The furry side of Instagram: A study about dog influencers on Instagram

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on online communication, specifically regarding dog influencers on a social network application - Instagram. The idea was found through a personal admiration and interest in dog influences on Instagram. Therefore a research area investigating why dog owners create profiles for their dogs and how they manage to gain a large follower base was created. For this research paper, six Instagram accounts were chosen. These accounts use dogs as a primary communication tool, and have managed to gain a large follower base, thus they serve as accurate research material. In order to gather qualitative data, six semi-structured online interviews were completed. Additionally, content analysis was used to analyze the visual and written content of these Instagram accounts.

Key findings were identified through theoretical frameworks, using mediatization, posthumanism and actor-network theory. Moreover, the chosen research methods were also introduced in-depth, along with the process of the research. Additionally, it is essential to note that several general influencer marketing tools are used by dog influencers to promote their content. When applied, these tools have different qualities and outcomes than the ones of human influencers.

The findings of the investigation show that the market of dog influencers is very competitive. This allows for the gathered data to be reused again in the future to further investigate the topic.

Keywords: Instagram, influencer, dog influencer, online communication, interviews, content analysis, media
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1. Introduction

In this digital age, due to rapid developments in the field of technology, new forms of communication tools are being applied in advertising. New tools and methods keep appearing on the market and creating more sustainable methods of promotion, i.e., email marketing, search engine marketing, and social media marketing (collectively called digital marketing), which are overtaking television and radio advertisements. This type of marketing tends to produce more effective results, and it approaches its audience with creatively developed, qualitative, and search-friendly content on online platforms (Opreana & Vinerean, 2015). Moreover, influencers strive to create authenticity and realness in their marketing strategy for a more successful campaign (Cotter, 2019). This can be seen as influencers building their channels around a specific purpose or a lifestyle to reach out to desired brands (e.g., sports brands that promote with athlete influencers). Social media platforms are continually growing and improving, attracting more and more active users and providing a unique space for successful social media marketing that allows them to reach millions of users.

Instagram is one of the newest and most popular social media platforms in the digital age. According to Statista (2018), Instagram has managed to gather a billion active users. Due to the large user database and highly active engagement on this platform, there are new opportunities for online communication, engagement, and promotion. One of the most popular methods of online marketing is influencer marketing. This concept is relatively new as it appeared on the market a few years ago, hence it is still considered a growing industry. According to Abidin (2016) influencers are a group of mainly young women, with a broad base of followers who are actively engaged in different social media channels, intending to introduce preferred products, and paid advertisements through sharing stories from their everyday. They create an inspiring
and trustworthy channel to attract and engage their follower base, who desire to live the influencers’ lives.

However, since it is still an evolving area of new communication, and it creates a possibility for anyone to become an influencer, there is an immense competition, which leads to introducing new tools in influencer marketing (Kemp, McDougal, Syrdal, 2018 and Influencer Marketing Hub, 2017). Furthermore, Instagram regularly provides space for various further improvements in different fields of technological developments. This means that the platform is evolving, providing the opportunity for discovery and research for its tools and functions. For that reason, Instagram does not only focus on human influencers. One of the newest trends on Instagram is animal influencers; hence, in this paper, online communication on dog influencer accounts is observed.

According to Dotson and Hyatt (2008), dogs are the oldest domestic animals, and their relation and closeness to humans have evolved throughout history. The media have represented these pets in various ways. Dogs were the main characters in movies and cartoons, e.g., Beethoven (1992), Marley & Me (2008), 101 Dalmatian (1996) and Snoopy (1950). Further on, they have appeared in specialized dog magazines, e.g., Dogs Naturally Magazine and Dogster, and dogs were also in focus for many podcasts, such as DogCast Radio and It’s A Doggy Dog World. Nowadays, humans have developed a much stronger bond with their pets. Dogs are often treated as loved ones and are considered family members because the owners believe in “relationship of mutualism,” which means that both the pet owners and dogs give and receive love (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). Since nowadays, dogs are a significant part of their owners’ daily lives, they have managed to get more considerable attention on social media, and in some situations, even higher than the owners themselves. Thus some owners have used their dogs as the primary reason for creating personal accounts on Instagram. In the name of authentic production (Cotter, 2019), they are the perfect ‘tools’ for promoting dog products. The concept of ‘dog influencer’ has not appeared in many studies yet and is a rather unexplored area of Instagram marketing. However, it is a recognized and growing concept, and it has even managed to appear in the Emmy award-winning series, Modern Family (2010). In the 20th episode of season 10, one of the main characters aims to promote his new business of designing different beds for dogs by collaborating with a famous dog influencer.

Personal admiration and passion for dogs play a significant role in choosing the research focus. However, the main aim was to research and analyze the phenomenon of ‘dog influencers’. Due to lack of scientific data about this specific topic, the goal was to gather qualitative data, and understand why and how this phenomenon appeared, and who dog influencers are. Moreover, this paper will present how dog owners use their pets as a part of their successful Instagram influencer marketing strategy. An investigation will be carried out, which focuses on the owners’ motivation for creating
personalized dog accounts and content development in this specific area of online marketing. In order to get a better understanding, essential concepts needed to be researched and explained, thus they provide a theoretical framework for this paper.

1.1. Research area and aim

The ever-growing field of online marketing has split into different platforms. Instagram itself offers functions that are used for different ways of advertisement. The most popular type of marketing on Instagram is recognized as influencer marketing. Brands have access to a new platform for their marketing activities, and by involving influencers (the third party), they use a primary sender of messages. In this type of online communication, the brands must maintain a trustworthy relationship with the influencers, and the influencers with their followers (Gustavsson, Nasir, Ishonova, 2018). The purpose of this paper is to conduct qualitative research to understand who dog influencers are and how are they being used as ‘communication tools’ for Instagram influencer marketing.

Moreover, see in what way the appearance of a fourth party (the organization that is being promoted, the owner, the followers, and the dog) affects communication, production, engagement, and promotion. This study aims to understand the phenomenon of dog influencer, as well as the progression of Instagram influencers and their strategies from a different perspective. From a preliminary online search, conclusions can be drawn that there are no clear studies or deep dives that focus on explaining how dogs, in general, are used as a marketing tool to communicate and engage with audiences on Instagram.

The primary aim is to research the symbolic value of dogs and representation of dogs on Instagram and understand the goals for using dogs for producing content for communication and promotion.

The relevance of this study to the field of media and communication is the rapidly increasing field of Social Media studies and changes in media and communication (mediatization). Within this area, Instagram has gained a billion active users, and it opens new opportunities, hence the popularity of using various forms and tools for marketing. Furthermore, this research paper investigates how changes in society have led to the appearance of dog influencers.

1.2. Research paradigm

The research paradigm can be seen as a lens which one can observe the world through, or in this case, the research project (Collins, 2010). This approach accesses the given research from a specific angle.
‘Different lenses necessitate different assumptions about the nature of the world and the ways in which we should attempt to understand it.’ (Collins, 2010, p.38)

Collins (2010), differentiates two approaches: Positivism and Interpretivism. The positivist approach argues that everything should be understood methodologically and theoretically. Thus it is ‘(..) de-emphasizing free-will, emotions, chance, choice and morality’ (Collins, 2010, p.38). Instead, everything is fact, value, and knowledge-based (Collins, 2010).

On the other hand, Interpretivism focuses on human senses and how each person interprets and perceives the world. According to this approach, things gain meaning when they are interpreted (e.g., by an interviewee). It is neither an objective nor a subjective philosophy, since ‘The world is waiting to be discovered’ (Collins, 2010). For this research paper, the Interpretivist paradigm is used as the paradigmatic base because it allows the research to be understood through the different interviews and content analysis. It provides diverse viewpoints, and the research area can be seen empirically.

1.3. Research questions

Blaike (2009) states that one of the most crucial parts of research is the research questions since they ‘make the research researchable’ (Blaike, 2009, p.6). There are three main types of questions: ‘Why, ‘What’ and ‘How’. The question starting with ‘What’ brings a more descriptive approach, where researchers must describe some patterns and characteristics of a chosen target audience or social event. When a question starts with ‘Why’ it aims to investigate the reason behind a phenomenon, and it seeks explanation, while the question ‘How’ is ‘(..) concerned with bringing about change with intervention and practical outcome’ (Blaike, 2009, p.7).

After developing the main research question, it is suggested to form further sub-questions, in order to define the areas of the investigation and to create a guideline for the research process. This allows researchers to approach the research area from various angles (Blaike, 2009).

**Why do dog owners use their dogs as a communication tool in mediatized marketing on Instagram?**

- What are the actor characteristics of dog influencers on social media networks?
- How do dog owners represent their pets by applying animal anthropomorphism on Instagram?
- How do the owners communicate strategically in a posthuman world?
Using a ‘WHY’ research question as the primary question allows us to investigate the topic of dog influencers since it is a growing and unexplored field of online communication.

2. Context

Animals have always played a significant role in human lives, in regards to food, workforce, companionship, or even gods. Various animals have symbolic meanings, and people have grown recognition and attachment towards them. In particular, humans have developed a strong bond with dogs. Over time dogs have played a symbolic and valued role in human culture. “Wherever humans have gone, dogs have gone with them, even into outer space.” (Helton, 2009)

2.1. The symbolic role of animals

Over time the relationship between humans and animals has changed. It is, therefore, varying between many representations and forms in the field of communication. The use of animal symbolic values has supported many significant factors during the development of the civilization and helped to shape “human religion, art, society, and, of course, marketing” (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013). For example, in marketing, various brands use animals for different symbolic meanings to bring out their intended identity or a specific message to the consumer (Lancendorfer et al., 2006).

Using animals and dogs in particular, in advertising has been a common choice in the past few decades. The simple explanation behind this is because “they [dogs] typically don’t share political views or anything controversial” (Wong, cited in Cramer 2018, p.9). This indicates that brands prefer choosing safe, influencer partnerships to promote their products. Besides, the audience finds it more comfortable to engage with such online accounts because it gives a different, “carefree” (Wong, cited in Cramer 2018, p.9) feel to the content on their feed.

The relationship between a dog and its owner is undoubtedly very close and personal, therefore using dogs in advertising is very common, especially that humans are somewhat sympathetic to concepts involving animals. Advertisers often try to address this “human-animal bond” (Lancendorfer et al., 2006, p.384) through their marketing strategy. A dog in advertising can have different meanings, Lemer and Kalof (1999) identified six types of animal culture on TV commercials: “as loved ones, as symbols, as tools, as allegories, as nuisances, and as part of nature” (Lancendorfer et al., 2006, p.385).
Animals represent different characteristics and emotions. Therefore some brands choose to apply anthropomorphisms of animals to describe their identity (Lloyd and Woodside, 2013). Anthropomorphism is the tendency to apply human characteristics to non-human objects, hence using fast and strong animals, such as tiger, lion or a horse for a car brand, automatically makes viewers perceive the brand through emotions and identify it as powerful and proud (Lloyd and Woodside, 2013). The role of an animal in communication can be substantial in sending the message and painting the image of the brand’s identity to the consumer.

In this particular example, several meanings can be identified behind the symbolic aspect of the dog. The main traits of a dog tend to represent loyalty, followed by friendship and companionship (Lloyd and Woodside, 20013). However, a dog can also show power, guidance, and protection.

### 2.2. Instagram influencer marketing

Instagram influencers are recognized by their social media identities and ability to reach out to a large group of audience, known as their followers. Often Instagram influencers have built their channels around a specific personality or lifestyle. Therefore an Instagram influencer is seen as a “trusted tastemaker in one or several niches” (Veirman, M. et al., 2017, p. 798). The use of Instagram and other social media platforms has vastly developed thanks to its diversity and collaborative nature, hence marketing has taken a new turn and developed a marketing strategy specifically for social media that is now commonly used by various brands to promote their products and services. This type of advertising is favored by the brands because “it appears to be more effective than traditional advertising tactics” (Veirman, M. et al., 2017, p. 798). Gradually through consistent engagement and content production, Influencers have gained the trust and interest from their follower groups, thus promoting products and services through the influencers makes the goods more trustworthy and credible (Veirman, M. et al., 2017). Both the brand and influencer benefit highly from this transaction, thus currently being an Instagram influencer is known as a full-time paid job for many people.

Influencers have managed to gain credibility, legitimacy, and trustworthiness by gaining large follower bases. Likes and comments measure their success. ‘Obtaining detailed subjective audience impressions of an SMI adds a new dimension to practitioners’ abilities to assess Social Media Influencers (SMI) capital, which heretofore has relied heavily on less precise measures such as number of followers.’ (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey & Fredberg’s, 2011, p.92). As it was mentioned before, these micro-celebrities have managed to make their passion towards entrepreneurship and social media into a full-time job, some influencers have started to put a stronger
emphasis on financial growth, and it has become their primary focus (Archer, Harrigan, 2016).

Another key factor for influencer marketing is the personal narrative incorporated by the influencers, which provides a trustworthy effect and a personal recommendation from another individual as opposed to the traditional brand-consumer relationship. It builds up a more intimate relationship between the influencer and their followers (Abidin, 2016). Influencers are considered a part of the twenty-first-century journalism, having become the newly trusted news sources. According to Maares and Hanusch (2018), society has started to show more interest in soft-news rather than hard news, and it is often a part of the influencer marketing to announce specific events around the world. Users perceive modern ways of news sharing to fulfill their interest and needs because Instagram allows two-way communication. The users can express their opinions towards news and trends because monologic communication is often perceived manipulative (Archer, Harrigan 2016).

2.3. Human-dog bond

Dogs are considered some of the most popular pets globally; 33 % of pet owners worldwide have chosen dogs as their domestic pets (Dale, 2016). According to Pet Secure (2015) collected data in 2015, in America, nearly 70 million households have dogs as pets, and 9 out of 10 Americans have a close bond with their pet and consider the dog a part of their family. The citizens of the United States are the leaders of spending money on their dogs, with over 50 billion dollars being invested annually in their pets.

Dog owners spend a significant part of their time with their pets, and many dog owners admit having a strong “attachment” (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008 p. 458) to their dogs. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) write that there are different types of human-dog relationships, and they fall into the following categories: dog as a possession, dog as assistant providing benefits, dog as a companion or “child surrogate” (2008 p. 458) and dog as “respected significant other” (2008 p. 458). Since dogs have been bred for centuries, some species are more dependent on the human-dog bond and can become very stressed when left alone (Boni, 2008).

The relationship between dogs and humans formed at least 18,000 years ago. In the past, they have played a significant role in hunting, guarding, and herding (Rehn, 2013; Payne, Bennett, McGreevy, 2014). However, throughout the years, dogs have developed a much stronger bond with humans. Several studies have been conducted to understand the human-dog relationship (Rehn, 2013; Payne, Bennett, McGreevy, 2014; Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). Dogs can interpret commands and respond to them. “The proficiency of dogs and extensively socialized wolves at such tasks are thought to reflect their
adeptness at social scavenging or cooperation and associating certain human gestures (Payne, Bennett, McGreevy, 2014, p.72). This has resulted in faster learning and adaptive skills in dogs. By being able to respond to them, humans have developed stronger emotions towards their pets. According to Rehn (2013), today’s’ relation between dogs and humans can also be understood as a mother and infant relationship, since dogs have always seen humans as the leaders of the pact. However, it is essential to know that this bond has evolved since humans have started to spend more quality time with their pets and thus understood them better, and not because dogs have changed in any way (Rehn, 2013). The way society sees dogs has reached a point where dogs are often treated as equal to humans and are considered best friends or family members. Humans react with positive emotions towards the presence of a dog (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008; Rehn, 2013).

2.4. Animal anthropomorphism

As described previously in 2.1. and 2.2., due to the highly recognized human-dog relationship and the close bond, people tend to apply human characteristics and emotions to the dog and often end up relating to a dog as an equal. This phenomenon can be seen on Instagram, where people follow dog influencers who appear to have personalities and seem to communicate directly with the users. Therefore, on account of the presence of human nature on their profiles, it may feel as if the dog itself is an influencer. However, this is recognized as anthropomorphism, and it means that humans want to make more sense of certain things by “attributing human-like reasoning to a non-human” (Olney, 2018, p.84). It could be argued that without anthropomorphism, humans would have not domesticated animals in the first place because they need to anticipate the animal instincts and activities in order to understand them (Boni, 2008).

Anthropomorphizing dogs tends to happen naturally, especially under specific circumstances where dogs are a part of a human job (Helton, 2009). Although this makes it easier to identify with dogs, as it increases the animal care and sympathy for them, anthropomorphism can affect human judgment towards a dog and the role it plays. An owner anthropomorphizing their dog can change the dog’s behavior; however, there is no clear explanation of how a dog’s behavior is affected by this (Boni, 2008).

Digital and electronic marketing communication, including Instagram marketing, is focused more on visual communication, that is using imagery, symbols, and icons (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013). This type of online communication in marketing is relatively new due to the development and growth of social media marketing and influencers. Information is less focused on compared to the visual presentation of the product or lifestyle (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013). As mentioned in 2.2, animals play a symbolic role in marketing communication that is used by brands in their strategy to convey a
message. Hence finding this type of embodiment in social media marketing is highly applicable by brands. Despite the relevance of using animal symbologies in marketing, researchers have not explored and expanded the real meaning of why “animal symbols are turned into marketing tools” (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013, p.1864). While animal anthropomorphism is very identifiable and recognized in many forms of marketing, the real effect on the success behind a dog influencer and why its follower group receives it so well is yet to be discovered.

Anthropomorphizing dogs can give bad judgment about the dog and its behavior. It is common to see dogs being treated like humans by their owners, who dress up their dogs, groom them, buy accessories, and even celebrate their birthdays. In that sense, it is easy to forget that a dog is simply an animal with animal instincts. Boni (2008) writes that many owners decide to euthanize or put down their dogs for adoption due to misbehavior and showing aggression towards other people or dogs. Boni (2008) also added that these people had poor knowledge of animals, which suggest that perhaps humans are anthropomorphizing dogs too much and forgetting the animal nature. This is a valuable aspect to examine because the symbolic meaning of animals changes over time. Thus, due to anthropomorphizing dogs, new social behavior can be observed, where Instagram provides the opportunity to follow dogs as influencers on Instagram and find the content relatable.

2.5. Literature review

As mentioned above, dog influencing and general use of animals to produce content on Instagram is an area that is only partially explored. A literature review will be described in the following paragraph to reflect on the proposed research area. There is a visible phenomenon of Instagram users creating content based on animal photos or videos. This phenomenon can be analyzed by observing the visual and written content on Instagram. There is similar research conducted based on these criteria where the researchers observe how pets affect the happiness rate on Instagram. Therefore, to reflect on a similar research topic, this literature review will focus on the findings made by Wu et al. (2016) and Peng, Chi and Luo (2018). The second research is using Wu et al. (2016) as the base of their research, and this base is being extended.

The two studies researched the effect of pets on happiness; first research investigates ca. 20 000 users’ Instagram accounts, and the other research expands the analysis to 2 million users. The chosen methodology was the same in both pieces of research: a program has been applied, called Face++, which helps to recognize users’ facial expression. Based on an equation, ‘happiness score’ was analyzed and thus data on the effect of pets could be gathered (Wu et al., 2016; Peng, Chi and Luo, 2018).
In the literature, the authors selected content that is focusing on cats and dogs. They argue that these two animals are the most common pets all over the world (Peng, Chi, and Luo, 2018). In order to gather relevant images, authors mention the usage of hashtags, and how it helped them collect pictures which were later analyzed, e.g. ‘#mydog, #mypuppy, #mydoggie, #mycat, #mykitten, #mykitty.’ (p. 60:3) These specific hashtags also help and identify whether the pet belongs to the account user.

These articles are not only relevant to our research because they discuss similar areas, but also because the same methodology is applied to the same media platform. Wu et al. (2016) mention that Instagram has become the most popular social media platform, and even though Facebook has more users, Instagram provides more visual content, which is easier to analyze. ‘Although Facebook owns the largest user population, it is not mainly a platform for image and video sharing, and it has a more restrictive API usage which makes it difficult to extend the research based on Facebook to a large scale.’ (p. 1890) This argumentation can also strengthen the choice for Instagram in this research paper.

To collect data, the researchers chose to analyze content based on images and captions. For content analysis, they created a coding frame where they categorized “dogs”, “cats,” and “other” (Peng, Chi, and Luo, 2018, p. 60:3). Further on, researchers divided the results into sub-categories, based on gender, race, relationship. They also identified whether the account user owns the animal in the image by analyzing the previously mentioned hashtags (Peng, Chi, and Luo, 2018). Similarly, in this research paper, the focus is to analyze animal content on Instagram posts. Therefore this research gives a better understanding of how to select the right accounts and further categorize the visual and written content.

Based on the results in the research paper of Wu et al. (2016) and Peng, Chi and Luo (2018), it can be concluded that both the written and visual content show a higher level of happiness if it is related to dogs. These researches show how the human-dog bond has a positive effect on people, especially dog owners. Furthermore, it also explains how dog users tend to share plenty of visual content about their loved pet, even on their account. This could be one of the triggering changes that later has led to developing a personal account for dogs.

3. Theoretical localization

This chapter reflects upon the theories that support this research paper. With the theoretical help provided by these social theories, observations can be made on how media and social platforms have developed further in the society (mediatization), and also discuss the human behaviour and habits through the content on Instagram based on social theories, such as Post-human theory by Gane (2006), Hayles (1999), Fukuyama
3.1. Mediatization (Dogs, Society and Technology)

It is essential to observe changes in society and their relation to dogs to understand how dogs could gain recognition on social media platforms. When changes in the media appear, the surroundings are also affected. The term ‘Mediatization’ is used to understand how changes in media influences relate to society and the other way around; thus, it is analyzing the interrelation between these two fields. ‘(…)mediatization research engages with the complex relationship between changes in media and communication, on the one hand, and changes in various fields of culture and society on the other’ (Hepp, 2015, p.314). This theoretical framework investigates media as an agent and its relation towards change in cultural and social paradigm. This media-centered tool examines how the expansion of media, in the new digital world, allows popular culture to set norms and values in the society, and the study of mediatization has become a more important field to social studies than politics, education or religion (Hepp, 2015).

As described in 2.1., the human-dog relationship has developed to the level where people associate a vital part of their lives towards a beloved pet. However, dogs were not always recognized as loving companions. In the past, dogs were considered as ‘only’ animals. René Descartes has referred to animals as mindless machines, thus demoted them to a non-human symbolic level. This assumption was based on the fact that animals are not able to verbally communicate, and that they, therefore, must also lack the ability to use their brains at a higher level (Sanders, 2006). Around the beginning of the twenty-first century, more and more sociologists have conducted research based on the topic of interspecies (e.g., Sanders, 1999 and Taylor & Signal, 2011). Nowadays, according to Birke and Hockenhull, (2012), sociologists have come a long and slow way to see animals as actors in social paradigms. They explain that pushing the boundaries of the way animals are being perceived by society does not necessarily mean that human rights should be applied to animals, but that post-humanism and contemporary sociologists have changed the way humans see animals and nature (Birke, Hockenhull, 2012). This means that as well as the fact that dogs are often treated as humans, and are becoming more than just pets, in the field of sociology, several studies support changes in society and its relation to animals scientifically.

The other area to be understood is how the media has changed and has affected society. Technology has rapidly evolved since the appearance of computers and the internet. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, have been developed. These social platforms allow users to express themselves in various creative
ways. People can use emojis, memes, personal pictures, and videos to share their feelings, activities, and thoughts with a specific group of people (Waterloo et al., 2018). Furthermore, brands have started to use these sites to interact with customers actively and have developed online promotions for their products and services as social media has improved and has introduced a new field of marketing, called Social Media Influencing (Gustavsson, Nasir, Ishonova, 2018). Since social media users have started to share content more expressively, selecting preferred products has developed influencers to pose as the third participants in this marketing area (Sammis et al., 2015).

In conclusion, rapid changes in technology have led to a more self-expressive society, where users’ online content sharing includes moments from their everyday lives. Today’s society perceives dogs differently; dogs are recognized as man’s best friend. This includes being part of their owner’s daily routine, which has allowed an active appearance of beloved pets on social media platforms. Dogs no longer appear on their owners’ profiles, but owners create accounts dedicated to sharing content featuring the pet on its own, and it functions as modern ‘micro-celebrities’ (Abidin, 2016) or social media influencers.

### 3.2. Post-humanistic theory

To create a better understanding of the research area, the concept of ‘Posthumanism’ will serve as a theoretical framework. There are several different theoretical explanations of this concept which focus that in this technologically advanced age, human embodiments no longer form strong bonds with nature. Instead, they enter a new dimension, where technological modifications are in focus. It results in a posthuman world, where people are not considered paramount anymore because the strong technological influence is leading society towards complex machines (Gane, 2006). The posthuman approach strives towards further technological development, which breaks the boundaries between the physical and non-physical world (Haraway, 1991) and thus slowly merges humans and machines. Fukuyama (2002), a more conservative thinker, questions whether devices can be equal to a human, due to the history of evolution and his belief in the existence of the soul. However, he also agrees that technology ‘can change the basis of human nature and it also threatens to change, which gives ‘stable continuity to our experience as a species’ (Fukuyama, 2002 in Gane, 2006 p. 433).

In the digital world, people are part of a posthuman world, where they share information online with the rest of the world. In the age of social media, users tend to share lots of information, often not only about themselves, but about their loved ones too. Hayles (1999) argues that the reason behind sharing information in the posthuman world is that ‘information can never do away with matter or the body because to exist it must always be instantiated in a medium’ (Hayles, 1999: 13, in Gane, 2006, p. 432.) Furthermore, Hayles (1998) states that computer-based technologies characterize humans since they
are the ones which can measure their capabilities which means that ‘(…) increasingly the computer is taken as the measure of all things, including humans’ (Hayles, 1998, in Gane, 2006, p. 433). Thus the information users share is the information by which they are defined.

Moreover, due to the rapid changes in technology, influencer marketing triggers that online users share a plethora of information. One of the critical factors of a successful influencer is to build up a more intimate and personal relationship with their followers (Abidin, 2016), thus sharing their everyday life is necessary. Furthermore, since this research paper focuses on dog influencers, or rather the accounts created for pets, it can be understood that these animals are being brought to the posthuman world.

### 3.3. Actor-network theory (ANT)

It is vital to understand the full spectrum of human and non-human relationships and social networking with the use of technology to explain the phenomena of social networking on online platforms, such as Instagram. The idea behind Actor-network theory (ANT) is based on the relationship among actors met in any social environment. These actors do not necessarily pose human roles; they can be identified as any objects, ideas, or non-human beings. Therefore, these relationships are described rather than explained (Latour, 2005). ANT has developed a different approach than the other social theories, as it prefers to observe human behavior and “tells stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t” (Law, 2007, p. 2). ANT is also “better understood as a toolkit for telling interesting stories” (Law, 2007, p. 2) about the actor-actant-relationships via networking.

Latour (1996) writes that ANT describes “the very nature of societies” (p.371), however, in order to be able to apply this theory, the actor has to be further explored not only as a human but also as a non-human and non-entity. ANT does not emphasize the social network as the theory itself; it merely plays a role in the social theory to better understand societies. In this case, networks are not seen as specific relationships, and they are not measured by any distances (Latour, 1996).

In actor-network theory, a network is explained as a connection between two elements that is either established or non-existing (Latour, 1996). A network is a “positive notion” (Latour, 1996, p.375) that can not be explained or understood by negative beliefs. Its micro and macro distinctions can not scale networks because they do not make any assumptions, and “the scale, that is, the type, number and topography of connections is left to the actors themselves” (Latour, 1996, p.374). This allows for exploring how an entity develops its strategy by gaining and losing its connections.
While an “actor” in actor-network theory may imply that it refers to a human, it is not always the case. The actor or an actant is either a human or non-human entity that acts under someone’s command (Latour, 1996). Ultimately, it means that anything can work as an actant.

ANT suggests that the world and its society are run by “intertwining networks” (Carroll et al., 2012, p.54). These networks have compound interaction, both locally and globally. The theory also helps to explore the links between social and technical networks, where actors play a significant role (Carroll et al., 2012). ANT does not follow a set of rules on how to analyze the social paradigms; it instead describes how to observe the behavior and actions of actors. Therefore, it uses social and technological measures and innovations to help and shape each other (Carroll et al., 2012).

4. Methodology, method and scope of empirical data

The goal is to investigate the engagement on dog influencer profiles on Instagram, its followers, and how they communicate and engage with them. It is relevant for the study since it is a new way of online communication. One of the primary goals is to contact the influencer dog owners on Instagram and to conduct interviews with them for qualitative research.

Following paragraphs describe the research approach and applied methods, and further presenting the overall outcomes.

4.1. Research process

To create an overview of the research process, Figure 1, provided by Collins (2010), is used as a tool for planning out the research process. The figure visualizes a circular way of planning. However, due to the iteration of the research, it allows moving back and forth between the steps (Collins, 2010). It is a great tool, since, for instance, once literature is being reviewed, that information can be applied to previous steps of the process as well.
The first three steps of the process show the beginning phase of the research. In these steps, the interest that is relevant to the field of studies needed to be set, in order to be able to narrow down to the research question later on. Once the research focus is established, a further literature review can be conducted. Blaike (2009), states that the relevance of the literature review is that it provides empirical data of the chosen field and allows researchers to broaden their knowledge. This, later on, helps to generate ideas further systematically (Blaike, 2009).

In the phase of the ‘Design of the Research Proposal’ the most essential and crucial step needs to be done: forming the research questions. As it was mentioned above, there are few types of research questions. After establishing the chosen area, the following research question has been developed:

‘How does Instagram, as a social networking medium, allows dogs to be influencers?’
After creating the research question, Brainstorming follows as the next step. Brainstorming is one of the most efficient techniques to generate new ideas or improve and modify already existing ones. Moreover, this tool allows researchers to apply creative thinking (Osborn, 1953).

However, due to further literature reviews and a better understanding of the research area, the previously presented research question did not allow for the correct scope to achieve the goal of the research project. Therefore, further improvements have been applied. The new research question became:

‘Why do dog owners use their dogs as a communication tool in mediatized marketing on Instagram?’

The last change was made due to a literature review by Blaike (2009), where it is described more in-depth how research questions need to be built and what working questions are used and with what aim. This helped to establish the final version of the question and sub-questions. It proved an excellent example of why the iterative nature of the research is beneficial; it allows changes, so specific points of the research paper can be improved.

The following steps focus on applying the chosen methodology. However, first, it has to be decided whether to approach the research with a Deductively or Inductively. The deductive approach focuses on already existing literature and data; thus, it can provide a framework for the research paper (Collins, 2010). However, as mentioned above, this area of online communication is quite an unexplored area, where the lack of data allows this research in an Inductive way. This approach is more common when qualitative data gathering method(s) is/are being used, and it gives the flexibility to explore a chosen area. Furthermore, there is much less need for generalizing the results (Collins, 2010, p.42-43).

The description of the methodology and how they are being used are described further in section 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4.

The last phase is presenting and analyzing the gathered data. This step also involves further literature reviews or using the already reviewed ones (Collins, 2010). It is beneficial to present the data more academically and provide theoretical frameworks to strengthen the findings and arguments.

4.2. Chosen methods

Using the guidelines written by Schreier, M. (2012) ‘Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice’ and Thornberg, Charmaz (2014), content analysis will be used to analyze 6
Instagram accounts, where dogs are posed as Instagram influencers and play a significant role in the overall success of the profile. The following proposed criteria will be used to help the evaluation and selection of the accounts: the channels need a high amount of followers and engagement, and the center and the main focus of the content is the dog. By analyzing these channels, the goal is to understand the underlying motivation, goal, and strategic approach to communicating with the followers to reach high engagement and follower amount. Following this, there should be a clear pattern of the dogs’ symbolic value on Instagram.

Interviews play a significant role during this research; therefore, they will be conducted with representatives of Instagram channels that use dogs for their content. Conducting face-to-face interviews often proves to be a challenge; therefore planning is essential. The guidelines from ‘Doing interviews’ by Kvale (2007) will be applied to prepare structured interview questions. The questions will be introduced to the interviewees beforehand, as well as suggested times and methods of conducting the interviews. The number of interviews depends on how many Instagram profiles/influencers respond to the request. The information gained from interviews will help understand how the profiles are being operated by the dog owners, their strategy, collaborations, and overall experience. Concluding the chapter, ethics will be discussed regards gathering data with the chosen methods in a safe and appropriate manner.

### 4.3. Interviews

In this section, it is described how interviews were prepared and structured, and the two-way communication between the researchers and participants is outlined. For this specific method, the following instructions of Kvale (2007), who has described steps of doing a qualitative interview in ‘Doing interviews’, are applied.

One of the main focuses of this paper is to learn how dogs are used as symbolic tools in communication on Instagram. In order to gather qualitative data around this topic, the interviews need to be conducted directly with the dog influencers on Instagram. During these conversations, the goal is to learn about their experience and insights as Instagram influencers.

An interview is considered a form of conversation, where the interviewer interacts with another human being (interviewee). During this conversation, the interviewer asks certain questions regarding a specific topic and listens to the interviewee’s provided answers, in order to understand the life experiences and opinions of the interviewee (Kvale, 2007). By the words of Kavel (2019), a research interview can be described as “... an interview where knowledge is constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p.2).
Moving forward, the type of interview is established. In this case, a conversation with another person is used as a tool to learn about their experience and knowledge in the field of Instagram influencing. Therefore researchers tend to ask and listen during a semi-structured interview (Kvale, 2007). The semi-structured interview is “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Kvale, 2007, p.11). According to Kvale (2007), a semi-structured interview includes the topic, “meaning, qualitative, descriptive, specificity, qualified naïveté, focus, ambiguity, change, sensitivity, and positive experience” (p.22). Further on, a description will follow for each area according to the topic to set a semi-structured interview.

**Instagram dog influencer**

The topic of this interview regards dog influencers on Instagram. The discussion will help gather qualitative data about the dog owners who have created online platforms on Instagram to share the content of their beloved pets and consequently gathered a large group of followers (above 10,000). According to Kemp, McDougal, and Syrdal (2018), people who have gained more than 10,000 followers on Instagram are considered as micro-influencers. Therefore, the goal is to learn how they have achieved this status by the help of their dog’s image and how they pursue Instagram marketing.

**Meaning**

The interviewer should keep in mind the topic of the interview during the conversation. During the interview, the interviewer needs to be observant of what is said, how it is said, what emotions are brought forward, and what body language and facial expressions are exhibited.

Instead of asking hard proof questions, an interviewer ought to seek out reactions and opinions to specific questions. An interview often concerns sensitive subjects, and an interviewee might not always want to share all the information, so the interviewer must interpret the questions in the right format. This way, the meaning behind the interview is more concrete.

**Qualitative**

Qualitative interview seeks out empirical information. There is no need to focus on quantity in the sense of numbers. Therefore, the interview should provide descriptions, opinions, and experiences of being an Instagram influencer.

**Descriptive**

The base of these conversations is the interviewee’s description of their successes and failures of using their dog to produce content for Instagram. It is possible to learn about their experience by listening to their story, specifically around Instagram.
Specificity
Since there is a specific research question for this research paper, the ultimate goal is to answer it in the best possible way. Therefore, the interview needs to follow the path and be descriptive about this specific topic of dogs used as a tool to produce content for the influencer profiles on Instagram. It is not a general opinion or knowledge regarding Instagram that is interesting, but the success story behind these specific cases of dog influencers.

Qualified naïveté
The purpose of the interview is to be open to the knowledge that is being received during the conversation. Instead of only asking pre-prepared questions, hold the conversation by listening to the interviewee, and respecting what is said. This can help and broaden the perspectives about the topic and not be narrow-minded due to their knowledge and research.

Focus
The Interviewers role is to set the focus for the interview by asking open questions. While it is a conversation type interview, it is easy to drift away from the main focus, so the interviewer should lead the conversation, and from there the interviewee can choose what information to bring forth.

Ambiguity
There is a possibility to come across a position of contradictory answers regarding their Instagram strategy, dog or marketing, so the goal is to make sure that the opinion stays the same for the data to be legitimate. If an interviewee answers ambiguously, they should clarify their answers.

Change
The course of an interview can suddenly take a turn if the interviewee reflects on a new perspective on the topic that they were not aware of before. Therefore, the interview might end up having a different set of qualitative data than anticipated in the beginning.

Sensitivity
The interview will evolve during the conversation. Therefore, the proposed questions can receive different reactions. An example of this could be how the dog is viewed as a marketing tool. One interviewee could see the dig exclusively as a marketing tool, while other interviewees may have a tighter bond with their dog.

Interpersonal situation
As two researchers are working on the same research paper, constructed roles for the interviews should be applied. It is due to the understanding that different people in
certain situations can collect different answers. The best scenario is to conduct the conversation together and follow the focus area to gather the needed data.

Positive experience
As described in the Ethics part of the paper (6), it is relevant to keep the experience positive for the interviewee by respecting them. People are different, and they have different opinions, the researchers should make sure that the setting of the interview is open and free.

Overall, the goal is to ensure a semi-structured conversation with dog influencers to gain qualitative data that will support the research and help answer the posed research question.

Beforehand, the ethical and epistemological issues are discussed surrounding the interviews. The following step is to plan the interview using Kvale’s (2007) Seven stages of an interview inquiry. According to Kvale (2007), the seven stages of an interview inquiry are (1) Thematising, (2) Designing, (3) Interviewing, (4) Transcribing, (5) Analysing, (6) Verifying and (7) Reporting (p.37-38).

(1) The topic and research aim are already described at the beginning of this research paper in Introduction 1. The interviews are used as a method to support this study and provide insights and qualitative data from people who are running dog influencer channels on Instagram. (2) Several accounts on Instagram have been chosen and contacted to engage in further research. Specific criteria were followed when choosing these dog influencers. They have to have at least 10,000 followers to qualify as micro-influencers or influencers (Kemp et al., 2018). These accounts post content containing images and videos of their dog, and this is the primary identification point for selecting dog influencer. Collaborations and promotions through content on the profiles are also a proper identification because it shows investment in the channel. While there were several limitations in reaching out to these profiles, the criteria were kept. The aim was to reach out to accounts that would have a higher response rate. Further on, questions were designed in order to support the research question and the influencers’ experiences and knowledge. (3) Once the communication with the influencers was established, a brief introduction of objectives and focus area was presented, followed by a proposal of a suitable interview form and time. All the interviews were based online via video call. Conducting the discussions in a more face-to-face environment creates a simple, light, and personalized atmosphere. As mentioned before, semi-structured interviews are the base of gathering data. Thus it also provides the ability to learn more about the owner, dog, and their habits. (4) Further steps included transcribing the interview, which is the initial preparation for “analysis” (Kvale, 2007, p.37). (5) During the analysis, a selection of specific information is analyzed to support the research. (6) The data should apply to the primary research
points and, therefore, be further investigated and validated. Further description of gathered data and analysis can be read in chapter 7. (7) The final step is to report the findings and qualitative data, which is the purpose of this paper.

**Scripting the interview**

It is essential to prepare for the interviews to obtain the best possible results. A script is a guide that is used for the interview that includes discussion topics (Kvale, 2007). Since semi-structured interviews were chosen, the focus areas and topics were prepared, followed by some central questions. It is important to note that not all items could apply to all participants; therefore, different types of questions and follow-up questions were designed. The interviews contained direct, indirect, and descriptive questions. The interviewees needed to feel comfortable; therefore, the aim was to design the interview in a friendly and light atmosphere yet gather qualitative data through it. Both thematic and dynamic dimensions were applied when scripting the conversations. Thematic dimension helps to gather knowledge and insights, while dynamic dimension creates an excellent interpersonal relationship (Kvale, 2007).

When applying the thematic dimension, designed “what” (Kvale, 2007, p.60) questions are applied, a thematic preparation of the interview provided narrowed down insights instead of the need to analyze extensive interview. Dynamic dimension focuses on the “how” (Kvale, 2007, p.60) of the interview. This part of the interview cannot be planned out, as it constitutes the human factor and direct interaction with the other person to keep the conversation alive and exciting. While focusing on central topics, the conversation continues by using follow-up questions, and comments on the information received when designing the questions, “what” and “why “questions should be answered before the “how” questions (Kvale, 2007).

The proposed focus areas for the interview:

1. Background information
2. Instagram account
3. Instagram content
4. Target audience
5. Engagement
6. Collaborations
7. The role of the dog
8. Relationship with the dog
9. Positive and negative experience with the Instagram account

Example of scripting an interview question for a topic:

10. **What** differences do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?
    a. **Why** is your dog an influencer and not you?
b. **How** do you communicate “through” your dog?

See the script of interviews in the [Appendices](#).

**Transcribing the interviews**

An essential part of data gathering and analysis is transcribing the oral interviews to written text, which is a long and challenging process. This is the step where a face-to-face interview turns from “abstracted and fixated into a written form” (Kvale, 2007, p.93). Video recordings with the conversations, with the permission of the participants, were transcribed. Later on, the dialogues are revisited to write down the discussion manually instead of using any help from computer technology. Video recordings provide an advantage of analyzing the interpersonal conversation, body language, and emotions when talking about specific topics (Kvale, 2007). The interviews are described as detailed as possible, however leaving out unnecessary words or pauses used for thinking, also formulating the sentences directly to the point. This approach helped us during the analysis because oral speech is often different from a written statement and can be challenging to understand when reading (Kvale, 2007).

All the transcribed interviews are available in the [Appendices](#).

**Risk management**

Before conducting the interviews, possible risks were taken into consideration that may be faced upon gathering qualitative data. The first concern was to gather several interviews with dog influencers that would support the research. It proved to be a long and complicated process. While there are plenty of dog influencers that were willing to collaborate on the research over Instagram, it took much effort to arrange a video call for an interview. Over 60 accounts on Instagram were contacted, which led to six solid interviews. People from all over the world (Australia, Europe, North America) responded to the request for participating in this research. Once the interviews were scheduled appropriately to timezones, technicalities were another aspect to take in consideration, such as the internet connection and screen/audio recording programs. As researchers, it is important to work together to tackle these challenges. No language barriers were detected during the interviews because all the participants were English speakers, which was important for interpersonal communication. Working together and conducting the interviews as a pair was also beneficial as it allowed for the gathering of more information.

**4.4. Qualitative content analysis**

Qualitative content analysis is a method used to “systematically describe the meaning of qualitative data” (Schreier, 2013, p.170). The core of this analysis is using a coding frame, where the significant parts of the content are categorized. This type of analysis
helps to reduce the amount of material by focusing on the most relevant content to match the research question (Schreier, 2013). The purpose of conducting a qualitative content analysis is to learn more about the image and video content on Instagram and what captions and hashtags are used to communicate and attract the audience. By analyzing these items, there should be a visible pattern of common traits regarding the content which is used to attract followers and to make the message clear. Most importantly, there will be a possibility to understand the dog’s purpose of being used as the center of content.

Guidelines by Schreier (2013) will be applied, followed by her proposed steps, during this method to do qualitative content analysis on the gathered dog influencer accounts. Schreier (2013) suggests that there are overall 8 steps of how to carry out this analysis and they are “(1) Deciding on a research question, (2) Selecting material, (3) Building a coding frame, (4) Segmentation, (5) Trial coding, (6) Evaluating and modifying the coding frame, (7) Main analysis, (8) Presenting and interpreting the findings” (p.174-175).

(1) The topic and the research question has been already described at the beginning of this paper in Introduction 1. (2) Six dog influencer accounts were selected to conduct a content analysis. The selection of these accounts followed specific criteria to find the most suitable participants for the interviews. To qualify as an Instagram influencer on a micro level, one must exceed at least 10.000 followers. Therefore, only participants having above 10.000 followers were considered for this research. See the account descriptions below:

   Followers: 24.7k
   Location: Perth, Australia
   Profile duration: 3 years
   Description: The content is based on two sausage dogs and has different themes. One theme consists of videos and photos of dogs dressed in customized sweaters, another one is about the dogs in nature surroundings, and another in their home surroundings doing tricks or just posing.

2. Charlie and Bodie: https://www.instagram.com/charlieandbodie/ (verified account)
   Followers: 180k
   Location: Oswego, Illinois
   Profile duration: 3 ½ years
Description: The videos and images consist of two dogs in their home surroundings. A significant theme shows the dogs sleeping in cozy places together, the dogs are also appearing playful and friendly.

3. Ava and Aspen: [https://www.instagram.com/littlepnwpups/](https://www.instagram.com/littlepnwpups/)
Followers: 35.6k
Location: Several locations in United States
Profile duration: 1 ½ years

Description: The content consists of two dogs in nature surroundings, mostly hiking or relaxing in hiking equipment. Some part of the content is dedicated to dogs playing or swimming in water.

Followers: 51.3k
Location: Estonia
Profile duration: 4 years

Description: The account has a clear visual identity and all the images has the same style. The images have been well thought-out and taken by a professional camera, as well as edited prior posting. The dogs is usually posing in nature or city surroundings, often with a child next to it.

5. Kona Bear: [https://www.instagram.com/goldenkonabear/](https://www.instagram.com/goldenkonabear/)
Followers: 44.8k
Location: Golden, Colorado
Profile duration: 1 ⅕ years

Description: The account consists of videos and images of mainly the dog during hiking trips in Colorado. It has a clear visual identity because the owner has experience working with video and image editing professionally.

6. Harlso the balancing hound: [https://www.instagram.com/harlso_the_balancing_hound/](https://www.instagram.com/harlso_the_balancing_hound/) (verified account)
Followers: 81.3k
Location: UK
Profile duration: 3 years

Description: The account is built up by content where the dog is balancing various items on its forehead, which is also the base idea for the account. Another signature for the profile is the dog wearing a bow-tie in each of the posts, either being a photo or video.
Once the dog influencer channels were selected, specific written and visual content was selected to build categories for the coding frame.

(3) Coding in the content analysis means labeling content in categories which help summarise the data (Thornberg, Charmaz, 2014). For the coding frame, the focus was on the thematic images and videos, promotional content, communication strategy, and captions. During the interviews, the content and communication strategies were discussed. Therefore it was possible to select some content for further investigation. (4) The material was selected from each of the accounts for further analyzing, and it was organized in categories and sub-categories. (5) While building up the coding frame, the content was arranged to match each of the set categories for a better understanding and overview of the accounts. (6) During that, it was needed to re-arrange and re-evaluate selected material that later on would support the data gathering. (7) As mentioned above, the primary analysis will be based on the content posted on Instagram by influencers who have been listed above. More about the analysis and gathered data can be read in chapter 6, following that (8) the presentation of the findings and drawn conclusions based on the qualitative content analysis about images, videos, captions on the mentioned dog accounts.

During the research process, the goal was to focus on analyzing the content and communication strategies on Instagram accounts, therefore choosing methods that support gathering qualitative data. The audience studies were not explained in much depth because most of the dog influencers do not focus on any specific target audiences. However, it is possible to explore audience engagement on dog influencer account through like frequency and comments. However, since the aim is to observe society (Latour, 2005) and their communication strategies through dog influencer point of view, the only focus was on the audience as a tool for a great strategy, and thus there will be no data about geographical locations, age or gender.

4.5. Ethics

According to Layder (2013), any social research papers require a set of ethical principles that work as guidelines for the researchers to protect subjects interest and well-being. This paper focuses on animal and human research subjects. Therefore many ethical principles need to be considered when doing the research. The meaning behind ethics can be described as “judgments about right/wrong” (Shamoo and Resnik, 2009, p.26) in a field of research. Shamoo and Resnik (2009) have developed a list of suggestions to take into consideration when doing any research, some of the ethics that are must pay attention to during the working process include honesty, objectivity, confidentiality, respect of the intellectual property. The primary sources of collecting data are interviews and online content analysis.
One of the ways qualitative data is being gathered is by interviewing people who run Instagram channels with thousands of followers. By following Layders (2013) instructions on “informed consent”, it was essential to inform people who have been contacted about the research and explain to them how they are contributing to the thesis project. Participating in the interview was purely optional and based on their interest in the topic. Furthermore, they were informed about how the data was gathered and how it was planned on being used in the research. It is crucial to ensure that the interviewee is comfortable with the research; therefore, “protecting participants’ interests” (Layder, 2013) was of great importance. The questions have been well-thought-out to protect the participants’ interests. Besides, the participants always have a choice of what and how to answer the questions. The same criteria are applied to all the participants.

It must be acknowledged that this research could touch upon some topics that participants are not interested in sharing with others or sharing information that could be ‘traced back to’ (Layder, 2013, p18.) them. Layder (2013) suggests ensuring confidentiality and anonymity for the participants. If any of the participants wish to stay anonymous, it has to be ensured that their name is not used directly or that no data is used in the research paper.

Using social media channels and its content for the research plays a significant role; therefore, all the ethical principles surrounding this type of research for the data have to be considered to be valid. In order to be able to analyze Instagram profiles and use the extracted data, it was crucial to make sure that the Instagram profiles and their content are public and available to anyone and not only to private groups or selected followers (Townsend and Wallace, 2016). Following this, it is recommended to “contact” (Townsend and Wallace, 2016, p.11) the admin and ensure that they allow their content to be used and analyzed.

Another important aspect is to identify that the research is not “dealing with young or vulnerable participants” (Townsend and Wallace, 2016, p.11) because online personalities can often be hard to recognize. Therefore, the data and examples chosen for the research have to be safe for the readers. Any sensitive topics that include animal cruelty or mishandling will not be addressed.

Everything being used in the research paper is well-thought-out; thus, the subjects will be addressed with full respect, and only data that has been agreed upon from both sides will be described. The analyzed Instagram content will be selected according to the described criteria for it to be legitimate and safe for presenting in this paper.
5. Presentation and analysis of results

The primary purpose of this chapter is to gather data and key findings so that it helps to answer the research questions. While investigating this research area, a particular curiosity was raised about the reason behind owners choosing their loved pets as a new communication tool on Instagram and thus creating accounts for them. The research paper was approached from an Inductive approach (Collins, 2010). Thus it was important to leave all possible assumptions behind, and try to answer the research questions with the gathered information with a link to the theoretical localization.

According to Layder (2013), documenting data, like recording and transcribing interviews, taking screenshots of individual posts, e.g., is necessary for the analysis part because it strengthens the argument with credibility. Moreover, Layder (2013) states that several different frameworks can be used for analyzing data. However, there is no specific rule set that needs to be used since the researcher role also involves organizing and analyzing data according to their judgment (Layder, 2013).

The data is gathered, analyzed, and presented after applying the chosen methods. In the following paragraphs, the data is categorized according to the key findings. The key findings play a significant role in answering the research questions, which will be reflected in this chapter.

While the research scope is not broad, the mixed-methods approach helped to gather enough empirical data to consider this research valuable. There are six interviews with dog influencers, followed by a content analysis on their Instagram accounts. There are multiple similarities between the accounts that are identified as key findings, which later on is supported by the content analysis.

5.1. Interviews

A stronger bond with dogs than with humans

After conducting the interviews, there were several points raised that almost all interviewees agreed upon. However, there was one that was undoubtedly the common denominator to all of them: praising their dogs. Not only did they all talk about their loved ones in superlatives, but some of them described ‘How beautiful they are’, and tried to mesmerize the researchers by performing some tricks (Harslo). In chapter 2, it was described how the human-dog bond has evolved throughout the years and how, according to Rehn (2013), owners often treat their pets as infants and act like their parents.
‘I had a corgi puppy who was too cute not to document! I always said I would never be “one of those dog moms,” but here I am, a year and a half later, fully invested in it all.’
(The owner of Ava and Aspen)

Dotson and Hyatt (2008), categorizes different human-dog relationships. Based on the answers from the interviewees, most dogs who are categorized as influencers are treated as child surrogates. Owners play dress up with them, and as Boni (2008) states, they often forget that dogs are animals that need to be understood based on their animal instincts and behavior. For instance, Paul (owner of Harslo), mentioned that he and his girlfriend liked to dress Harslo according to public holidays, and they also collected different bow ties for him. Whereas, Obi and Kato are often dressed up in different outfits that are knitted by their owners’ mothers.

Based on the conducted analysis, many of the interviewees have not only developed a strong bond with their dogs but also they expressed much stronger emotions towards their pets than to other humans or themselves. When discussing how the development of their accounts started and what the key indicating factors behind such an idea were, the answers showed that they believe their dogs are ‘better looking’, ‘more photogenic’ or just ‘much less boring’.

‘I do not like pictures of myself. I never tried to be an influencer myself because I feel like I’m just awkward in every photo. So it was maybe me creating a profile of a subject matter that was not taking pictures of me. Does that make sense? And I always figured that you could take a great photo of a puppy running down the hill with like 20 miles/hour, trying to eat your face..’ (Owner of Kona)

‘My personal account was all about my dogs anyway.’ (Owner of Charlie and Bodie)

‘I am not comfortable in front of the camera. ‘(Owner of Ava and Aspen)

These replies show that some of the respondents feel much more comfortable showing their dogs. This phenomenon happens not only because of the owners’ admiration for their pets but because they generally think that their dog can be a better influencer due to their cuteness, beauty, or even talent.

Moreover, Harslo’s owner emphasized that:

‘Me, as a person, I am boring (laughing). I think influencers are quite exciting, yeah, influencers are not people like me, they are really good looking and have like these fitness accounts.’
Several types of research (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce, 2017; Abidin, 2016; Freberg et al., 2011) have been conducted on influencer marketing from different angles. These studies try to explain who Instagram influencers are, what they do, and what characteristics they have. In these research papers, regardless of gender, age, or interest, the authors describe how influencers try to sell and promote content with a message of confidence. Nowadays, due to different waves of feminism (Thorpe, Toffoletti, and Bruce, 2017) and other body movements, being skinny or fit is not necessarily the key to becoming an influencer. Nevertheless, based on the answers mentioned above, many owners seemed to lack confidence and had low self-esteem. They were not keen on posing for others, sharing their daily life, or even promoting any products or movements. On the other hand, their dogs, which they treat as their babies, are more than capable of becoming the new star of Instagram in their way. This can mean that their ‘human-dogs’ get more attention than they give to themselves, and they would rather invest in turning their dogs into influencers because they believe that their pets would be more successful.

**Online communication strategy**

During the research process, dog influencers were identified as a big part of the market on Instagram. It shows that it is a rapidly growing and competitive field. Kona’s owner, Sarah, mentions:

‘*There are so many dog influencers. It is really hard to keep up.*’

In order to maintain profiles, all the owners use communication strategies. There were several points that all interviewees have listed; thus, the following communication strategies are reflected upon from the findings:

A. Quality pictures

In the world of influencer marketing, people share their daily lives on a mobile app. In order to be able to do this, people record videos and take pictures with mobile phones instead of spending time on creating qualitative content with professional cameras. This has led to oversharing and posting pictures and videos a couple of times a day. Moreover, qualitative content is no longer the priority. Therefore, storytelling becomes the center of attention (Hjorth, Pink, 2014).

Based on the responses, most of the dog owners do not spend much time on Instagram to post content, they do, however, spend a lot more time on engaging with followers or other dog owners.

‘So, because I do not spend a lot of time there [Instagram], my gain is not the biggest either. For example, I try to upload a photo every day, and during the process, I scroll
through the comments and reply to some, check messages. Perhaps it is an hour a day.’ (Kristiina Tammik)

‘I post a picture maybe every 3-4 day.’ (Owner of Harslo)

‘I have slowed down quite a bit and taken a step back from posting every single day.’ (Owner of Ava and Aspen)

Apart from trying to post more selectively and not to overshare the content on Instagram feeds, some of the owners put effort into taking quality pictures and thus expressing their passion for photography and creativity. For instance, Kona’s owner shared her story and background of how she has worked for a video production company. Her aim is to show original and creative posts on the account, and also present her point of view as a semi-professional photographer. Additionally, Kristiina Tammik also mentioned that the admiration towards her dog is not the only reason why the dog profile exists. In general, for her, the profile started as a platform, where she can share pictures of things she likes and ended up having a dog account, where often her son appears as a guest.

‘So, actually, my profile is not exactly for my dogs, but for my creativity.’ (Kristiina Tammik)

Lev Manovich (2017) mentioned that in the area of Instagram, there are several different accounts and different styles. According to him, people differentiate casual and professional pictures. Based on the responses and further researches, it is clear that most of these dog profiles strive towards a professional photography account, where the main actors are the dogs. However, it is essential not only to share a good quality picture but also to address an exciting subject and share content with an aim. Moreover, oversharing rather than focusing on quality can be applied here as well, because qualitative and professional images often do not need extra styling and editing. The quality of the pictures can also boost the follower base (Manovich, 2017). Abidin (2016) also argues that visually appealing profiles tend to have better engagement. Thus having a background in a creative field can be beneficial. However, it is crucial to keep clean aesthetics when it comes to sharing qualitative images on Instagram. Furthermore, it is important to note, that taking these images can be a time-consuming process, and sharing fewer pictures and investing more time into quality pictures can be a vital element of a successful strategy.

B. Unique identity

Studies (Freberg et al., 2011; Grafström, Jakobsson and Wiede, 2018) state that influencers tend to be a beneficial tool for online marketing, and thus they can be compelling when it comes to sending a message. It is often due to building up a personal narrative, which is a base for authenticity (Abidin, 2016). Being authentic is a
significant factor in influencer marketing on Instagram; however, in order to do that, a personal identity for the account needs to be created. Each profile has different goals when it comes to uniqueness. As mentioned above, some profiles like Kona and Kristina are highly focused on providing quality visual content and creating a more creative, artistic account.

Apart from focusing on nicely presented stories throughout visual content, other dog owners have developed different types of accounts. For instance, Harlso’s account is unique for one skill: he can balance anything on his head. During the interview, his owner, Paul, has said that this is the only trick Harlso knows. Hence most of his posts contain Harlso balancing things on his head. He even presented it during the interview. Due to this specific skill, he has even appeared on TV shows and different media channels. Being the balancing dog has led him to become an influencer with 81 thousand followers.

The owner of Obi and Kato highlights that their profile is a bit different because the content focuses on two dogs. Most of the content posted has two main characters. However, when she started the profile, she only had Obi, and the profile became mostly famous for humanizing the dog.

‘He was becoming known for having different outfits, like a human.’ (Owner of Obi and Kato)

Later on, this was continued, and now both of the dogs are often dressed up in matching outfits, making the account gain more and more followers.

Others would argue that their dog is just ‘too adorable’ not to be documented. While ‘just being too cute’ (Owner of Ava and Aspen) is not necessarily a unique identity a dog can have, it is something that they want to be perceived as. According to the post-humanistic theory, being present in a medium became an inherent part of human lives (Hayles, 1999: 13, in Gane, 2006), and moreover, what one shares is what they are being defined by (Hayles, 1998). Thus if this content is being demonstrated in the right way, it can be just what followers seek.

It was interesting to observe what unique qualities help dogs become influencers. Building up characteristics, that later on, they can use as a base for being authentic, is another argument for animal anthropomorphism, thus attributing dogs with human skills and qualities (Olney, 2018).

C. Usage of hashtags
While discussing the specific areas of the dog influencers’ accounts, goals, and strategies, the interviewees have mentioned using hashtags while posting content online.
In online communication marketing, the use of hashtags can help to divide the shared post into different themes, contexts, or topics on different platforms (Laestadius, Wahl, 2017). It is common for the users to collect and use hashtags based on what they want to communicate with the shared content. However, several hashtags are being developed by organizations, thus encouraging other users to share similar content (Laestadius, Wahl, 2017).

‘Plus, I, by that time, had started researching more about Instagram, and how it works, how to get more followers. So, I looked more about hashtags - I knew nothing about hashtags, I knew nothing about tagging people. I just, you know, put a hashtag like “puppy” and think that is cute. Then I realized, hey, you could put up to 30 hashtags, you could tag other big pages, like Dogs of Instagram or something like that.’ (Owner of Obi and Kato)

‘Yeah, we definitely use hashtags. Like we used to have a set of them, and now we try to base them on content. Also, the content is focusing on some special events like Easter. Then we use the hashtag accordingly.’ (Owner of Harlso)

Responders show that hashtags can be a very beneficial tool for influencer marketing. First, it can help express and strengthen the topic being shared on Instagram, second, it can reach out to a specific target audience (Abidin, 2016), e.g., by using #goldenretriver will attract people who are keen on looking at pictures about this specific breed. The owner of Obi and Kato also stated that it could help to boost online engagement. Moreover, the usage of hashtags, since on Instagram users can also follow specific hashtags, can help to create awareness, and thus the correct implementation of hashtags can be a beneficial tool for a successful communication strategy.

D. Loyal target audience
Apart from using hashtags, there are other ways for broadening influencers’ follower base. Content can be featured either on a more significant account or on other platforms. For instance, Kona’s owner told us that her content was reposted on another account that collects pictures and videos of golden retrievers. According to her, that helped her boost the number of Kona’s followers. Additionally, her photo was also shared on Ellen DeGeneres’ account on Instagram; however, since she did not get credited, it only gave her positive feedback for her work.

Apart from owners of Kona, Ava and Aspen, the owner of Obi and Kato also talks about how being featured on other accounts can help with the communication strategy on Instagram. Based on the information they shared, it could help and improve the strategy for influencer marketing among dogs. For Harlso’s owner, not only did it help to create more awareness, but also his dog was featured on TV shows and a popular website 9GAG.
Interviewees also mentioned that being active and engaging on the accounts can also help to gain a larger group of followers. For instance, trying to reply to the comments, and answers to direct messages is essential in order to keep the fans of their beloved pets interested. Archer and Harrigan (2016) mention that monologic conversation is often perceived more manipulative, thus when one provides space for two-way communication, it can attract more people, since they feel like they are part of the communication. In this multi-layered communication model, however, the owners need to try to answer from the dog’s point of view while being the actual human who answers, therefore using the symbolic interpretation of the dog. For instance, Kona’s owner said that she is using her own words and voice to reply to the followers, however:

‘I am a very political person myself, and when it comes to Kona’s profile, I really try to avoid all of these views, since it is not the purpose of the profile.’ (Owner of Kona)

Nevertheless, the process of active engagement can be very time-consuming:

‘I try and respond to many people; however, I do not have the time.’ (Owner of Charlie and Bodie)

‘I engage by trying to respond to as many comments on my posts as I can. I also engage with other accounts I follow by commenting, liking, and chatting in private DM’s. If someone messages me with a question or request, I will always respond. If it’s a message that’s just an emoji or something like “so cute” I usually do not engage. Just purely not enough time in the day!’ (Owner of Ava and Aspen)

Kristiina believes that her follower base is not the biggest due to the lack of her engagement:

‘So because I do not spend a lot of time there, my gain is not the biggest either.

By using the mentioned tools, like hashtags and proper communication, a large follower base can be gained. Continuous growth is one of the main aims of an influencer. However, gaining more followers is not enough if influencers are not able to maintain a loyal audience. Kona’s owner talked about how she is more active when it comes to followers who often comment and send messages. Moreover, Harlso’s owner said that he is the most grateful for his loyal audience because it got them to win a Webby award. This was an unexpected event to him, mostly because other profiles, who were also nominated, had many more followers. This indicated that not only the number of followers matters but also the relationships they can build up with them.
Bury (2016) explains that being a part of a larger group and forming these online communities have always been significant in the digital world. Followers, who comment and engage with content, can feel like they are part of a larger group. An active follower can be more expressive and share thoughts and ideas in an online space with like-minded people (Busse, Gray, 2011). Thus these influencer accounts are particular networks, where the followers can share their admiration and passion towards certain breeds or dogs in general. Furthermore, due to a social phenomenon, the ‘need to belong’, which is, ‘fundamental human motivation that underlies a myriad of human interaction and behavior’ (Busse, Gray, 2011 p. 639), users and followers have generated better well-being in parasocial communication, due to the fact that they are part of a larger group, where they can engage with people over shared interests (Greenwood, Long, 2009).

**Dog influencers over human influencers**

The paper aims to investigate the reason behind the existence of dog influencers and how they appear on Instagram. As emphasized above, there is a modest amount of research based on a specific topic. Therefore, the need for exploring and observing the effects of mediatization in a post-humanistic world, where dogs can be used as a new form of a tool in online communication. However, being an Instagram influencer, in general, has some specific characteristics. In this section, the characteristics of the dog and human influencers are compared and analyzed.

Influencers can be considered a tool for online marketing since they promote products, services, organizations, and movements (Abidin, 2016). Studies, such as as the one of Freberg et al. (2011), show that promotion through influencers tends to have better outcomes than the traditional marketing methods. The reason why people want to become influencers is to profit from collaborations with brands and organizations financially. ‘For a significant proportion of the bloggers interviewed, money had become a motivator, and the bloggers wished to be remunerated for their writing for mentions of brands’ (Archer, Harrigan, 2016, p.70). This has resulted in influencers losing their authenticity by promoting brands and products often without doing any further research on them. On the other hand, the data gathering process showed that most of the dog influencers’ aim is not to promote content solely in order to earn money. Most of the answers showed that they did not have a specific goal with their profiles at the beginning.

‘I never really went in with a goal or inspiration behind it. Its turned into an adventure/hiking/PNW account for sure though.’ (Owner of Ava and Aspen)

Moreover, all interviewees carefully select collaborations, and there were only a few who were paid. Most of the owners, however, get free products or they buy the products themselves.
'It was definitely an achievement for me to gain a partnership with Stella & Chewy—considering they are providing us with dog food for an entire year and I completely back their brand and quality standard.' (Kristiina)

'We like to collaborate with brands we believe in. However, we also do not mind just buying products ourselves.' (Owner of Harlso)

The aim of these accounts is not primarily to provide income; therefore, there is a different reason behind creating such accounts. Most responses showed that the accounts were created as something merely entertaining. The content they post aims to trigger positive emotions. Kona’s owner said that when she gets positive feedback, e.g., a follower says: ‘It just made my day’, it is something that motivates her to continue work on the whole account. Thus for the dog owners, it is not the primary goal to promote products or services (Abidin, 2016), but to entertain their audience. Moreover, due to the actual human-human engagement, owners can also experience the more favorable outcome of being part of a collective (Greenwood, Long, 2009).

Based on this information, one could argue whether these profiles can count as real Instagram influencers or whether they have a different approach compared to human influencers. However, instead of promoting products, some profiles try to send out more important messages that concern animal welfare. Kona’s owner recently started to foster puppies. This is an excellent chance for posting more content, and as her pet can also make new friends, while she is trying to promote the adoption of dogs. Not only does she send a message with this type of content, but she also provides a great example of what lifestyle a dog lover can lead.

Kristiina shared:

‘The biggest challenge is that people see my beautiful breed and want them only based on their looks. They are not easy dogs – I have lost two because of their crazy prey drive, and they do have the ability to make people go crazy. I would not want them to end in shelters just because people thought they were beautiful, so from time to time, I try to talk about their personality as openly as I can. I should do it more often, though.’

When it comes to the power of influencer marketing, and its effective results (Freberg et al. 2011), it is important to use this it for informing followers of important matters. Since dog profiles do not function as regular human profiles, they have more space and creativity to send more valuable stories. According to Charlie’s and Bodie’s owner, the reason behind having more space for creativity as a dog influencer can be:

‘As dog influencer, there is a very limited market of what we can influence.’
Thus fewer product and service promotions on Instagram can result in more quality promotions with valuable messages.

5.2. Qualitative content analysis

As mentioned before, in the methodology chapter, based on the guidelines from Schreier (2013), a coding frame was designed with segments and categories using the preliminary content analysis on the dog influencer accounts. During the research process at the beginning of this paper, many definitions were encountered. Theories regarding Instagram marketing, post-humanism, and actor-network are applied on online communication, which will be identified through visual and written content from the chosen dog influencer accounts. When conducting interviews and observing the Instagram accounts that post content with dogs, several key findings were identified that are further used in the qualitative content analysis. The coding frame is built by using categories that match the preliminary online research: promotional content, thematic content, engaging content, written communication, animal anthropomorphism, and human-dog bond. More details and the following categories are described in Table 1. Using the post-humanism and actor-network theories by Gane (2006), Haraway (1991), Fukuyama (2002) and Latour (2005), further observations of the actors, their roles and habits on Instagram will be addressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-category</th>
<th>Promotional content</th>
<th>Thematic content</th>
<th>Engaging content</th>
<th>Written communication</th>
<th>Animal anthropomorphism</th>
<th>Human-dog bond</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Content shows products or partner up collaborations, therefore creating promotion</td>
<td>Content is based on well-known and recognized themes, i.e., Christmas holiday or trending internet challenge</td>
<td>The content reaches out to the audience for direct engagement</td>
<td>Each post is always supplemented with a caption where the owner sends a specific message to the audience, with a possibility to speak “through” the dog</td>
<td>Content that is easy to relate to because the dog appears more human through emotions, actions or behavior</td>
<td>Content contains not only the dog but also its owner or other human, which represents the human-dog relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Engages audience to try out and buy new items from specific a brand they have chosen to collaborate with</td>
<td>Fun way to engage with the audience to appear more relatable. Spread joy and fun surrounding the topic</td>
<td>A direct way to talk to the followers and send positive messages. The aim is to spread positive emotions and engage in new content</td>
<td>Supplement the photo or video with a positive type of message</td>
<td>To engage with the audience in a way that can be relatable to everyone, either through text, image or video</td>
<td>Express the loving experience and relationship that the owner and dog share between each other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: coding frame for content analysis on dog accounts on Instagram
Following paragraphs will focus more in-depth on each of the categories and present direct examples and findings from dog influencer accounts. For gathering data, six profiles that were described in the methodology section are investigated. Approximately 250-300 latest posts of each of the accounts are observed and categorized according to the labels presented in Table 1.

Based on Latour’s actor-network theory (2005), dogs can be identified as actors under the command of their owners. Instagram is a social network where the owners use the image of their dogs to build relationships with followers and other accounts. The content analysis on the six accounts will help and observe the actor roles of dogs and how their owners use them as communication tools for both the visual and written content.

1. Promotional content

One of the common traits of being an influencer on Instagram is the ability to collaborate and work with other influencers or brands to create a new forum for marketing and product or service promotion (Veirman, M. et al., 2017). While talking to the owners of the accounts on Instagram, it was discovered that they never intended to do any collaborations or promotions on their accounts because they only wanted to post their dogs in different situations. However, since they were able to grow a large follower group and gain their trust and interest (Veirman, M. et al., 2017), all of them encountered offers from brands or other influencers for collaborations. It has been
shared with human Instagram influencers to run their accounts based on promotion and collaboration, but a change in a society that allows dogs and their owners to participate in this type of marketing can be observed (Birke and Hockenhull, 2012). Based on Latour’s actor-network theory (2005), dog influencers can be treated equally to a regular influencer on social media for observing and understanding the change in society. Therefore, one of the categories fell into Instagram influencer marketing to analyze how much of their content is promotional and what visual and written content they use to promote products, services, or other profiles. As an influencer, it is necessary to spend an immense time on creating credible and trustworthy content (Abidin, 2016), not only by posting good quality images and videos but also creating the right message and obtaining it.

In Image 1, an example of a promotional post in a desktop view can be observed. Several indicators express its collaborative nature. Visually the image is of good quality, and in the center, two dogs that are celebrities of the account can be seen. There is a particular emphasis on the bandanas they are wearing because their names are printed on them. Further on, it is visible that the owner has tagged another account on the image - the little profile icon on the bottom left corner signifies this. While tagging other more significant accounts is common, the user can still tell if it a product placement by seeing where the tag is located. By exploring the right side of the image, there is a neutral caption informing about their daily activity, yet below the caption, there is a text “Can’t get enough of matching bandanas with these two”, followed by a mention of another significant page and a promotional code for discount. To summarise, several points can be analyzed and observed in a post to indicate whether or not it is promotional. Many influencers on Instagram also use the hashtag #ad to be transparent and direct with the followers.

**Data gathering**

![Graph 1: amount of promotional content on selected accounts](image-url)
In comparison, it can be established that all the participants had promotional content or collaborations with other accounts. During the interviews, the owners explained that it was never their goal to seek out collaborations with brands or other accounts, yet all proved to end up posting content with products, services, or other accounts. Through observations, it was noticed that the dog owners choose products or services that benefit their dogs or themselves. For example, they promote dog food or treats, collars, bandanas, harnesses, clothing for dogs, and blankets. Since the accounts are mainly used for their and others enjoyment, the owners are very selective of their collaborations.

Accounts that have partnerships and pose as ambassadors tend to post more promotional content. It could be observed on littlepnwpups Instagram account. Kristinatammik’s account is also an ambassador for a brand, yet it is less emphasized, there are less promotional posts. However, the partnership with the dog food producer is visible through the photos.

In the previous research, it was shown that brands have specific requests of what and how they should be posted and what hashtags and tags need to be added. When posting promotional content, owners always tend to focus on their dog and the product, therefore making a clear emphasis on the product, which can be observed by only looking at the photo. The captions usually give a positive message and mention of the brand’s name to support the visual content - creating credibility and trust for the users.

2. Thematic content

![Image 2: from obi_and_kato Instagram account, April 21st 2019.](image2.png)
As an influencer on Instagram, there is a need to be involved in the social life and up to date with trends, which allows obtaining follower impressions (Freberg et al., 2011) and interact with their existing and potential followers. Trends and events are ongoing, and often, the source of bonding and relating with others. While dogs themselves do not understand the concept of such themes, they play more of a symbolic role in creating content for others. This is because it is often more comfortable for the audience to engage with content containing animals because it gives a more “carefree” (Wong, cited in Cramer 2018, p.9) feeling and it limits room for controversy. This also supports the idea and message of the accounts. During the interviews, the account owners would often emphasize how they want a fun and straightforward content that everyone can engage with.

Image 2 is an example of thematic content from obi_and_kato on a desktop view. The theme for this specific post is Easter. Easter is a vastly popular public holiday, therefore very likely that many people can find it relatable. In this particular post, the owner had decided to dress up the dogs and familiar symbolic characters of Easter - a bunny rabbit and a small chicken. In the background, she had added Easter decorations with eggs and green grass. The visual message is loud and clear to understand from the first glance. On the right side, the written communication is short and to the point - wishing happy Easter and using Easter hashtags. Overall, it is rather easy to sense the theme and message of the content and also understand how the dogs are used as symbols in their online communication.

**Data gathering**

![Thematic content graph]

*Graph 2: amount of thematic content from selected accounts*
Trends and public holidays are a great way to create engagement with the audience. Therefore all the accounts have some content containing their dogs in a thematic atmosphere. Commonly, public holidays, such as Christmas, Easter, Saint Patrick’s day, are used to produce content. The dog owners tend to dress up their dogs or give them symbolic accessories for each of the holidays - it is something they get creative with. These accessories help with the visual message because it is easy to indicate the holiday and the message the owners want to send to others. Besides public holidays, the owners also participate in online trends, such as throwback Thursday, where they post pictures of their dogs as puppies. They supplement these posts by using hashtags, the most common and easy to recognize hashtag is #tbt. The owners also like to participate in challenges that involve their dog, making the profile engaging.

Interestingly, the small dog owners tend to focus more on dressing up and buying accessories for their dogs on holidays. Graph 2 shows that harslo_the_balancing_hound and obi_and_kato have far more thematic content than other accounts. Harslo, Obi and Kato belong to the same breed - dachshund.

3. Engaging content


While most of the dog owners agree that they are not looking for a specific growth or collaborations on Instagram and that they took it up as an exciting project, they feel connected to their followers. Therefore, they want to spend more time involving and
engaging with their followers. One of the abilities of an Instagram influencer is the opportunity to create a personal and intimate relationship with their followers (Abidin, 2016). While a dog plays more of a symbolic role on Instagram account, the owners and followers always praise and involve their pets. Due to the rapid technological evolution, people have learned to express themselves in various and creative ways (Waterloo et al., 2018). Thus, this personal relationship between a dog and followers on Instagram creates a different type of communication and high engagement. This is a great example of mediatization (Hepp, 2015); how the opportunity of representing ourselves in new and more creative ways has allowed society to become more expressive.

Image 3 shows a post from goldenkonabear Instagram account. The visual content is of good quality and appealing, yet it does not describe why this type of content creates engagement. On the right side, it is noticeable that the owner has created a suggestion: “Caption this. I will post the best captions from the comments on my story!” This suggests a direct communication between the follower and the account owner. Followers are encouraged to share their thoughts and opinions to attribute “human-like reasoning to a non-human” (Olney, 2018, p.84) or descriptive and creative text to the image.

**Data gathering**

![Graph 3: amount of engaging content on selected account](image)

To continue the growth and create a stable follower group, the owners maintain a stable engagement with their followers. During the interviews, it was acknowledged that the owners often reply to comments or direct messages; however, during the content analysis, observations were made based on how the owners engage with their followers through content. Nearly all of the accounts create written content to engage with the audience through questions, suggestions, or competition. The captions would often
describe the owner’s opinion or situation and then ask the followers to share their experience with the rest through the comments. As can be seen in the example before, it can be as simple as asking their followers to be creative and decide what caption best supports the picture of their dog.

The engagement varies between the accounts. Not only do they engage with their audience by asking questions, but they also tend to engage via sharing information from their experience or giving tips that can be helpful. On kristiinatammik’s account, it was shown that she offers others to engage with her and ask her for help or advice regards dogs or photography.

4. Written communication


Instagram is vastly popular by the aesthetic visual content it provides, and it is more common to focus on the quality and presentation of images and videos (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013). Part of this research aims to understand how dogs are used as symbolic tools for communication on Instagram. Therefore one of the categories which was included in the content analysis is the written communication. The written communication on Instagram is more common in the captions under the image or video. The caption can contain any length of text that can be supported by tags or hashtags. Captions can convey a message of the image, video or the post itself, and here the dog’s symbolic role can alter and affect the way the message is received (Lloyd and Woodside, 2013).
Image 4 from harslo_the_balancing_hound Instagram account shows an example of how the dog can be involved in communicating with the followers by using its voice. While it is impossible to guess what the dog might think, the owners can use him as a tool and add human thinking (Olney, 2018) to create more direct communication with the dog. It is so-called communication through the dog itself. This can be reflected upon the theory by Gane (2006) and Latour (2005) who described that in the post-humanistic world humans are no longer the center and all actors, no matter if human or non-human, can be treated equally.

Data gathering

![Written communication graph]

In Graph 4, it is presented that all the accounts spend a significant amount of time on written communication. However, each account has a different approach to what they include in their captions.

Harlso_the_balancing_hound appears to communicate through the dog a lot of the times, explicitly focusing on jokes that match the video or image that they have chosen as it could be seen in the previous example. Most of the captions end with his name as a signature, indicating the close relationship between the dog and its followers. All the messages have a light and humorous approach, often witty and amusing.

Goldenkonabear has a distinctive approach to communicating with its followers. The owner adds short captions that communicate through the dog, attributing human thinking and emotions to the dog.

Kristiinatammik does much communication through captions; however, she does not use her dog’s voice for it. She rarely adds emotions or human thinking to her dogs. The
captions have the voice of the owner, who informs about dogs’ activities, achievements. She also spends much time informing people on how to care for dogs and to be responsible.

**Littlepnwpups** focuses a lot on the captions due to promotions. This account spends much time describing the products they are using. Therefore there is very little communication *through* the dog. The dog plays a more symbolic role.

**Charlieandbodie** has mixed voices between the owner and the dog. Mostly on focusing on communication *through* the dog. The content sends a message not only through captions but also through videos, where the owner has added small subtitles to the dogs’ activities. It attributes human-thinking and emotions to the dogs.

**Obi and kato** uses short captions, and it does not give a distinctive voice. It is much more descriptive, including information about the dogs’ activities, products, or greetings.

5. Animal anthropomorphism

![Image 5: from charlieandbodie Instagram account, August 9th 2019.](image-url)

In a post-humanistic world, where the human is no longer the center of attention (Gane, 2006), the world tends to focus on the technological evolvement which opens doors to different dimensions (Haraway, 1991). During the research, the symbolic use of dogs
for communication on Instagram accounts was explored. One of the common traits of using dogs in marketing, in general, is that “they [dogs] typically do not share political views or anything controversial” (Wong, cited in Cramer 2018, p.9) and, therefore, creates smooth engagement with the audience. Dogs can represent many things, emotions, and situations, and their owners often assign human-thinking and behavior to their pets. Animal anthropomorphism means that certain traits make them appear human and more relatable (Boni, 2008). For example, by wearing human clothing or participating in human activities, as well as indicating human-like thinking and talking.

Image 5, from charlieandbodie Instagram account, is an example of attributing human-behavior to the dog. The content is relatable to humans because of the tendency to prepare “summer bodies’ and following diets, and in this case, it may send a message that the dog is working on its diet and summer body when in reality the dog is merely waiting for a treat or feeding.

**Data gathering**

![Animal anthropomorphism graph](image)

**Graph 5: amount of animal anthropomorphism content in selected accounts**

Commonly between the accounts, owners tend to apply human-like thinking, emotions, and behavior through their captions. Goldenkonabear and charlieandbodie have clear animal anthropomorphism through their captions, which appear to reflect what the dog is thinking. Charlieandbodie also created videos where they write subtitles to dogs’ activities, which creates a sense of human-like behavior. These accounts focus more on using the dog’s voice to relate to human behavior and activities.

Harlso_the_balancing_hound often dresses up in human costumes, especially by wearing a bow-tie. The content is supported by captions that appear to be said by the dog. Similarly to Harlso, obi_and_kato also shows similar communication strategy. The
dogs are often dressed in sweaters and relating human problems, for instance going to work on Monday or partying on weekends.

6. Human-dog bond

Lastly, observations were made based on the human-dog relationship. During the interviews, one of the key findings showed that the owners praised and loved their pets very much, and they wanted to share this bond with others. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) imply that there are different types of relationships between a beloved pet and its owner, and since all the owners, who were contacted, praised their pets, it indicated that their relationships are more related to “dog as a companion or “child surrogate” (2008 p. 458). Thus this category explores how dog owners represent this bond through their online content.

Image 6, from kristiinatammik's Instagram account, presents a human-dog bond where a dog is a companion and a part of the family. The image consists of a dog and a toddler sitting close to each other. More interestingly, it shows how well-behaved and trusted the dog is since it is posing next to a child who is embracing it. The caption writes “The unbeatable two ...” which expresses the secure mental connection to the pet.
Data gathering

Not all the accounts show the human-dog bond. It was rare to come across a photo that consists of a dog and a human, which would indicate the human-dog relationship. The owners who post photos of the dog and humans mostly chose pictures of themselves with a dog and calling themselves parents of the dog. Other family members are also involved, therefore recognized as a grandmother, aunt, sibling. The human-dog relationship is always represented as positive and joyful companionship, showing how important the dog is to the family.

The dogs are almost always described as owners’ children and never considered as anything less than a family member or close friend.

Kristinatammik shows a different type of connection to the dog. The dogs are continually participating in competitions, so is often pictured next to the owner in a severe manner - strictly posing while the owner holds the leash -, but at the same time, she also posts a high number of photos where the child is embarrassing or standing next to the dog. It created two feelings - a well-trained professional and family member.

6. Concluding discussion

In the following paragraphs, the main findings and research process will be discussed in order to answer preliminary set research questions. This paper will conclude by summarizing the research and drawing conclusions and remarks.
6.1. Discussion

The gathered findings have given us a broad insight into why dogs are used as communication tools on social media by their owners. From the preliminary observations, and being a part of Instagram marketing as direct users, the significant difference in how people communicate online and in real life can be seen. This sparked an interest in researching the media and communication changes in society - also known as mediatization (Hepp, 2015).

Personal admiration for dogs must be admitted, alongside with the active content creating on Instagram. Various posts were carefully observed on Instagram that contains dog images, videos, and memes. As communication and media students, this societal behavior naturally arouses curiosity about how we as humans can relate and connect with content about dogs and why is it so appealing and easy to engage. Besides browsing other content about dogs, it has been discovered that posting photos and videos of pets gather a much bigger response rate than regular photos with people or anything else in comparison. For the focus, the goal was to learn more about why dogs on social media, especially Instagram, are so appealing to us as humans and how are they used to build up influencer accounts.

By now, many people know about Instagram and influencers, but what they usually do not consider is that now, in a post-humanistic world (Gane, 2006), anyone or anything can be one. So how can a dog be an Instagram influencer when it has no clue what Instagram is? The human may not be in the center of attention; however, he still plays a significant role in the back of the stage. Using animals in marketing is nothing new. Animals have many characteristics that help us express specific ideas or messages (Lancendorfer, K. et al., 2006). A dog can represent positive emotions and behavior, such as loyalty, friendship, companionship, and pure joy (Lloyd and Woodside, 20013). Overall, during the data gathering process, there was never a negative emotion or behavior regarding dogs. It makes sense why people would like to follow such content - it is simple, it is not controversial nor political, and it just makes anyone smile (Wong, in Cramer 2018). However, to even qualify as a micro-influencer on Instagram, the beloved pet needs to gather at least 10,000 followers (Kemp, McDougal, and Syrdal, 2018) and that is quite a vast number of followers for someone who does not know what Instagram is and wants to chew on sticks all day.

More than 60 accounts were contacted to gather data and analyze the media and communication using dog content on Instagram. Each of the accounts, who were contacted, were using a dog to produce and share content, and by doing so, gathered more than 10,000 followers. The aim was to get in touch with them and get insights about why their dog is an influencer and how they use their pet for online
communication. While this turned out to be a complicated process to find people to engage with (apparently they are shyer than their dog), six helpful people agreed, to share their experiences and talk about their dog as an influencer in order to provide valuable insight to this research.

The interviews show how strong the owners’ bond and relationship with their pets is. All the pets are considered a part of their family (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). The owners praise and love their dogs, and the reason why they started a separate account for their pet was to share the love and positivity they receive from their pet every day with everyone else. When asked about why they did not choose to do it themselves instead of using the dog, they all thought that they would not make right influencers because of the looks and the fact that they are camera-shy, hence the dog always looks good and happy in any context.

The difference between a regular human influencer and a dog influencer is usually that the dog owners do not create accounts with the purpose to gain followers or partnerships with brands. They have the privilege to choose products and services with others based on their interest. In a way, it is more reliable feedback because they do not do it for profit - they do it to benefit their pet. The accounts are a playground for their creativity and showing off their dog in different surroundings. Therefore any collaboration and promotions are seen as unexpected successes and achievements. As influencers, they are less stressed about their profiles, and they only focus on keeping it positive. Their accounts can send serious messages as well - about dog adoption, taking care of the dog, teaching, giving tips and help to people who want to learn - overall they can spread informative material about responsible dog ownership.

The dog is the center of the account, and each owner develops a tone of voice and message, therefore creating a symbolic meaning of their pet (Lloyd and Woodside, 2013). The saying *like owner, like dog*, does not necessarily apply to this situation. The owners shared that they can be rather political or controversial, whereas they want to keep their dog’s account positive, joyous, and less controversial. Further on, the owners have developed a particular interest and investment in the accounts. A lot of Instagram users have taken on self-studies about Instagram marketing strategies to be able to continue their engagement with followers (Veirman, M. et al., 2017). They actively use hashtags; they tag big dog pages and share their content. There are many dog accounts out there; therefore, it is vital to keep up with the competitive market, even though this is something the dog owners did not anticipate. A unique and creative profile is the start for it, and the follows trust and credibility for promotions (Veirman, M. et al., 2017).

So far, the dog owners appreciate engagement with their followers and try to keep a high response rate and engagement with their audience. This can lead to a more extensive follower base and loyal audience (Freberg et al., 2011). It creates a positive
experience for the owner and the followers. The owners get gratification from positive feedback about the content and their dogs because the human-dog bond is secure, and their owners care for their dog’s well-being (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008). The followers are more likely to be loyal and continue engaging with the profile and its content if they feel welcomed and appreciated by direct interaction from the account owner.

While exploring the content on dog influencer accounts, several similarities and patterns were observed. The owners tend to spend less time producing, editing, and posting images and videos. However, they have created their own visual identity, tone of voice and style, which helps to build a robust, unique and creative account (Veirman, M. et al., 2017) that can help and stand out in a competitive Instagram market. The owners tend to post their dogs doing tricks, dressing up and talking like a human. There are differences in how the owners choose to communicate. Some owners communicate as if the dog was communicating itself (Olney, 2018), and yet some owners are more aware that the dog itself is not running the accounts, therefore choose more descriptive captions explaining their activities. Since the audience studies were not explored in depth, it is hard to acknowledge which way of communication gives better results. Likes and comments could measure this, and perhaps then it is easier to evaluate which type of communication is more preferred by the audience.

The owners have emphasized the importance of having good quality photos and videos. They admitted that they much prefer looking at good quality images, which also inspired them to work more on the visual content and even buy a better camera. This is rather significant because Instagram is well-known for its aesthetic feel (Miles and Ibrahim, 2013). It is fascinating how addictive Instagram can be. What turned out to be a simple project to share a few puppy photos, developed in a more time-consuming activity of gaining followers, thinking of new creative content, and promoting products.

Overall, the admiration for their dogs is clearly shown through the content on Instagram. It takes time and patience to create content with a living being that does not care for good lighting and the right side for their portrait. This indicates how devoted the owners are to their pets and they spend much time together, making their human-dog bond ever so strong. The actual effect on the dog’s behavior is unknown (Boni, 2008); however, it is clear that the dog gets more playtime and walks in the park to get that one perfect photo for Instagram. After that, it is the owner who spends time thinking of a fun, quirky, and informative message for the caption.

**Further findings**

In the phase of collecting and analyzing data, an interesting finding occurred. Most of the researched profiles have been created in the year 2016 or around this year. This information appeared for the first time during the interviews with the dog owners; however, it seemed like the information that could be further investigated. Thus further
literature and already existing researches were reviewed again in order to find some useful data.

As it was mentioned, this field is not as explored as other areas of online communication. However, by using the Mediatization (Hepp, 2015) framework, it was necessary to find information that can prove that the starting point of this phenomenon could be related to some technological changes. Luckily, Instagram offers a timeline of its improvement, and thus, the features that appeared in 2016 were investigated. Instagram (2019), states that Instagram was introduced in Windows 10 mobiles, thus broadening the possible group of users.

Moreover, Instagram has also started using Instagram stories this year, which is yet another option for posting content, and further engaging with the followers. Additionally, holiday theme related stickers also appeared in this year, which based on the interviews and content analysis is a prevalent theme to use among dog influencers. The ever-growing app has reached 600 million users, which can also mean that with high scientific chances, these accounts appear with diversity. However, due to the lack of scientific data, it was decided not to use this information, since it cannot be further investigated.

Part of the roles as researchers, secondary analysis on specific topics can be applied at any time. Layder (2013), explains, ‘a data set could be reanalyzed in terms of the key problem issues around the six problem categories. Or you might want to reanalyze the data according to the specific topic-questions that concern you.’ (p.19) In his example, he mentioned how he has further researched his research and have gathered new data about the topic, due to further findings and new interest. In the personal understanding of the field of Media and Communication, there is always plenty of space and opportunity for new research, and thus it is important to note, that further findings are not something that should be forgotten, but instead to use for secondary analysis.

6.2. Conclusion

Reflecting on the research questions, the conclusion of this research paper will be made by summarizing the main findings and answer the proposed questions at the beginning of the paper.

The research has shown that communication and media have changed significantly. It is no longer required to use only human images and human communication to promote, inform, and engage with an audience online. At first glance, the idea of having a dog influencer Instagram account can be puzzling, but after researching the recent changes in society, media and communication, such a switch in Instagram influencer marketing are more understandable.
One of the main questions that needed to be answered with this research was: Why do dog owners use their dogs as a communication tool in mediatized marketing on Instagram?

Through extended discussions with the dog owners themselves, their viewpoint is understandable. As dog owners, they feel a strong bond with their pet, and they both get attached. During this human-dog bond, dog owners experience a different type of love. This one non-human creature can bring so much joy in their everyday lives, even though their communication differs from human-to-human conversation and bonding. Perhaps that is the reason why it is so easy to relate to a dog because it does not bring any assumptions, controversial thinking, and opinions. Each person can relate and interpret a relationship with a dog in their way. This said, the dog owners keep a positive mindset and want to share the joy of owning a pet with others. The society has never been so intertwined with technology as it is now, so there is a natural need for sharing written and visual content online. The dog owners may often feel pressured by other influencers online, and, therefore, think they cannot qualify to be an influencer themselves. With a lack of knowledge, they create an account for their puppy and start sharing images and videos, but eventually, they notice how well-received their content is, and the followers multiply. When that happens, the owners realize that there is more on Instagram than just simple content sharing. Hence they use the opportunity to turn their dog into a communication tool for interacting with others online. They do not negatively use the dog, and they use this advantage to spread positive thinking and messages across Instagram.

A dog influencer is the owner of a dog that decided to share the content of their dog with a broad audience. The dog itself is not directly affected by this; it merely plays its role and develops a different type of relationship with its owner. A dog influencer represents positivity, friendship, humor, creativity, and love. The dog owners try and represent all these characteristics through good quality images and videos with a touch of creativity. It is not an easy job to work with a dog to create exciting content for others, but they do it for a fantastic experience. It can often be touching and emotional to be able to spread happiness to their followers.

This type of social change on social media was not something predicted. Due to constant technological and communication developments, more of these changes can be expected. This can be used to learn that communication comes in different types and forms, and we as humans can be placed in the background who generate the content and communication. Anything can be modified to match the need of media, communication, and the audience itself.
Being a part of media and communication studies have shown how this field is continuously growing. Any form of communication and can be altered to match the target group’s needs on specific platforms. Whereas, the way people communicate has changed due to mediatization. For instance, interpersonal communication has been affected by online communication. During this change, many emotions and reactions that are expressed in face-to-face communication can be lost or altered; therefore, being creative in online communication helps us maintain a more interactive communication.
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**Instagram accounts:**

Obi and Kato: https://www.instagram.com/obi_and_kato/
Charlie and Bodie: https://www.instagram.com/charlieandbodie/
Ava and Aspen: https://www.instagram.com/littlepnwpups/
Kristiina Tammik: https://www.instagram.com/kristiinatammik/
Kona Bear: https://www.instagram.com/goldenkonabear/
Harslo the balancing hound: https://www.instagram.com/harlso_the_balancing_hound/
8. Appendices

DRAFT: Interview focus areas

1. Can you tell about your story on Instagram
   When/how it all started?
   Why did you decide to make a profile for your dog on Instagram?
   How did it develop so far? (Process)
   Idea behind the profile
   What challenges did you face when starting such a channel on Instagram?

2. How much time do you spend on managing the account? (Weekly)

3. How do you decide what content to post with your dog? (Does your dog inspire you with its personality or behaviour)
   Do you spend extra time teaching your dog how to “pose” or any tricks that you use to create content?

4. What is the specific audience you are trying to reach?
   How do you engage? And how do you respond to your followers' requests and feedback?

5. Are you collaborating with any brands or organizations for promoting products/places/services?
   Was it one of your goals to gain collaboration with a brand?
   If so, does this channel work as an income source?

6. How does your dog help you reach out to your followers? Or engage with them.

7. What difference do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?
   Why is your dog an influencer and not you?
   How do you communicate “through” your dog?

8. How are you trying to represent your dog on Instagram?
   Have you created a specific personality for your dog?
   What role does your dog play?
   Do you consider your dog as a marketing tool on Instagram?

9. How do you see your relationship with the dog?
   Has Instagram affected it?
   Is your dog just made for a specific task? Or the dog is more like a friend/family member?

10. Can you share your biggest success and biggest failure by running a dog influencer channel?
    Or, share an interesting experience.
1. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH OBI AND KATO OWNER

Name of participants:
Interviewee: Xian (Obi and Kato’s owner)
Interviewees: Fanni and Zane

F: First we would like to hear your story on Instagram, like how did it all start and how did you decide to create an account for your dogs.

X: Sure! I obviously had an Instagram account for myself before I got my dog's. As you are aware, we have got two: Obi, which is the black and Kato. We got Obi first. We got him in, I think it was, 201. Probably January-February. At that time, a few of my friends had already had dogs, they had Instagram accounts for their dogs. So, I guess, I thought it would be a fun idea to create an Instagram account for Obi. So that was kind of my reasoning for doing it. Everyone else seemed to be doing it - so, why not?

So, Obi’s account officially started, probably, that year in January/February. And it has obviously come a long way since then

F: How did it develop so far? (Process)

X: It started off with just photos on my camera phone. Probably really crappy quality, you know, low-lightning. He was a puppy then. One thing I can’t regret, is not taking enough pictures of him as a puppy because they grow quickly. But the biggest progression was when I decided to buy a DSLR camera because half way through operating his account, I realized that, you know, a - I enjoy looking at other people’s pictures with good quality, and those accounts intended to get more likes, more followers. So, half way through, I bought a DSLR and then I noticed that, you know, those pictures were liked a lot more than crappy, low-light camera phone photos. Plus, I, by that time, had started researching more about Instagram and how it works, how to get more followers. So, I looked more about hashtags - I knew nothing about hashtags., I knew nothing about tagging people. I just, you know, put a hashtag like “puppy” and think that’s cute. Then I realized, hey, you could put up to 30 hashtags, you could tag other big pages, like Dogs of Instagram or something like that. At that time as well, my mom’s a retiree and she knits as a hobby. She started knitting little outfits for Obi.

Z: That’s really cute!

X: So I thought he was becoming known for having different outfits, like a human. So the progression, it’s developed from, you know, a beginners account with crappy photos to me having to actually learn about Instagram. Almost treating it like it was Instagram business. Like Obi’s account was originally just a private, not private - it was public -,
but it wasn’t a business Instagram account. And part way through I created that because you can get stats and things like that. Also another thing I found was advertising. I never would’ve considered that one when I first started. Now I actually pay 3 bucks for a photo for maybe three days advertising. I definitely noticed a big difference in likes on the page. But it’s interesting from a development point of view, from that side, I mean, we have come from, obviously, zero followers to about 22,5 thousand, keep in mind, he’s a small fish in a very big pond. There are dogs, as you have probably noticed, with hundreds of thousands of followers. But certainly I found that when he’s featured on a really big page, that’s when I get exponentially a lot more followers. So that was a really long speech of how it developed.

F: No, that is perfect. It is perfect for us, if you give us all the insights. Feel free to talk about whatever comes to your mind.

Z: So, what were the challenges for you when you started the account for your dog on Instagram?

X: I think, the challenge was probably the … I approached it more like just sharing photos. I didn’t treat it like, I wasn’t hungry for likes or followers. I am probably more now. So the challenge I guess was more when I started to become a bit more hungry, I wanted more followers, I wanted more likes. The challenge was realizing that I didn’t know anything about how Instagram works, and it meant that I had to actually sit down and read articles on Instagram, like there are apparently better days to post. For example, I just post whenever I felt like it. But I had to learn -okay, who’s my largest pool of audience? And that is why the business Instagram account was better. Because it got all the stats of where your audience and people liking your photos, where are they based. It appeared to me then that if the majority of the people who like my photos are based in London or in Europe, there is not point for me posting a photo when they are asleep. So it is the timing of the photos. Might be that I have to post them in the late afternoon, maybe early evening PErth time to those people in London or wherever. And there are apparently certain days of the week, stats wise. You know, a lot of articles suggest that a certain days are better. So yeah, the challenge was learning how to up-skill myself in Instagram, and I am sure that I am still not as advanced as there are a lot of other people. I know that some people probably get involved in engagement groups, where they all work together as a group to try and increase followers and likes within the groups. For example, I have been involved in one, it was a bit time consuming but you know it’s like - alright, on this day we all gonna post a photo of this particular person in the group, we all gonna like, share. We’re going to post instagram stories, so there are different methods of doing it. So, I think the challenge is, if anyone wants to become an influencer, it is not what I am inteding, I work full time and I think if you want to be a full time real popular famous instagramer, you need to devote a lot of time to that. From what I have read of people who are influencers, that seems to be the case. Because there is actually a lot of time in it, if it goes into running and account.
Whether you’re human or dog. It is not only good quality photos, you have to be posting a lot I think, and targeting your audience. There is a sausage dog called KRusio, the celebrity daxon, I don’t know if you have heard of it? HE has like, god knows how many followers he’s got, but his owners are pretty sure, one or more of them, is like a graphic designer. They make amazing videos with soundtracks, they make custom costumes for their dogs, like that requires time. So I think the challenge for, not for me personally, but certainly for a lot of people wanting to be an influencer, would be finding the time and the money and effort in research and run it. And put that effort to get those likes, like it is very rare that you get you can’t just hope that you may go viral from one picture, you know, and that’s rare. Most of the time people have to just work for it.

F: How much time do you spend on managing the account? (Weekly)

X: I would say, I am on it every day, but on little bits. So, I won’t spend a big part like two hours or something, I would get up in the morning and check it, when I’m sitting on the train going to work - I will go in there and I will be liking other people’s commenting. Throughout the day it’ll be like 5-10 minutes here and there. You know, regularly through the day, every day.

F: What are the most activities that you do the most? Like when you are managing the account - do you reply mostly to some comments or some messages, or do you like other posts, do you post or spend time editing the pictures?

X: So, I post normally, I post photos probably two times a week. It probably takes me about 5 to 10 minutes to do a post because I have saved hashtags, I have saved big pages that I tag on to those photos as well. So that’s about 10min a week to post, and then I will spend time replying to anyone who has commented on a photo, I generally like their comment or reply “thank you very much” or something like that because normally they’re compliments. And then when I’m on the train, you know, my train ride is about 25 minutes from work to home, I’ll be liking photos that come upon my feed and if I think it’s a really nice photo or cute photo, I will comment on that as well. So it is a bit of a mixture of all of that. I rarely do stories, that was like a recent thing that I started trying to do because I noticed a lot of people do them. I didn’t really know if I had to do them. Being part of this engagement group, that I was a part of kind of recently, forced me to learn - it was all about posting stories. I just had to figure out how to do it. But I tend to just focus on the photos or videos. So yeah, every day doing some little thing and twice a week posting my own photos and then in between liking and commenting, just like that. I also run a facebook page for them as well, which is kind of linked to the instagram, but whenever I post on Instagram it automatically posts on Facebook, once in a while I will like or reply the comments that people have posted on facebook posts as well.
Z: How do you decide what content to post with your dog? (Does your dog inspire you with its personality or behaviour)

X: Let me think, Obi certainly inspired me to do videos because he is really smart. He picks upon tricks quite quickly, so he learns quite a few tricks and I take videos of his tricks. It inspired me, I thought “oh that’s pretty smart” and someone might find that cute. I remember doing one video where I just did series of tricks, all in one video which was quite popular. Obi and Kato has quite different personalities. Kato, I got like a backpack, like a napsack, which has a clear niche in the front - it is designed for your dog to nit and then you can just zip it up. He loves going in there, every time I pull that out, he tries to leap into it so that inspires me too, because it is just so cute how excited he is. So there was a video on Instagram of him just casually strolling into the napsack and then we just zipped him into it. We did one with Obi and Kato where I had one of those carry bags, like a big tote, and Obi again was very excited and he would be leaping into it. So those little characters work, it inspired me to do videos for that. My mom, I obviously mentioned it, she’s also knitting. She would knit little sweaters and hand-embroidered the patterns. So, that kind of inspired me to take photos of, first with Obi, and then with Kato both of them wearing the sweaters. To showcase the work, but also people just keep going on “Oh my god, your mom should sell them” because, you know, sausage dogs are very odd shaped. So it is very hard to find something that fits them, so people kind of find it amazing that these dogs have their custom made sweaters and they have amazing patterns on and amazing colours.

What else? It is hard in my house, because I have really poor lightning. And I am not yet one of those crazy influencers that are bothered to go and spend money buying selfie stick or like a tripod with lightning and all that. I have noticed that trying to take some photos outside in the courtyard with some greenery. There was a period when I was doing kind of the same picture - it was inside, on their bed. But then I thought, you know, it’s some other profiles that I have looked at - they mix it up a little bit. So I have started to use the garden as a bit of an inspiration to get some greenery, something like that. Sometimes things that inspire me, are public holidays, like Easter, where you dress them up in rabbit outfits, get some basket with chocolate eggs and then go down to the park with some greenery and take some photos there. Halloween - get them in some scary costumes. We got store selling some budget items, they have, they’re really cheap, but they have these amazing dog sections where they sell these different costumes. A lot of times, I got to K-mart and be like - Oh a six dollar costume! Why not, I’ll get two. So they have a hot dog outfit, two mexican sombreros, they got all sorts of crazy costumes. A lot of times just walking down the pet section inspires me to take some pictures of them in some funny outfits.
F: Do you spend extra time teaching your dog how to “pose” or any tricks that you use to create content?

X: The tricks I thought them outside Instagram that was just for interest, but it certainly helps for posting on Instagram. For posing - they don’t have any particular pose, but it was more so to get them stay still.

F: Definitely, that is the hardest one.

X: That is the hardest thing when taking pictures of dogs. There is a lot of me holding a DSLR and holding a squeak-able toy or holding a treat above the camera. And even doing that, Kato will still be wandering off. There is a lot of work. Obi is not too bad, because we have had him longer. When I bring a camera and he’s there, and I call him, he will genuinely come back and look into the camera. Kato is more scatter-brain and it takes me a while to get his attention. But there are no tricks involved, habit - i guess. In the house it is probably okay, but when you start taking pictures outdoors, where there are birds and and all the people - very hard. And since they’re small dogs, I am on my stomach. There’s been people seeing me in the park laying on my stomach and holding a squeak-able above a camera. The public probably think i’m an idiot.

Z: What is the specific audience you are trying to reach?

X: We talked about the audiences, but I don’t have a specific audience that I am trying to reach. I think the target for me is just as broad audience as I can get. The hashtags I use are probably gonna be more targeted, I imagine when you think about it, anyone who’s going to be liking and following us, has to be either a dog lover in general or a sausage dog lover. So I imagine I would be target those sorts of people, but I don’t care what background or where they’re from. If they like and follow - that’s a win for me.

F: How do you engage? And how do you respond to your followers' requests and feedback?

X: how do I engage? Mainly indirectly. But the engagement would be replying to their comments. Sometimes I will get private messages., either in a response to a story or, very rarely, to a picture - I will respond to that. A lot of the time direct messages are normally people wanting to collaborate. Most of the time they [followers] don’t have requests of feedback in general, it is more likely to be a person who is looking to collaborate.

F: Are you collaborating with any brands or organizations for promoting products/places/services?
X: Not currently, but I have. The first collaboration I had was with Obi, before we had Kato. I think, it was Doxy Watches. They are a brand of watch wear. They have a symbol of a Dachshund and the hands of the watch are extra short like sausage dog legs. They were pretty much like “we will send you a watch if you take photos and use our hashtags”. So that was probably the first collaboration.

Happy socks, you have probably heard of them. They’re quite a big brand, I think they’re based in Norway, they’re Scandinavian - I’m pretty sure.

F: It’s quite possible.

Z: Yeah, that’s possible.

X: They were like “we will send you 5 pairs of socks if you take pictures with your dog and dogs and use happy socks hashtag”. So we got 5 socks from them, funnily enough a year later they sent me more socks but without any requests. So I was like “okay”.

Recently I had two collaborations, almost at the same time. One was called, Possum Paul boutique. It’s a UK lady who does like dog harnasses, leads and collars. And I noticed, because at the same time there were a few other big dog pages that I follow where the dogs were wearing the same harnasses, so she was obviously targeting a lot of people and certain dogs with large followers. Essentially she sent me two hand made harnasses which is great, mine were getting a bit raddy and I was looking for some. And they’re really cool, and I had to do two posts with a short space of time from each other, use this hashtag, that sort of thing.

I can Icon dog wear, they had like dog hoodies. They sent two free dog hoodies, and again the same thing - pictures, hashtags, a video and all that.

I have a lot that try and collaborate, but I pick and choose. If it benefits my dogs or me, then I will do it. And if there is no cost involved. Like I had one where it was an american company and they were like “we make these special dog water bottles” which has a special bowl attached, but they were based in US and they were like “we will give you a 25% discount”. And I was like “ugh”, a - I don’t really need a dog water bottle, b - it’s not free and I have to pay for shipping as well from US and I was like “nah”.

I had another one with someone wanting, I could pick some cheap - they were like these places selling like mugs with a photo on it, crappy stuff like that - and I was like, that is just not for me.

Another one was like “you can get these headphones”, but you need to do like a video where you sit down and talk about the headphones, and I was like “no way, I’m not
doing that”. So I do knock back some. I think I had another one who was like “we make iphone cases, they are customized” but I didn’t want an iphone case. They’re the sorts of collaborations, though I have seen other dog accounts where the collaboration is quite, they almost make it a competition. I just personally hate those. I get invited to, not exactly invited, people tag me in these things. Of course, these competitions are like - we have collaborated with this dog biscuit company - so it’s a competition, it’s a 30 thousand dollar giveaway, you can get these bags from this particular dog biscuits, to enter you need to follow all these brands, then you need to tag as many people - and that’s where I get tagged. It’s way too much effort. When I first started, I did a couple of those. There are types of collaborations, I haven’t been asked to do one of those types before. I might change my mind, it might be different if I’m running the competition, then I might not mind. But certainly entering that sort of things is not my thing.

Z: Was it one of your goals to gain collaboration with a brand?

X: No, never one of my goals at all. It just happened. They just contacted me out of the blue. I still to this day don’t aim to do collaborations. If they get through and they’re good and I like it and it’s not too much effort for a full time worker, I will get involved. But that’s not one of my aims for operating Obi and Kato’s Instagram account. I certainly don’t make any income from it, in fact I am probably spending more on it and advertising than I am actually gaining.

F: How does your dog help you reach out to your followers? Or engage with them.

X: I don’t know if they help me reach out to followers or engage with them. I mean, I will have certain followers to a regulars, like they will always like a photo and they will tend to always comment. I always try to make an effort to engage with those people a bit more. But I don’t think they [dogs] help me reach out to followers. It’s more me getting out there and hoping I get more followers and likes. I know, in my head that I probably need to do more to get more followers, whether be more in engagement groups, the base line of what I am doing is advertising, but it’s probably more time and money than I have. Unless our pictures are featured on a big page, our followers going up is very slow. But if they are featured on a massive page, then yeah, I will see exponential increase in followers, which intend to be likes. Advertising for a photo tends to get me more likes, if I don’t pay for advertising - I notice I don’t tend to get as many likes. But I don’t think it increases followers.

Z: What difference do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?
X: Potentially, the audience. On my personal Instagram, when I follow an account, it’s normally like a makeup influencer or something like that. I mean with dogs you are limited to the collaborations. The collaborations are more limited to dog or pet things. With regular influencers the collaboration is much more broad. It could be from makeup to food, to clothing or anything really. Maybe something that you guys can look into is whether these accounts have a bigger reach than a regular influencer. Because as I said someone who is gonna follow a dog page they gotta love dogs or that specific breed. For instance I hate French Bulldogs. I just can’t stand them, so I’m not gonna follow them.

Z&F: Why is your dog an influencer and not you?

X: Number one, I’m private. My Facebook and Instagram is only for sharing with friends. I don’t want any strangers looking at my pictures, it’s very private. With a dog, it’s totally different. And I spend money on promoting my dog’s account. I don’t do that with mine. And they are cuter than me. It’s pretty easy.

Z&F: How do you communicate “through” your dog?

X: It’s an odd one.. Like for example I have a friend who doesn’t like the way that most people do it and how I do it, when we talk as ‘we are’ the dog.

Z&F: That’s exactly what we meant by this question.

X: Oh yeah my friend says it’s weird, but I like it. This style makes is more personal with the audience. Like if the dog has a funny face, for example passed out face, you can say: Oh, Mondays are hard. People can relate to that more, than: He is Obi. He is very sleepy. It kinda puts the audience in a mind of a dog and what the dog would possibly be thinking.

Z&F: How are you trying to represent your dog on Instagram?

X: Represent in what way?

Z&F: We meant like how you ‘use’ your dog as tool if you do. More in a symbolic way.

X: It’s not like I have a brand. For example, do you have Peter Alexander there? He is an Australian sleepwear designer. He started off making pajamas in his garage and built up a multi-million dollar business in Australia. His brand is simple: sausage dog. So you can imagine all the sausage dog owners love his design. And this is how I imagine a sausage dog being a symbol. But to me, my dogs aren’t symbolic or they don’t represent anything, it’ just sharing what I think of a cute pretty dogs, in their outfits.
Z&F: Have you created a specific personality for your dog?

X: No, I haven’t. I mean with Obi, originally it was only his account, I don’t know if his personality comes through his Instagram account. Certainly when I joined Keto, I haven’t created any personality.

Z&F: How do you see your relationship with the dog?

X: They are my children. I don’t have children. I find this breed to bond very well with their owners. They are the most snuggly ones. People tend to become obsessed with the breed and that’s definitely the case for me. It’s good to come home for something that loves unconditionally.

Z&F: Has Instagram affected it?

X: Not at all. I don’t see them as a cold tool for marketing.

Z&F: here we were focusing on both negative and positive aspects. For instance do you spend more time with them? Or different kind of activities due to the usage of Instagram. You also mentioned making outfits for them.

X: If I had to find something negative then it would be to find time taking those pictures, when they are definitely not cooperative. But at the end of the day, you love them and you see people liking your pictures of them. So that wasn’t all a waste.

Z&F: Is your dog just made for a specific task? Or the dog is more like a friend/family member?

X: More like a friend, family member. Not for specific task. I’ve always had dogs, and I love dogs. They are the best companion.

Z&F: Can you share your biggest success and biggest failure by running a dog influencer channel?

X: Probably the biggest success would be being featured on ‘Dogs of Instagram’ (@dogsofinstagram). That’s a massive page with millions of influencers. I think my followers went up exponentially over in a couple of days. Biggest failure.. My biggest failure is more Instagram’s problem. It has to approve the picture before the ad starts running. I find that really annoying. Sometimes it can take two days. And if I pay for three days, then it goes from the days that I paid for. But it’s not my failure.
Z&F: What is your future plan?

X: I think I’ll keep going as I’m going. The aim is to gain more followers. Probably there are a lot of things I can do to get more followers much faster, but that takes some time and money that I don’t have. Or I can just quit my job and be a full-time dog influencer.

2. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH THE OWNER OF AVA AND ASPEN
Name of participants:
Interviewee: Ava and Aspen (littlepnwpups)
Intervieweess: Fanni and Zane

Z&F: Can you tell about your story on Instagram, when/how it all started?

A: I started the account back in January of 2018 because I had a corgi puppy who was too cute to not document! I always said I would never be "one of those dog moms" but here I am a year and a half later fully invested in it all.

Z&F: So, why did you decide to make a profile for your dog on Instagram?

A: As stated above, a combination of wanting a platform to document little Ava, and a few of my friends encouraging me to go for it.

Z&F: How do you feel about the development of the process so far?
A: Well, at first I was just posting silly photos I was taking with my iPhone, then transitioned to a DSLR Canon camera. I continued to practice and grow my skill set with photography (and still am!).

Z&F: And what was the main idea behind the profile?

A: I never really went in with a goal or inspiration behind it. Its turned into an adventure/hiking/PNW account for sure though!

Z&F: What challenges did you face when starting such a channel on Instagram?

A: I tried not to go in with any expectations. My goal was not to become "instafamous" it was really just to share photos with friends and family as well as have a log of my dogs growth. But once I got bigger the more that drive kicked in. You hit 10k followers and its great for a moment but then the want and desire for more creeps up. So the biggest challenge I think for me has been to accept where I am now and know that its enough.
Z&F: And how much time do you spend on managing the account per week?

A: I spend a couple hours a day probably on Instagram (choosing a photo, posting and coming up with a caption, and responding to messages and comments. Although recently I've slowed down quite a bit and taken a step back from posting every single day.

Z&F: When it comes to content sharing.. what kind of content do you like to share?

A: My content is 90% based off the scenery in the PNW. So we hike up mountains, find waterfalls, explore in the snow, and take photos while doing so. Sometimes I'll take action shots and try to capture their crazy energy and personalities running around or playing in the water.

Z&F: Do you spend extra time teaching your dog how to “pose” or any tricks that you use to create content?

A: I've taught Ava a number of tricks (high five, shake, wave, play dead, roll over, sit pretty (a work in progress)) but I wouldn't go as far as to say I did it to create content. I train with her because it's fun for both of us, keeps her engaged and motivated, and is fun for people who meet her. "Wave" is really the only trick I've utilized for photos and it's pretty darn cute. Otherwise having a consistent, strong sit/down and stay to pose is SUPER crucial for me.

Z&F: How do you engage? And how do you respond to your followers' requests and feedback?

A: I engage by trying to respond to as many comments on my posts as I can. I also engage with other accounts I follow by commenting, liking, and chatting in private DM's. If someone messages me with a question or request I will always respond. If it's a message that's just an emoji or something like "so cute" I usually don't engage. Just purely not enough time in the day! In terms of the audience I'm trying to reach- anyone and everyone, specifically geared towards those who appreciate the great outdoors and cute pups ;)

Z&F: Since our topic involves influencer marketing, are you collaborating with any brands or organizations for promoting products/places/services?

A: Yes! My long term partnerships with larger brands are Kurgo (adventure dog gear) and Stella & Chewy's (dog food). I've done a number of short term promotions for products (product for post + posting fee). I used to do these just to "get free stuff" but at this point my account has grown to the ability to start getting a 'small' income. I am a
brand ambassador for a number of dog apparel small businesses that send us gear in exchange for photos which we love doing for fun.

Z&F: Was it one of your goals to gain collaboration with a brand? And If so, does this channel work as an income source?

A: It was definitely an achievement for me to gain a partnership with Stella & Chewy- considering they are providing us with dog food for an entire year and I completely back their brand and quality standard. VERY very little at this point. The sponsored posts that people are willing to pay creators for is still far and few between- but growing and will continue to!

Z&F: What difference do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?

A: Interesting question... the major difference is that my dogs aren't deciding what to promote or not (they do get a say in when they want/don't want to take photos- I never force them to do something they don't want to do and always keep it SUPER positive with high value treats). For a regular influencer its traditionally a one man show. Brand reaches out, influencer accepts deal, tries product, posts about it. For me I'd argue it's a few extra steps, decide if the product aligns with our theme/feed, then try to integrate it in with the dogs in a photo which is not always easy. Other than that I feel like they would be similar but I've never been a "regular" influencer.

Z&F: Why is your dog an influencer and not you?

A: We are all a team. They do work and so do I.

Z&F: Do you consider your dog as a marketing tool on Instagram?

A: No, we do all this for fun, to bond, and to be a family together.

Z&F: How do you see your relationship with the dog?

A: I'm extremely close with my dogs, they are my babies through and through. My husband and I always have their safety and best interest at heart. They live incredible lives hiking, swimming, paddleboarding, etc. and really all they ever want is to just be with us.

Z&F: Has Instagram affected it?
A: If it has only in positive ways! There are days I'm a little more motivated to spend time with them out and about if I know I need brand photos or whatnot. We've also made so many great friends (dog and human) through Instagram that I'm so grateful for.
Z&F: Is your dog just made for a specific task? Or the dog is more like a friend/family member?

A: 100% family member above anything and everything else.

Z&F: Can you share your biggest success and biggest failure by running a dog influencer channel?

A: Or, share an interesting experience. I'd just reiterate the fact that we have met SO many other influencers in our area through connecting on this platform that I truly believe will be lifelong friends. We share the same interests of the outdoors and photography, our dogs all get along, and I feel like if I got nothing else out of having my account but that I'd be THRILLED.

3. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH KRISTIINA TAMMIK
Name of participants:
Interviewee: Response from: Kristiina Tammik
Interviewees: Fanni and Zane

Z&F: Can you tell about your story on Instagram -When/how it all started?

K: I had an instagram maybe 4-5 years ago but i didn't understand it and it was half dead... I especially didn’t understand the hashtag thing people had in there! I re-did it after i stayed home with my little son and wanted to express my creativity. It was a bit too much for Facebook but people on Instagram really appreciated it.

Z&F: Why did you decide to make a profile for your dog on Instagram?

K: If you haven’t noticed then i’m one of the few whose username is real name. Sso actually my profile is not exactly for my dogs, but for my creativity, I also feature there my son or other dog photos worth posting. My dogs are still dogs to me, I don't compare them with humans. They are wonderful though because i can do art by using them as my models and of course develop myself too.

Z&F:How did it develop so far?

K: My profile bursted out in the first year but after that i’ve been growing very slowly. Mostly, maybe because it's for my lack of communication with others – social media is about being social.
Z&F: What was the idea behind creating the profile?

K: I just want to share my photography.

Z&F: What challenges did you face when starting such a channel on Instagram?

K: The biggest challenge is that people see my BEAUTIFUL breed and want them only based on their looks. They are not easy dogs – I have lost two because of their crazy prey drive and do have the ability to make people go crazy... I wouldn’t want them to end in shelters just because people thought they were beautiful so from time to time I try to talk about their personality as openly as I can. I should do it more often though.

Z&F: How much time do you spend on managing the account on a weekly basis?

K: Less and less now. My wish is not to be the biggest, but I see it as my portfolio, as something I can express myself in. I also see myself as the voice of the breed. So because I do not spend a lot of time there, my gain isn't the biggest either. For example, I try to upload a photo every day and during the process I scroll through the comments and reply to some, check messages.. perhaps it's an hour in a day. Difficult to say because I work as a marketing specialist so I NEED to be in other Instagram accounts too – maybe this too is a turnoff for my own Instagram account.

Z&F: How do you decide what content to post with your dog?

K: I look at photo quality and choose based on it. The focus has to be correct, the emotion or expression has to be nice.

Z&F: Do you spend extra time teaching your dog how to “pose” or any tricks that you use to create content?

K: No, I do basic obedience with them and some trick training to develop their brains when they are in puppyhood.

Z&F: What is the specific audience you are trying to reach?

K: I’m not looking to engage anyone specific but I do like good photography accounts.

Z&F: How do you engage?

K: I’m very bad at it. I used to reply to everyone but with 3 dogs, a baby, household, full time job it is impossible.
Z&F: Are you collaborating with any brands or organizations for promoting products/places/services?

Yes, I collaborate with few high profile brands.

Z&F: Was it one of your goals to gain collaboration with a brand?

K: At the start, sure. I actually even accepted far too many things but now I choose myself who suits with me. I am extremely happy that the brands who work with me, want my content.

Z&F: Does this channel work as an income source?

K: I have earned something but it’s for sure not enough, it’s like some pocket money.

Z&F: How does your dog help you reach out to your followers?

K: They definitely help me to showcase my photography. And that is my main goal with this profile. They are good looking, so naturally people want to drop few nice words.

Z&F: What difference do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?

K: In the end they all are quite the same in my opinion. Pet accounts are more anonymous while people accounts grow into „stars“.

Z&F: Why is your dog an influencer and not you?

K: Because I’m not comfortable in front of the camera.

Z&F: How do you communicate “through” your dog?

K: The account is still mine, and dogs are dogs so when commenting or speaking I represent myself not them.

Z&F: How do you see your relationship with the dog?

K: My dogs are foremost still dogs who have their needs. They don't care about internet or photography, they want to please their owners. I always try to compensate their hard work by walking them a lot or giving lots of treats.

Z&F: Is your dog just made for a specific task?
K: They are fierce hunting dogs but for me they are family members.

Z&F: Can you share your biggest success and biggest failure by running a dog influencer channel?

K: I studied advertising and wanted to study marketing too but because of my channel, I got work as a marketing specialist and I’m eternally grateful for that.

4. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH THE OWNER OF CHARLIE AND BODIE
Name of participants:
Interviewee: Response from charlieandbodie
Interviewees: Fanni and Zane

Z&F: When/how it all started?

C: It all started 3 ½ years ago.

Z&F: Why did you decide to make a profile for your dog on Instagram?

C: Because my personal account was all my dogs anyway.

Z&F: How did it develop so far? (Process)

C: I was constantly posting. Since the idea behind the profile to share with other dog lovers.

Z&F: What challenges did you face when starting such a channel on Instagram?

C: Instagram is hard to work with the block your account to who they want to see so their Instagram algorithm is constantly changing

Z&F: How much time do you spend on managing the account?

C: A couple hours a day, including everything.

Z&F: How do you decide what content to post with your dog?

C: Depending on what mood were in, I will post differently, weekend is fun post, weekday is more towards weekday grind.
Z&F: Do you spend extra time teaching your dog how to “pose” or any tricks that you use to create content?

C: I wish I had! I just have to take 200 photos to get that one shot.

Z&F: What is the specific audience you are trying to reach?

C: I think 18-35 age group is our biggest group.

Z&F: How do you engage?

C: I try and respond to many people however I don’t have the time. But we engage with followers via comments.

Z&F: Are you collaborating with any brands or organizations for promoting products/places/services?

C: Brands we’ve worked with lull, bobsweep, smarty paws, ruggable, furbo, petcube, impact dog crates, puppo, tru pet, a lot of little companies.

Z&F: So does this channel work as an income source?

C: We’ve only seen a two paid gigs, most brands just want us to post for free product.

Z&F: What difference do you see between a dog influencer and a regular influencer?

C: As dog influencer there is very limited market of what we can influence.

Z&F: Why is your dog an influencer and not you?

C: I'm always behind the camera, never saw myself in front of the camera.

Z&F: How are you trying to represent your dog on Instagram?

C: Bodie is naughty, Charlie is my well behaved one.

Z&F: How do you see your relationship with the dog?

C: Not at all still crazy dog mom that gets to share them with the world.

Z&F: Has Instagram affected it?
C: Yes, I've made great dog mom friends all around the world

Z&F: Can you share your biggest success and biggest failure by running a dog influencer channel?

C: We were with a dog agency company, I dropped them after a year and only seeing one job from them, maybe they would’ve helped us grow further.

5. INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH THE OWNER OF KONA

Name of participants:
Interviewee: Response from goldenkonabear’s owner, Sara
Interviewees: Fanni and Zane

Z&F: Can you tell us how did it all begin?

S: I was living in NYC and I was working for a television production company as a producer, and I didn’t want to do that anymore. Me and my boyfriend wanted to move for a while, and we moved to Colorado. I always wanted to get a dog, but before my dog was so busy, so when we moved, I convinced him to get a puppy, and I said that taking care of the dog can be my full-time job and somehow he said yes. And I always did photography as well. Then I was looking online and I saw some fun dog accounts, and I was like that’s so fun I should do that as well, to kinda re inspire myself and take good pictures. At the beginning, I had nothing to do so I was just spending so much time with my dog and I was taking so many pictures of him. It was so much fun.

Z&F: So when you started you didn’t aim to grow into one of these bigger accounts? so big?

S: I think I started it that it could be so fun, but let’s see, maybe I can get some followers. I mean it was an experiment, like how hard can it be? I don’t like taking pictures of myself. So I have never tried to be an influencer, cause I am just awkward on every photo. But I like taking photos of other people, my friends, so I knew that this could work for me. So it was maybe me creating a profile of a subject matter that was not taking pictures of me. Does that make sense? And I always figured that you could take a great photo of a puppy running down the hill with like 20 miles/hour, trying to eat your face.

Z&F: Did you have some challenges when you started?
S: Yeah, kind of. I mean growing a follower base is hard. There are so many dog accounts, and I didn’t know that. It’s just a whole weird world, where millions of dog accounts are being created everyday. So it is a challenging market.. So funny to say that out loud. And I think another challenge is that I have so many friends who created accounts for Golden Retrievers, where they post only funny videos. But I am a creative producer, and so I could probably have more followers, if I wouldn’t focus on the quality and wouldn’t have made it into a photography account. So it was challenging how to grow followers just based on photos. I want my account to be more about quality.

Z&F: In the sense of growing followers, and reaching out...Have you done a lot of research?

S: I have weird phases.. Sometimes there is a big gain and I’m just like.. Where are all these followers coming from? It took me a while to figure out but I am constantly growing everyday. Going back to the videos, my biggest growth is when I post a viral video. I have maybe four viral videos, and three of them went mega viral.. As in millions of people watched it.. Even Ellen Degeneres reposted them. But then I have some month when noone is watching them and then it gets picked up again and being shared. Also I was featured on BuzzFeed. And also, hashtags are huge! I tried a couple of those paid ones, but so many people use them that it’s pointless. But a lot of people follow me based on hashtags, as I can see in my Insights. Sometimes I’d tag other accounts like Golden Retriever pages, or hiking accounts. It’s still really hard to figure out the algorithm tho!

Z&F: How much time do you spend weekly?

S: I didn’t have a business profile until I gained like 30.000 followers, but then I started to think about it differently. Also how comments work, and how you engage with the audience through them. Maybe around 4 hours a week including taking pictures.

Z&F: Are you trying to target a specific group of people or accounts?

S: That’s a good question. I guess it is pretty targeted. I research the accounts, and then we would tag each other based on similar follower base. But there was an account who wanted me to tag her account under every single post, and I said No. There are like commenting groups, where they tag each other but tell you how much you can post. I don’t like to be told what I can or can’t do on my account. But I target my favourite accounts, and leaving comments there, which can be a great reward.

Z&F: So how do you get inspired for taking pictures? Do you teach your dog any tricks?
S: Well we’ve been working on some tricks, like stay pretty and calm. But I don’t make him do anything crazy! And for inspiration.. It’s super hard. Sometimes I feel the lack of inspiration. I mean it’s often sunny in Colorado, which is cool but it’s really bad for taking pictures. He is also the same color as Colorado. I never thought to wait for cloudy days. But usually I just go on hikes with him and try to take pictures. But like I said I want to express my creativity, and don’t want to just take pictures of my dog sitting or laying. There are some account who are so creative, and I also get inspired by that.

Z&F: A lot of influencers are collaborating with other brands. Is that or was that one of your goals?

S: I know so many people who have like 2000 followers and are collaborating with brands. Like I said I didn’t even have a business profile until I had like 30 000 followers. People are like why aren’t you making money out of this? I mean I haven’t even thought about it. Of course I would like to make a living just from taking pictures of my dog. I mean that’s the dream! Although in my opinion there is nothing worse than an account that’s only promoting. But I get reached out to all the time, and I am crazy careful about choosing these collaborations. One of the first collaborations I had was with a company who makes tracking collars, but I mean that’s cool, I really like the idea and I also made a bit of money with that. I do think that I could do more with his followers but I haven’t really persuaded that. I don’t wanna feel obligated to post, you have to believe in that.

Z&F: What is the difference between a regular and a dog influencer in your opinion?

S: I don’t know.. I mean for example I try to make Kona’s account much more fun. I think dog accounts should just be more fun. And less serious stuff. I mean I’m a super political person but I try to keep that away from his account. I feel like I want people not to bombarded by published news.

Z&F: You mentioned these accounts that talk through their dogs. Is it something that you do as well?

S: When I started a lot of the post were through him, but I hated it, I felt that was really embarrassing. And now since I have grown, I realized that I can talk my way but also a little bit of his way as well. Like kinda write what he could be thinking but not make it like super cheezy. So I switch it up!

Z&F: How do you want to represent your dog?
S: I just want it to be fun, and to make people happy. He is so wonderful and goofy and loving, honestly the best therapy dog. All my friends love him and when I go away they fight over who is gonna watch him. And he loves you no matter what! So I want people to see this and to make them feel happy. And maybe be inspired. I get so many messages when people tell me thank you so much your dog makes me feel so happy and there is no better feedback for me. I really don’t get negative message ever.

Z&F: Has the account changed your relationship with your dog?

S: Maybe a little bit. I guess we go to more places, because I would just hike with him all day that’s what we do and also sometimes I’m out of pictures. This added motivation makes me get out of the house more.

Z&F: What kind of content is your favorite?

S: I do love taking photos, but my favorite is to make funny stories (as in Instagram story). Because of my background I like to put together an actual story. It’s also less pressure since it’s only for a day.

Z&F: Do you have any success or failure stories that you would like to share with us?

S: I think failures are just like when I take a picture that I personally think it’s funny and then I don’t get so many likes or the interaction I imagined. But the algorithm in general is really annoying. I was getting many likes lately but my photo yesterday did poorly. And I’m not even doing anything differently. And success stories would be some of my viral videos.

Z&F: What about the pattern of the posts that don’t get so many likes?

S: I really don’t know the reason.. there are certain photos that I know that will do well. For instance following the trends like ‘Tongue ot Tuesday’. But yesterday I thought that his puppy picture will break the internet and it didn’t. So I don’t really know if there is a pattern or a reason. But I can see that pictures of him and another dog do well. Right now I’m fostering 5 puppies so it’s perfect timing to take more pictures.

Z&F: What do you think the future looks like for this account?

S: I started fostering puppies and they get adopted really easy. So I’m really excited to take more pictures of these puppies and Kona and to use the platform to promote adoption and create awareness. And also I’d love to get a second dog! They would do so great.
Z&F: We will start by asking you about your experience - how did it all start? And why did you decide to do this? Just the basics.

H: I think, Harlso’s Instagram account sort of began by accident, really. Harlso was about 2 years old when we began his Instagram account. I suppose a lot of people have Instagram accounts for their dogs, and start them as a puppy. It’s like a way to show off their photographs from a puppy to right through. But for us, I was playing with Harlso one day and set a coin on his head. I realized he had this hidden power for balancing stuff on his head. I took a photograph and then my girlfriend started the account - Harlso the balancing hound. We realized that he could balance more than just one thing. So yeah, I joked at the time - who’s going to be interested in this? Who follows dogs on Instagram? (laughs) I said to Jennifer, I don’t think he will get a hundred followers. By the end of the week she already had a hundred followers. So that’s how the account began. Then we started sharing the photos on to Facebook and Twitter.

Z&F: So from a development point, when did it actually kick-off? And when did you decide that “this is it” and you should continue doing that?

H: It wasn’t really like an aim that we wanted to get a certain amount of followers or that the account had to be at the stage where it is now. The goal was just to take photos and have some fun. We realized people were enjoying the photos and engaging and following them. It sort of encourage us a bit to think outside the box, and think what else can he balance and how can we make this more fun. Lot of our videos will try and play music that relates to whatever he is balancing on his head. We will use a bow-tie related to whatever he is balancing. And just have a bit of fun with it, really. I suppose, that is what is slightly different about his account. It has that theme throughout it, it is just always like 9 or 10 photos of Harlso just balancing stuff. A lot of dogs on Instagram, they maybe do different things because maybe they have other talents, you know. But this is what Harlso is good at.

Z&F: Yeah, it is definitely interesting that you have this one thing that you go through, it is really cool. When it comes to posting content, did you figure out if you were going to use hashtags, tag other pages or engage with followers?

H: (Harlso barks)
Z&F: (laughs) I can’t translate that.

H: I think that’s a yes. We started using hashtags that a lot of the other accounts, that we were following, were using. Hoping that we would appear on the explore section of Instagram to get more followers. A lot of the things that Harlso would balance would be around a certain, notable day of the year. Like st. Patricks day - we would balance like a leprechaun or a pot of gold. Australia day - maybe like a kangaroo. Christmas, Halloween, Easter, those sorts of holidays. We always find it that sort of content people share or tag friends in it. So we would use those sorts of notable days. They would start out in our diaries - oh we should do something for that. Then we would use a lot of hashtags and just trying to get the content seen more. We used to tag a lot of big pages, like the dachshund community, sausage dog central. Or pages even like Unilad, 9gag. Whenever your content gets shared on those pages, you will get flocks of followers. Obviously they have hundreds of thousands of followers or sometimes millions. The first time we got shared by sausage dog central, it was pretty cool. It was pretty exciting. So, we would use hashtags and tags, but not so much now. I think the algorithm has changed on Instagram. Sometimes we would use hashtags and it wouldn’t be apparent in the explore section. Even some bigger pages have been struggling with that. Their engagement appears to have gone down. So we don’t really rely on that or think about it too much, like we used to.

Z&F: Did it help that you were tagging these bigger pages? How did it affect your growth of followers?

H: Yeah, your followers would always increase after being shared by one of those larger pages. I think 9gag shared a video, then about 2017 we gained 15 thousand followers overnight. We woke up in the morning and thought “wow what happened? Where did these followers come from?”

Z&F: Time-wise - how much time per week do you spend on creating content, editing and posting? And all the other things you do on Instagram?

H: We don’t spend an awful lot of time taking photographs. If you look at our profile, I think we have almost 300 photographs in 3 years. So that is 1 photo or video in 3 or 4 days maybe. Harlso balances everything on his head first try, so it makes it easy. We spend more time looking for things to buy and to balance. Jennifer would spend time making the bow-ties. There is more time spent on that sort of stuff than there is on balancing something on his head. Like 10min of photo shoot and then it’s online.

Z&F: So what about if you have comments and people engaging with you, do you spend more time that as well?
H: I have been trying to reach out and respond to a lot of the comments. Sometimes it is difficult when you get so many comments and you are trying to manage Facebook. I have like a fan page on Facebook where there are Harslo’s hardcore fans and are part of that group. So we have moderators who manages that and she would respond to the comments, and then she will message me if there is anything to highlight in particular.

Z&F: So it is easy to create content with him since balances stuff on his head so easily? Does he just follow the camera?

H: Yeah. (demonstrates on the camera) He always seems to follow the camera. We have done so many things on TV over the years. It does not matter how big is the camera, it does not matter how many people are there, it does not matter what is going on. He just follows the camera. He isn’t trained at all like that. I mean, he is a good boy, but we are not dog trainers. He is just a family pet, he hasn’t done any special training.

Z&F: What about your target audience - do you have any specific people?

H: Our followers meet between the ages of 18 and 45. The majority are female, something like 75%. That’s pretty much the same over Instagram and Facebook. A large part of our followers are the US, the second largest on Instagram is Brazil somehow. But again, we don’t really pay attention to the demographics. We have a business account, so we can sort of see that but we don’t really pay any extra attention to that.

Z&F: A lot of people use a set of hashtags that they have prepared before. Do you do the same on your account?

H: We did have a set of hashtags that we would just add in our comment section. The past two or three photographs we have taken, we haven’t been using them. I haven’t noticed any difference in the engagement rates.

Z&F: Then we would also like to ask about collaborations since a big part of Instagram is based on that. Is that something you have done before or is it one of your goals to do Instagram promotions?

H: Yeah, we have done a couple of collaborations in the past with small businesses. They would sell bow ties or dog treats. It is not something we would be called in regularly. More because there is some pressure with it. They need photos done by a certain date and time - it takes the fun out of it for us. Instagram for us is just fun. It isn’t something we want to do to make money out of. In dog world it would collaborations with small businesses, so generally it would not be worth your while, you
can just get free products and stuff. We would only like to collaborate with stuff that we would actually use. So a lot of times brands want to collaborate their products that we would not need. Like stuff that they are buying from China and is dirt cheap.

Z&F: Have you done a lot of collaborations?

H: I don’t think we have done a lot. We have done one with sausage dog central, you can see that on our Instagram feed. Other than that, I don’t think we have done too many. If there is a friend, we have people who make bow ties and bandanas, then we are happy to promote their stories but we would never be asking for money.

Z&F: So it is more like you are choosing what to you want to participate in instead of seeking out the collaborations?

H: Yeah, we would never reach out to anyone, really. We have never done that.

Z&F: Have you done any interesting projects regards your dogs abilities and Instagram?

H: It’s been on TV a couple of times, also newspapers and magazines. We have done a television show, and we have done a kids television show, where Harslo just balances stuff on his head and just having a bit of fun. We will be doing a talk in a couple of weeks, like a video conference in Belfast, talking about social media. I suppose we live in a small country where there are not too many people, and doing dog influencing. So, I guess, we are bringing something different. Other than that, not a lot, really, no.

Z&F: Do they reach out to you? Or how do these collaborations happen?

H: Normally, they will just send an email or direct message, asking if we would be interested. Then we would do a bit of research to see if it’s something that’s real. Sometimes, we would get a lot of emails, like companies trying to exploit Instagram pages, they are like agencies. They find brands to collaborate with, but we are not interested in that. A lot of those companies are trying to get as many people on board as they can to raise money.

Z&F: Returning to Instagram, we have noticed that a lot of people try to speak “through” their dog using the captions. What is your approach on communication using your dog as a communication tool on Instagram?

H: Generally, we find it getting a caption is the hardest part. We try to make something that’s either relatable or funny. Because, I think, that’s what our account is all about. We want to make people laugh or smile, so we try to come up with some funny caption
or funny quote and see if people find it funny or relatable and so they would comment
on it. We spend a lot of time Googling jokes and try and put some twist on it.

Z&F: What do you think is the image you paint of your dog? How do you think you are
representing your dog on Instagram through captions and content?

H: A lot of people show Harslo’s photos and videos to their children. So we try to keep
it family friendly. I know there’s other dog accounts out there that can be more
controversial, but we don’t want to do that. We want to make it funny so that everyone
can enjoy it, whether you are 4-5 years old or an adult.

Z&F: Since your dog is an influencer, and you even have your account verified, have
you ever considered that you could be an influencer and not your dog?

H: Not really. As a person, I am really boring (laughs). I think influencers are exciting
people. Influencers are not people like me. They are really good looking, and have these
fitness accounts and can really motivate people, whereas it is not so much me. Harslo is
the good looking one.

Z&F: Do you think dog influencing affects your relationship with your dog? In a sense
of spending more time with your dog or something like that.

H: I think we are quite protective of him but not many people recognize Harslo or where
we live. Maybe in the park people would stop and say “is that the dog that balances
stuff?” But Generally everyone’s nice. Regards my relationship with him, I don’t think
it’s any different from anybody else’s relationship with their dog, really. We treat him
like a baby, I suppose. Anything he wants - he gets. Even if he wasn’t famous on
Instagram, I think we would still be like that.

Z&F: Do you have any future goals regards your Instagram account?

H: At the minute, not really. In my head, I would not imagine hundred thousand
followers, just because I think it is a pretty hard number to get, but that will take time.
I’m sure if we were to do content every day, or increase the amount of content we put
out there, we would get there quicker. But we aren't in any rush. It is just supposed to be
a bit of fun. Whenever you are doing content every day like that, it would be a lot of
pressure. Myself and my partner, we both work full time, so we don’t have the time.
Jennifer does not have time to make 365 bow ties or that many stuff to balance.

Z&F: So you are just keeping it simples?
H: Yeah. A lot of the time we think we have a great idea for balancing something, but it doesn’t go off that well. Sometimes we create a very simple idea and suddenly get a million views. Something simple like the Toblerone chocolate got 10 million views. And something we really thought about didn’t make so many views.

Z&F: Do you have people who suggest things to balance? Or you put up your own initiatives where you ask people for suggestions?

H: We will sometimes ask people. We would put up a question box in the stories, where we would ask people what they would like to see Harlso balance. Some people send direct messages, asking for things to balance. Sometimes it’s also people writing and saying that it’s someone's birthday next weekend and she loves your dog, and then ask if we can balance something and wish a happy birthday to her.

Z&F: So you respond to these requests?

H: Generally, if we have time, then I will try to respond to everyone’s messages. Sometimes they build up and I have to dedicate half an hour to just check in. I think that’s important because they spend their time sending a message to you.

Z&F: How many years have you been running this account?

H: I think we started in 2016, so 3 years.

Z&F: So what are the biggest fails or successes that you have faced during this time?

H: I don’t really know. I think, it’s been pretty cool to be invited on TV shows and chat shows. That is probably the coolest thing. But otherwise, I don’t really think there is any failures. We are just happy with how it turned out. If the account was to be deleted tomorrow by accident, yeah, we would be pretty gutted because we would lose all our connections to people all over the world.

Further notes from the owner of Harslo, from Messenger conversation:

H: On successes. Totally forgot to mention winning a Webby award was a big success for us because it showed how engaged and committed our audience was to win a vote against some bigger pages.

F: Oh wow!! Huge congrats:) so your followers voted on you?

H: Yeah! We managed to win against some big pages including the dodo, Izzy the Frenchie, Brussels sprout & Esther the wonder pig (I think was the other nominee).