



Exploring the Inclusion of Dogs in Online Personal Branding



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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement in technology has evolved the relationship between people, branding and dogs in the twenty-first century. With the rise of popular social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, people have become publishers of their own lives, freely sharing their experiences with others on a global scale. This has made it easier than ever for people to construct and create their own online personal brands, some of which include dogs, as an integral component of their online identities. This phenomenon, in which people actively include their dogs as part of their online personal branding, has remained largely unexplored, warranting comprehensive investigation. The primary objectives of this qualitative study were to further investigate personal branding and to explore why and how online personal brands incorporate dogs as well as to determine the extent to which people are aware of the ethical implications of these practices for their pets. Guided by the literature review, this study incorporated research on brand identity, brand image, personal and online branding, self-presentation, the evolving function and values of dogs, and the ethical considerations surrounding the inclusion of dogs in online contexts.

The study employed an exploratory methodology, utilising qualitative research methods to gain an in-depth understanding of the research question: why and how people incorporate dogs into their online personal branding and whether they are aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs. The population and unit of analysis comprised individuals who frequently featured their dogs on their personal social media accounts, with a specific focus on Instagram and Facebook users. A non-probability sampling approach was implemented, and the final sample was purposively selected by the researcher. Seven qualitative, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the motivations and methods used by the participants when incorporating their dogs into their online personal brands and to assess their awareness of potential ethical implications it might have for dogs. When analysing the qualitative data, a thematic analysis approach was employed, unveiling themes, categories, and patterns that provided rich insights into understanding this phenomenon.

The insights from this study underscore the extensive impact of social media on personal branding, as individuals leverage these platforms to shape their online identities, often incorporating their dogs as integral elements of their extended selves. By featuring their dogs, individuals render their online personal brands more relatable and approachable, facilitating more meaningful connections with their audience. People include their dogs for a variety of reasons and in novel ways, which appears to enhance the appeal of their online personal brands. Notably, the findings highlighted the varying degrees of awareness individuals possess regarding the ethical implications when showcasing their dogs in their daily posts.

The insights generated by this study enrich and contribute to the discipline of personal branding, offering a deeper understanding of the motivations and strategies used by people when including their dogs in their online personal brands. It also addresses the gap in the existing literature concerning the understanding of this phenomenon and the possible ethical considerations that need to be contemplated by online personal brands when including their pets. Lastly, this research serves as a valuable framework for individuals seeking to enhance and add value to their online personal brands. From a brand leadership perspective, this study can prompt reflection for corporate brands that are unaware of the potential ethical implications associated with incorporating dogs into their branding efforts.

Keywords: Brand Identity, Brand Image, Personal Branding, Online Personal Branding, Brand Extension, The Self, Self-Presentation, Value of Dogs, Ethics.

DECLARATION

I affirm that this dissertation presented for the Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership degree at The Independent Institute of Education is entirely my original work. This document has not been previously submitted to any other university or higher institution for a degree.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Smith', written in a cursive style.

1 February 2024

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Our pets are family. They're a huge part of our lives, and in some cases, brands. Animals are fantastic points of connection for your clients, instantly initiating an emotional response. And they're great at slowing people's scroll on social media. (Lyburn, 2022: n.p.)

Chapter one provides a synopsis of the dissertation and its intended purpose. It gives a brief history on how the relationship between humans and dogs has evolved as well as the connection between dogs and personal branding that is often overlooked. It briefly outlines how the value of dogs has shifted from purely functional roles to companions, status symbols, and even branded commodities. This chapter also highlights the rise of social media in the twenty-first century and how it has further transformed the human-dog relationship as people started to integrate dogs into their online personal branding efforts. The chapter outlines the research question, which seeks to explore why and how people include their dogs on their online platforms as part of their personal branding and whether they are aware of any ethical implications that this might have. Lastly, a brief review of the research methodology and ethical considerations is provided as well as a summary of the study's chapters.

1.1 Contextualisation

Society has a long history with both branding and the domestic dog, but these two concepts are seldom seen as being connected in any way. It is accepted that branding has a major influence on the consumer world, which includes how people use animals as commodities. Dogs today are more than just pets; they have become extensions of people's own personal brands. The extent to which branding plays a role in this process warrants further investigation in order to better understand the impact it has on how individuals develop their online personal brands as well as the consequence it has for dogs.

The concept of branding can be traced as far back as when early human tribes had to defend and differentiate their hunting grounds from neighbouring communities (Enslin & Klopper, 2011) in an effort to establish and communicate ownership (Cunningham, 2021). Around the same time, humans started to forge a bond with the first noticeable dog breeds that date back as far as 3000 years

ago to help hunt and protect their land (Swart & Van Sittert, 2008). From the literature, it can be concluded that the relationship between branding, people, and dogs has always been intertwined in some way or another. Donna Haraway, a prominent scholar and writer renowned for her work on animality and companion species, asserts that pets such as dogs have the unique ability to bring human and non-human species together in the most unexpected ways. She affirms that throughout history, dogs have been intricately intertwined with human existence, participating in a shared narrative of co-evolution (Haraway, 2003). Over time, dogs evolved into various shapes and sizes, mostly borne out of a specific need, function or particular interest (Parker & Ostrander, 2005).

The first purebred dogs were bred based on Victorian ideologies, which exemplified quality, search for purity, and progress. Dogs were bred by the Victorians to emphasise their social and professional class, and unlike the very exclusive breeding of horses, the breeding of purebred dogs afforded the urban middle class a chance to compete with the Victorian elite. At this point in history, people saw an opportunity to bend and sculpt dogs through selective breeding programmes and thus invent new and novel breeds that conformed to various breed standards, which were developed by national organisations that are still devoted to a particular breed of dog to this day (Swart & Van Sittert, 2008).

Towards the last part of the twentieth century as more people moved from the countryside to cities looking for work, many breeds lost their immediate function as working dogs and were more commonly kept as pets and companions (Amiel, 2012; King, Marston & Bennet, 2011). Humankind's existence with its beloved breeds of dogs had become so interwoven that an existence without them seemed impossible. The main function of the dog became that of emotional sustenance and soon dogs became part of the human family. As prosperity rose and people became wealthier, the choice of the next family dog became more of an aesthetic one rather than one borne out of function (Amiel, 2012).

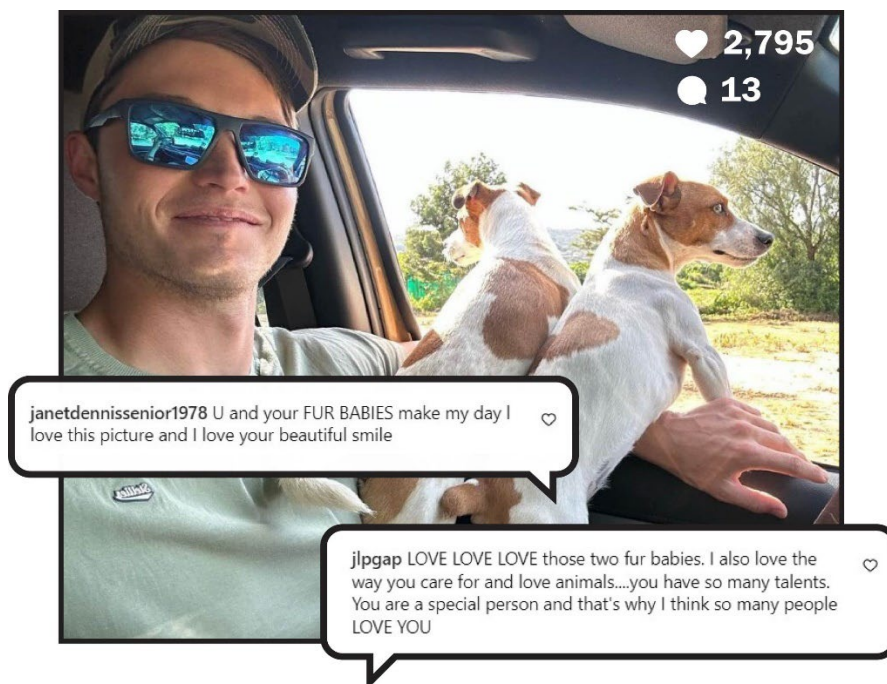
The growing discipline of brands and branding evolved in tandem with the expansion of the role and value of dogs. A brand is more than just a logo or visual identity system; a brand is a social construct that is formed by all spheres of society and emotionally connects with people by adding value and meaning to

their lives (Cunningham, 2021; Enslin & Kloppe, 2011). Brands are omnipresent and nothing, human or animal alike, can escape their influence. Brands shape people's perceptions and determine the success or failure of products, services and even people (Perry, Freundt & Spillecke, 2015). It can be argued that people's relationship with branding has evolved into a connection just as inseparable as their relationship with dogs. Dogs and humans share an inescapable relationship, one characterised by mutual dependence between the two species (Haraway, 2003). Similar to their relationship with dogs, people have grown increasingly dependent on brands. Consumers have become entirely reliant on brands for their everyday existence (Enslin & Kloppe, 2011), as they provide individuals with opportunities for self-expression, a sense of belonging, and identity.

From the mid-1900s the dog's value shifted much in the same way that the value of branded products did. During the 1950s companies shifted their brand's positioning to that of a more emotional one in order to differentiate their product offerings from their competitors as well as to connect with their consumers more (De Swaan Aarons, 2011). Dogs started to evolve into commodities that could add value to their owners in the same way branded products could and soon people started to view the breed of dog that they chose as an extension of themselves (Kavin, 2016). Branding, and how consumers started to view dogs, started to interconnect. Social and financial standing as well as lineage could be reflected through the dogs that people bought and bred (Brandow, 2015), serving the same function as branded products.

In the twenty-first century, branding has evolved beyond just using traditional communication channels such as print and television advertising to the use of social network platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube to connect and engage with people on a more personal level. Benady (2014) states that the attention of today's audiences is consumed by their electronic devices and not by traditional platforms such as television. The rapid advancement in technology has seen the rise of 'consumer power' whereby people have become more involved in the branding process as well as their own personal branding power (Kendall, 2015). Zidar and Marič (2015) describe personal branding as an alter ego whose only purpose is to influence other people's perceptions of their brand and turn that

perception into an opportunity. This notion then begs the question: what kind of involvement has online personal branding had on people's relationship with dogs and how has it altered the world of the dog? Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 provide visual context on how individuals have incorporated their dogs into their online personal accounts.



brendan_peyper

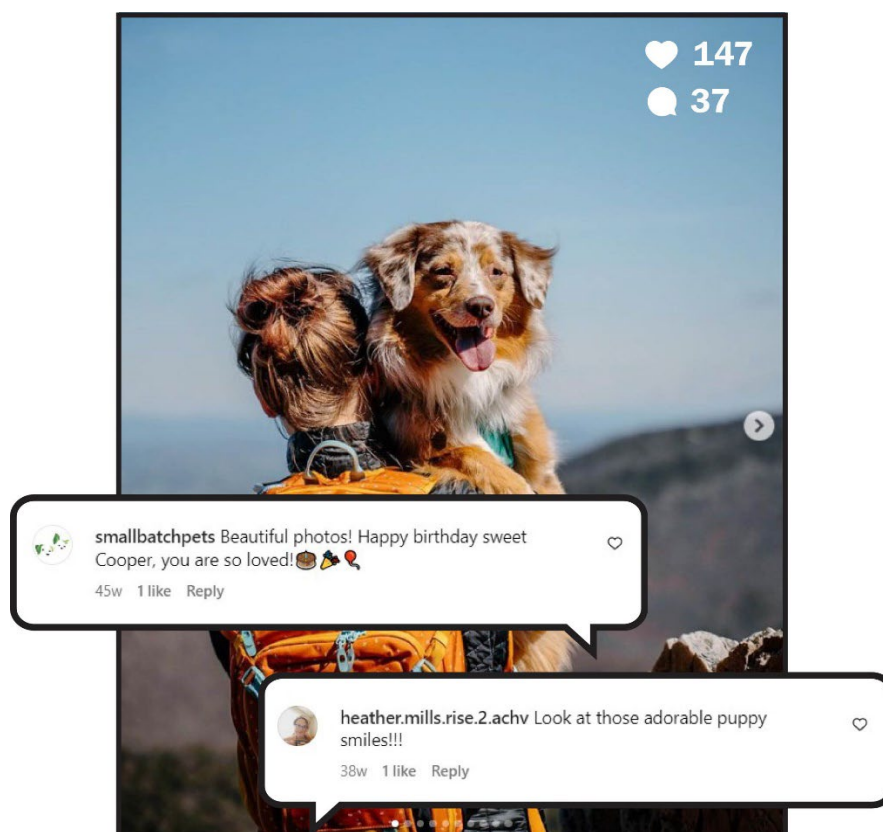
199K followers

Figure 1: brendan_peyper

(The image was compiled by the author based on the image's presence on Instagram 2022).

This study aimed to explore why and how dogs are being used by people in their online personal branding platforms like Facebook and Instagram and whether they are aware of any possible ethical implications this might have for dogs. Brands speak to consumers directly and subtly; they stimulate desires and have the power to influence decisions (Perry *et al.*, 2015), and as such they play an important role in the creation of people's personal branding. Moving into the twenty-first century, branding has evolved the relationship between dogs and

people even further. The popularity of dog breeds is now determined by social influence that is directly related to media exposure (Packer, Murphy & Farnworth, 2017). Social media is a branded platform that has had a great impact on the evolution of dog breeds. Social media accounts, or brands, that use pets on their media feeds are popular with consumers because people find animals more approachable, relatable, enjoyable, and engaging than certain brands (Cramer, 2018). Brands find partnering with pets a safe option as they are free from any political views and controversy.



girlmeetsmerle

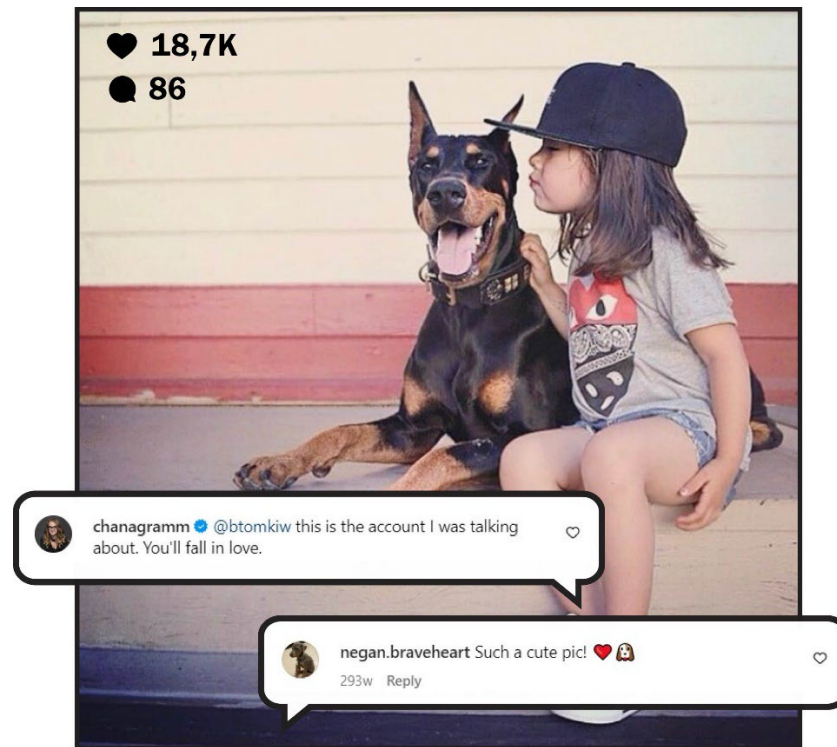
34,4K followers

Figure 2: girlmeetsmerle

(The image was compiled by the author based on the image's presence on Instagram 2022).

In the last decade, the popularity of certain dog breeds, along with a shift from function to form, has seen many breeds of dogs be impaired by various health problems because of breeding practices. Brandow (2015) argues that dogs have been bred purely to conform aesthetically to the needs of consumers to the point of being physically and mentally compromised. Dogs are being altered, designed,

and packaged to appeal to people in the same way as luxury branded products do, which raises ethical concerns as dogs are being bred to meet consumer demand and this may cause overbreeding, that can lead to not only unhealthy but also unwanted animals. This then begs the following question: are people who are using dogs as part of their online personal branding aware that their actions might have ethical implications for dogs?



cutieandthebeast

223K followers

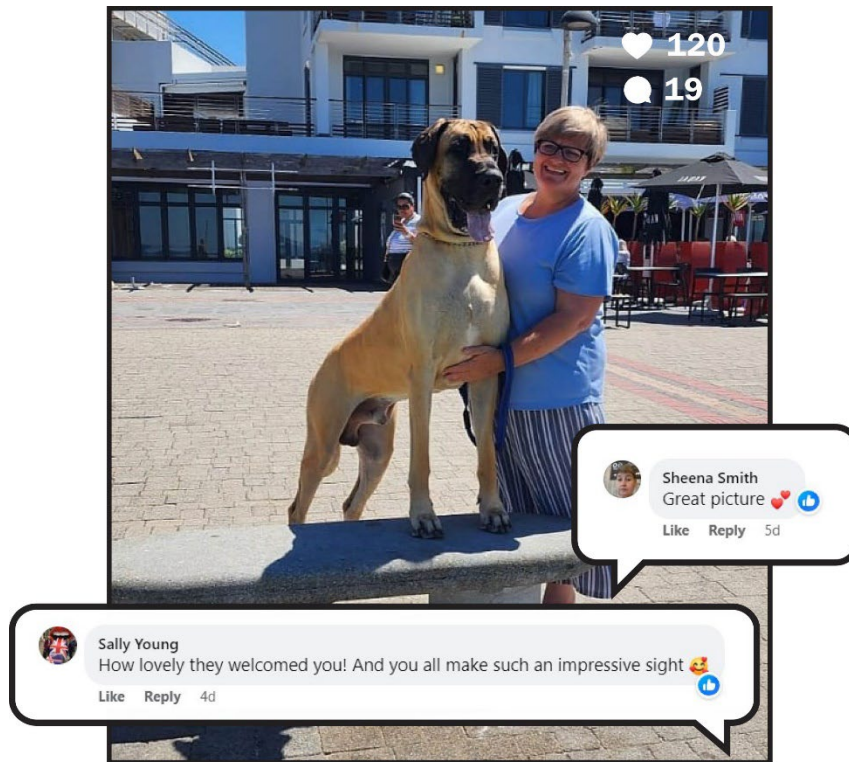
Figure 3: cutieandthebeast

(The image was compiled by the author based on the image's presence on Instagram 2017).

This study aimed to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon whereby people include their dogs on their online personal brands and from a brand leadership point of view, whether people were aware of the ethical implications of these practices for dogs. The role and perception of pets, particularly dogs, in society, have undergone significant shifts in recent decades, particularly concerning how humans integrate them into their modern lives. The emotional and spatial closeness that companion animals like dogs share with humans has contributed to this evolution (Blouin, 2012: Dürnberger & Springer,

2022). In previous generations, dogs were mainly relegated to outdoor spaces, serving as guardians and loyal companions. However, in modern times, most individuals regard their canine companions as integral members of the family, granting them a prominent place inside the home. This shift has also propelled dogs into the online presence of their owners, a phenomenon that has grown significantly (Spector, 2017). Studies have shown that dog owners engage with dog-related online content frequently. According to these studies, people post a picture of their dog at least six times per week and view videos and pictures of other people's dogs at least three times a week (Spector, 2017).

This study was undertaken to acquire valuable insights into the motivations and methods behind people's inclusion of dogs in their personal online platforms and discern the implications this may hold for the discipline of branding. From a brand communication point of view, this study adds value by exploring a branding phenomenon to create an in-depth understanding of online personal branding with regard to why and how people are including dogs in the social construction of their online personal brands, and what the effects thereof might be beyond the construction of their personal brand. It also sheds some light on any ethical considerations that need to be considered by well-known and respected brands when branding not only dogs but the natural world. Underpinning the study is the notion that brands should take the lead in being more educated and ethical in their branding approaches. From a brand leadership perspective, it is important to inform people about the potential impact that their decisions to include dogs within their own online personal branding could have on the health and sustainability of dog breeds, especially if people are not aware of these implications.



Martin Leigh Beckmann

4,889 friends

Figure 4: Martin Leigh Beckmann

(The image was compiled by the author based on the image's presence on Facebook 2023).

1.2 Problem Statement

Modern dogs are selectively bred and shaped by humans and have shared in people's lives since Victorian times (Worboys, [s.a.]). Brands have the power to shape society, alter our world, and impact the way in which people consume (Graphicwise, 2023), therefore it can be assumed that branding has the potential to impact people's relationships with dogs as well. Dogs today are seen as companions, status symbols, extensions of consumers' personal brands as well as brand ambassadors. Branding has had a direct influence on how the value of dogs has shifted in the mind of the consumer and as such it has altered the evolution of dogs from a form and relationship point of view. Online personal brands, that incorporate popular breeds of dogs as part of their branding strategies, are increasing demand for certain breeds' aesthetics and shifting the relationship between people and dogs from a solely companion-driven one to a

partnership in which their animals are viewed as commodities.

The problem investigated therefore was that currently there seems to be limited literature that explores the concept of why and how people are using dogs within their own online personal branding. Consequently, this study aimed to create an in-depth understanding of this phenomenon as well as explore the possible problematic ethical concerns of this practice.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore and create an in-depth understanding of the inclusion of dogs within personal branding on social media platforms and to determine whether people are aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs.

1.4 Research Question

Why and how are people including dogs in their personal branding on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and are they aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs?

1.5 Research Objectives

The research objectives are:

1. To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are including dogs to create and express their online personal brands.
2. To explore whether people are aware of any ethical implications of such practices for dogs.

1.6 Research Methodology

The methodology employed by this study investigated why and how people include their dogs in their online personal branding and whether they were aware of the ethical implications that these practices can have on dogs. The study adopted an interpretive paradigm with the aim of understanding the subjective experiences of people who include their dogs in their online personal brands. Given the subjective nature of this phenomenon, the study determined that an exploratory qualitative approach was most appropriate. Due to the lack of

predetermined variables and the goal of understanding the social experiences of individuals including their dogs online, the research design was primarily qualitative. The population of interest included people who frequently use their dogs in their online personal brands and the unit of analysis focused on individuals with social media accounts on Instagram and Facebook. The study used a purposive sampling approach, and a small sample size was selected due to the qualitative nature of the study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted online with the selected participants, capturing their experiences and motivations on why and how they included their dogs in their online personal brands and if they were aware of the ethical implications of these practices on dogs. A thematic analysis approach was implemented to systematically arrange and analyse the data from the collected narratives in order to identify patterns and themes that would benefit the researcher in understanding the participants' behaviours and experiences.

1.7 Ethical Considerations

This study applied the necessary ethical principles concerning the welfare, dignity, and rights of each participant (Kushwaha & Dube, 2023). Appendix 3 contains the ethical clearance received during the proposal defence. By obtaining informed consent through the use of a digital participation and consent form (Appendix 1) that detailed the interview process, the participants were invited to take part in the study. The participation letter gave context to the nature of the study and indicated that the participant's interview would be recorded while strict adherence to confidentiality guidelines would be followed. This ensured ethical conduct by safeguarding each participant's information and well-being while maintaining data integrity.

1.8 Layout of the Chapters

This dissertation's chapters are summarised briefly below:

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter contextualises the research question and provides an understanding of the existing literature and knowledge regarding the phenomenon of why and how people are including dogs in their online personal brands and if they are

aware of any ethical implications these practices can have for dogs. The literature aided the researcher in positioning the study within the broader academic field of online personal branding as well as identifying gaps where new research can contribute. It allowed the researcher to identify and define the theories and concepts surrounding personal and online personal branding, the self and self-presentation as well as the evolving value and function of dogs. The chapter concluded by exploring the literature surrounding the possible ethical considerations when including dogs in mass and online media. The literature review provided background and justification for the study whilst shaping the research question and objectives as well as contributing to the intellectual context in which this paper is situated.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

Chapter Three details and justifies the methodology and research design adopted to explore the inclusion of dogs within the selected participants' online personal brands as well as their awareness of any possible ethical implications of their actions on dogs. The researcher investigated the motivations and subjective experiences of individuals who frequently include their dogs on their social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. This chapter will guide and explain the research approach and paradigm as well as how the research was conducted by providing a clear understanding of the methods and processes used in this study.

Chapter Four: Findings and Discussions

Chapter Four presents the rich data and findings obtained from the research in the form of themes, codes, textual descriptions, and discussions. The themes and codes were analysed, and the findings were interpreted in the context of the research question and objectives. Emerging patterns and results are discussed in relation to the existing literature and the implications and relevance of the findings are highlighted in the context of why and how people are including their dogs in their online personal branding and the possible ethical implications that might arise from such practices.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The study's final chapter provides a concise review of the research's significant findings, highlighting the most noteworthy outcomes and confirming how the

research question and objectives were addressed based on the findings and analyses presented in Chapter Four. The limitations of the research are acknowledged and explained and their potential implications on the study's findings are discussed. Lastly, the broader significance of the study within the field of online personal branding and the human-dog relationship is examined and recommendations for further research are proposed based on the limitations and gaps uncovered during the study.

In conclusion, the evolution of dogs from functional animals to extensions of people's identities and online personal brands is an intriguing journey influenced by the complex relationship between humans, dogs, and branding practices. Linking the parallel evolution of branding, technology, and the domestic dog, this study intends to explore the phenomenon of why and how people are including dogs in their online personal branding and if they are aware of the possible ethical implications of such practices on dogs. By employing a qualitative research approach, the study aims to uncover the motivations and ethical considerations behind this occurrence and shed light on the human-dog relationship in the digital age, revealing benefits and implications for both online personal brands and dogs. Chapter Two that follows will explore the existing literature surrounding this research question and give context for the investigation of this phenomenon.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

In order to fully understand previous research in the area of online personal branding and the inclusion of dogs on social media, Chapter Two provides a thorough examination of published studies dealing with this topic as a means of formulating a coherent framework from which the study proceeds. Existing literature from several disciplines had to be consulted and explored to provide the researcher with a comprehensive overview of the key concepts and theories that contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon. Through the reviewing and examining of the literature, gaps and emerging trends were identified which guided the research and contributed to the advancement of knowledge in this field. This literature review begins by conceptualising the importance of brand identity and brand image. Brand identity and how it is constructed need to be understood to gain insight into the importance of personal branding and the role it plays in people's lives. A closer examination of the concept of personal branding contributed to the sound understanding of online personal branding and the literature consulted confirmed the importance of having an online personal brand identity as well as why and how individuals construct their personal brands online.

Throughout the literature review process, it became apparent that underpinning the concepts of brand and personal brand identity was the subject of the self and self-presentation. Sources were reviewed to get a better understanding of how people define themselves in today's society as well as to explore the important role self-presentation plays, not just in real life, but also in an online environment. The chapter also considers how the modern-day dogs' value has evolved from a purely functional one to that of a companion animal and, in many circumstances, an extension of a person's identity. Concepts that include dogs as status symbols and online brand extensions have also been explored in this literature review. Lastly, the possible ethical considerations as a result of the related phenomena have also been reviewed from a brand leadership and future research point of view. This chapter establishes a solid foundation for this study and provides valuable insights into the existing literature and concepts of the research question being explored.

2.2 Brand, Brand Identity and Brand Image

Sources like Perry *et al.* (2015) and Enslin and Klopfer (2011) state that brands are the true 'giants of the consumer world' and that they shape consumers' perceptions, add value, and connect with people daily. Branding literature also theorises that branding can blur class boundaries and elevate a consumer's status in social settings when being associated with a certain high-valued brand (Perry *et al.*, 2015). A brand's true value lies not only in its aesthetics or its functionality but also in its intangible assets, as leading branding expert Kapferer (1997) explains. Some of these intangible assets are mentioned by Mocanu (2013) who states that consumers buy certain brands and products not just for their functional properties but also because of the social significance they can represent. When consumers buy a brand, the symbolic significance of the product is considered during the purchasing process, but the psychological and social value that it might hold plays an even greater role in the final purchasing decision (Mocanu, 2013). When selecting a dog, it can be argued that people factor the same social and symbolic value into their buying decisions, similar to how they would when purchasing a branded product.

When evaluating brands, consumer emotion plays a very important part (Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2015). According to Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) when consumers purchase products that are symbolic, they make their choice based on emotions that cannot always be clearly articulated. Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) use the example of customers buying perfume. They argue that customers will struggle to defend their decisions by breaking them down into the specific attributes that they like about the product. This is because their choices are self-focused and when they state they like a certain perfume because it smells like success, it reflects their personality and values rather than any inherent attributes of the fragrance. This example can be applied to various expressive products and applies to dog-breed preferences as well. When somebody considers buying a puppy, they may base their decision on which type or breed of dog to get, purely on an emotional level that is self-focused. They may select a breed of dog that can reflect and represent their unique personality or add value to their own identity.

The branding landscape is forever shifting and evolving. Brands play such a big

part in the way people experience modern-day life (Shah, 2023) that they have become measuring instruments of a healthy society and have moved out of their product categories and traditional media to become true global inhabitants (Koekemoer, 2011). Consumers can now engage with brands on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter), and have become important role players and contributors in the everyday life of the consumer (Koekemoer, 2011). Literature indicates that branding has shifted from merely serving a functional role to providing more of an emotional benefit, which is concerned with how the brand makes the consumer feel and connects with them on a deeper level. It is perhaps this emotional benefit that people are considering when using their dogs as part of their personal branding online. People are including pets as extensions of their own identities in the hopes of reflecting an image that will resonate emotionally with the outside world and shape the view others have of them.

Brand identity and brand image go hand-in-hand with the development of strong and unique brands. Brand identity can be defined as how brands would like to be seen by their customers and include characteristics that make a brand unique and meaningful in the mind of its consumer (Lindeberg, Blomkvist & Johansson, 2012). Seminal authors Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2009) define brand identity as a set of associations that a brand seeks to create and maintain for itself. These associations need to be aspirational, resonate with its consumers, and differentiate the brand from its competitors as well as clearly represent what the brand can do. A well-defined and unique brand identity establishes a relationship between the brand and its consumers. It does this by generating value by providing emotional, functional, and self-expressive benefits to its stakeholders (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). A brand identity is organised around four main perspectives namely, the brand as a product, an organisation, a person, and a symbol. Brands can find meaning and relevance in any of these four perspectives, but no brand has associations with all of them (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). For the relevance of this study, brand identity is explored from the perspectives of a brand as a person and a symbol.

A brand's identity concerns itself with self-image. With regards to brand management, a unique brand identity needs to be established before the brand

image (Kapferer, 2008). A brand needs to develop its identity before it can project a strong and differentiating brand image to its stakeholders. This study explores how people are using their dogs to add value to, enhance, and develop their own identities.

Brand image, on the other hand, can be defined as the perceptions that people have about a brand and how these perceptions are generated and evaluated through cognitive and affective processes in the mind of the consumer (Lee, James & Kim, 2014). Brand image takes into account how the consumer decodes all the information and messaging being received from the brand and, according to Kapferer (2008), before a brand can project a unique brand image to its stakeholders it must first know what and how it will go about projecting this image. Thus, having a clear and understandable brand identity is of great importance. According to Janonis, Dovalienė and Virvilaitė (2007), any brand that would like to stand out from its competitors needs to strive for uniqueness that cannot be imitated by its competitors, and having a unique brand image is a resource that can aid a brand in having a competitive advantage. With so many personal brands competing on the Internet, people are considering various ways that will enable them to stand out and be unique. Some of these accounts include dogs as extensions of their own brand identities in much the same way as when including certain product brands.

To create a successful brand image, a brand should have a strong, true, and clear identity that can easily be absorbed by its consumers and, at the same time, differentiate itself from others (Janonis *et al.*, 2007; Kapferer, 2008). How a brand visually portrays itself results from its own brand identity, and this requires the brand to truly have a clear understanding of what it represents. When looking at the outward aspects of a brand, its core values, and what it stands for should be apparent at first glance (Kapferer, 2008). Today's society finds itself living in a world saturated with communication and every person and every brand wants to communicate something. This has led to an environment where it has become very difficult for brands and personal brands to thrive and successfully communicate their unique identities (Kapferer, 2008).

Interestingly, Kapferer (2008) notes that a lot of brands choose to mimic their competitors because they have no clear brand identity. Other brands exert considerable effort to cater to a broader audience and fail to create their own unique brand identity, thus they move from one trend to another, which can lead to a fantasised identity. These brands create an identity based on how they would ideally like to be seen and not how they truthfully are (Kapferer, 2008). The above-mentioned scenario seems to link up with how individuals also find it difficult to create their own identities that reflect an image that is authentically who they are. Including dogs as extensions of their own identities could possibly aid individuals who struggle to create identities that are unique, authentic, and clear to others on social media platforms.

When a certain brand is purchased, the decision is made based on that brand representing something special to the individual, or that it conveys something important to others about that individual. Brands are used to define people's identities, and as such people are highly involved when making brand choices (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015). It can then be argued that people use dogs alongside their own identities as some sort of brand extension in order to construct an image that is more authentic and unique so as to benefit from it in some way. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2009) noted that the main structure of brand identity included a core and extended identity as well as a brand essence. A brand's extended identity includes all the elements that are not grouped within its core identity. The extended brand identity is useful in helping to deliver a brand image and personality to its consumers and to help show what the brand is not (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2009). When people assess a brand, the assessment is based more on the emotional implications of the self than the actual product or brand that is being assessed (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015). Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) point out that when consumers feel positive about a brand, they are more inclined to take note and process information about that brand in a more positive light. People will digest and analyse this information and associate it with their own frame of reference, which in return can lead to an enhanced recall of the brand by the consumer. It can be argued that dogs might be able to assist individuals in creating a more favourable brand identity online that can lead to viewers having a more positive reaction to it.

2.3 Personal Branding

Regarding personal branding, branding guru Tom Peters (1997) wrote the following:

That cross-trainer you're wearing — one look at the distinctive swoosh on the side tells everyone who's got you branded. That coffee travel mug you're carrying — ah, you're a Starbucks woman! Your T-shirt with the distinctive Champion "C" on the sleeve, the blue jeans with the prominent Levi's rivets, the watch with the hey-this-certifies-I-made-it icon on the face, your fountain pen with the maker's symbol crafted into the end ...You're branded, branded, branded, branded.

The literature reviewed states that branding has evolved beyond products, services, and companies to include people too (Cunningham, 2021; North, 2011). People wishing to create their own personal brand would need to establish their brand identity first and then decide how they will go about communicating that identity through symbolism, communication, and behaviour (Khedher, 2014). Kucharska (2017) and Chen (2013) explain that personal branding is about self-presentation that is done through the planned and strategic process of self-marketing. Chen (2013) views self-presentation as the means by which people convey information about themselves to others that allows that individual to market their unique identity as a personal brand. Personal branding follows the same process as product and corporate branding. Individuals should formulate identifying attributes in order to create a gripping personal brand statement that can differentiate their brand from competitors and connect with the outside world (Arruda, 2003). At its core, personal branding is about the perception that people have in their minds of other individuals (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018). Successful personal brands manage these perceptions, expectations, and images effectively (Rampersad, 2009). Seminal author and branding expert, Montoya, and leading branding writer Vandehey (2009) define a personal brand as the clear and captivating image a person holds in the mind of the public. It represents an individual's qualities, values, expertise, uniqueness, and influence as well as their relationship and promise to others. Within this dissertation, it is argued that this image can be expressed and improved through the inclusion of dogs within a person's online brand.

Personal branding plays a very important role in conveying who a certain individual is and what makes them unique to their selected target audience (Montoya & Vandehey 2009). In their book, *The Brand Called You*, Montoya and Vandehey (2009) list three objectives a well-formulated personal brand can assist people with:

1. It helps to differentiate a person from others by focusing on what sets that individual apart and making it visible to other people. With regards to this study, the inclusion of dogs can aid a person's own branding by differentiating their online brand from other online brands as well as peaking interest with viewers.
2. A good personal brand aids an individual to be viewed as more approachable and relatable to others. By including dogs, people might find that their online personal brands become more welcoming and applicable to others.
3. Lastly, it assists in securing possible connections and followers by encouraging them to get in contact with the specific individual. People using dogs within their personal branding online might be using them to secure likes, followers, and favourable comments.

Ilies (2018) echoes the above and adds that personal branding can also help people position themselves more favourably in social groups at work, online, and in their personal lives. Today personal branding has moved beyond just the traditional norms of individuals creating and branding themselves in the physical world to include online or digital personal branding that makes use of social media platforms, podcasts, and blogs as part of the personal branding discipline (Vitberg, 2009). This study explores how and why people are using dogs in the creation of their personal online brands. According to Hillgren and O'Connor (2011), one of the most interesting expansions in the discipline of branding is the research on online personal branding. Hillgren and O'Connor (2011) elaborate on this notion by explaining that with the rise of people becoming more technologically literate, it has become imperative to understand why and how people are building successful personal brands online, which supports the value of this study in understanding any occurrences related to this subject.

2.4 Online Personal Branding

The advancements in technology and the increase in accessibility of the Internet have had an immense impact on personal branding (Kucharska, 2017). Rampersad (2009) states that people have now become self-proclaimed publishers of their lives by means of the Internet. The rise of social media and new visual technologies have given people channels to actively create and grow their personal brands on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram that are being utilised for self-presentation and self-expression and which are now treated as a vital part of everyday life (Kucharska, 2017; Lindahl & Öhlund, 2013; Stone, Guan, LaBarbera, Ceren, Garcia, Huie, Stump & Wang, 2022).

In today's modern world, people are using social media platforms to communicate with the outside world. Schau and Gilly (2003) discuss the concept of 'communicative intent,' which refers to how people purposefully communicate and express themselves and explain that today people communicate through the posting of personal websites, which occurs in the public domain, as opposed to other communicative experiences that occur in more private spaces such as people's homes. These personal websites can be viewed as 'personal' because they represent the individuals themselves, but they can also be seen as public because they exist online, which is accessible to many. Individuals purposefully invite others to view their personal websites and enjoy having access to a worldwide audience with new and fresh perspectives and are not defined by the creator's familiar surroundings (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Schau and Gilly (2003) refer to the use of personal websites, but the same can be applied to the personal accounts of people on social media platforms. People are using social media platforms to communicate, express, and present themselves through the posting of images and videos. Gray, Norton, Breault-Hood, Christie, and Taylor (2018) state that images are powerful tools that convey meaning to others. They explain that these images are coded according to social, ideological, and cultural contexts. Kirilova (2017) supports this notion in her thesis on key components for successful personal branding on social media by stating that platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat are at the centre when creating an online personal brand. Ordinary people and celebrities alike are packaging themselves to appeal to others, future employers, and fans. Social media is part of a digital visual culture that allows people to construct their personal brand

identities online through self-presentation that gets represented in a digital world (Gray *et al.*, 2018).

Kleppinger and Cain (2015) refer to an online personal brand as a personal digital brand and define it as a well-planned, self-marketing attempt by individuals who seek to exhibit their professional identities through the use of social media channels. For the purpose of this study, online personal branding is the term used going forward when referring to people creating personal brands through the use of social media platforms.

Having a strong personal brand has become an important strategy to set oneself apart and gain personal success in the digital world (Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016). It fuses all the perceptions and images created together in the minds of others when they interact with it. The digital world is competitive, and people are self-packaging themselves in the hopes of positively affecting the opinion that others have of their personal brands (Lair, Sullivan & Cheney, 2005). This need to be popular or accepted is a human trait that has not changed even in the face of changing technologies (Machaz & Shokoofh, 2016). In order to create a positive personal brand, online visibility is one of the most important factors driving an online brand's success (Shepherd, 2005). In today's technologically connected world, visibility has become essential for brands because the online environment has become increasingly competitive with the rise of the Internet and smart devices like cell phones and tablets (Shaikh, Glavee-Geo, Tudor, Zheng & Karjaluoto, 2018). If visibility is a key driver for the success of a personal brand, it can be reasoned that in an online environment with its vast competition, to achieve visibility, online personal brands would need to stand out from their competitors. In this dissertation it is argued that one way of making an individual's personal brand more visible is through the inclusion of dogs on social media platforms.

Rein, Kotler, Hamlin and Stoller (2006) explain the importance of visibility by using the following example: they state that in an increasingly competitive world, visibility can mean the difference between a competent surgeon and a surgeon who makes more money and appears on talk shows to promote their latest book, the latter being more visible. Visibility is all about attracting attention. It creates

fans and opportunities and elevates an average person to a higher level with incredible rewards that can include social status and access to premium services (Rein *et al.*, 2006). Kaputa (2012) states that visibility builds mindshare¹ and defines it as the awareness of brands in the minds of their target markets. Interestingly, Rein *et al.* (2006) argue that being well-liked or popular has become part of a person's brand identity because being well-known in today's society directly translates to wealth and power. For personal brands existing on social media, being well-liked means having a large number of followers (Kirilova, 2017).

Having a highly visible, popular, online personal brand can help generate these benefits and it can be argued that people including their dogs as part of their online personal branding are using them to increase their visibility and to assist in securing followers and reaping the rewards. Kirilova (2017) supports the above reasoning by stating that online personal brands are also viewed by others in terms of what else is associated or affiliated with that brand, which in turn creates a message and overall impression that the audiences are confronted with. She expands on the above notion by maintaining that not every personal brand is 'interesting enough' to gain maximum rewards and thus needs to be enhanced to make a lasting impact. Certain brands rely on visuals of tanned and beautiful people on a beach to invite users to view and like their accounts, while others like makeup artists might rely on fashionable headshots of their latest creations to create a following (Kirilova, 2017). It could be argued that online personal accounts that include pictures of the account holder's dog sharing their ice cream, might aim to do the same. The inclusion of dogs on posts, like other branded products, can be regarded as a strategic approach to pique interest and attract followers.

Kirilova (2017) shares the following examples from her research *Key Components for Successful Personal Branding* that are of interest to the nature of this study. In her data analysis, she makes the point of showing an Instagram post (Figure 5) of one of her units of analysis and notes that this particular post, which shows a dog named Dexter curled up on his owner's lap, was one of the most well-received posts of that personal brand that year. One of her other units

¹ Mindshare refers to the level of consumer awareness or recognition associated with a specific product or brand (Kenton, 2023).

of analysis included a video on the participant's YouTube channel that included her new cat that received 486,000 views and became the most-watched video on her personal channel. These two examples illustrate the value of this study in understanding why and how people are including their pets in their online personal branding in more detail. Brittz (2020) states that photographing dogs today has emerged as the best and, in certain instances, an obsessive method for visually depicting the human-dog relationship. Moreover, Brittz (2020) suggests that by analysing these images, researchers can gain valuable insights into the dynamics of the human-dog relationship. Interestingly, Montoya (2002) and Peters (2007, cited in Hillgren & O'Connor, 2011) mention that much has been explored regarding the role a celebrity plays in creating a personal online brand, but little has been done when looking at how ordinary people create a meaningful online personal brand. The above section of literature helped guide the researcher in exploring why and how dogs have been used in online personal branding.



Figure 5: Instagram post by @mmiisas
(Rotola-Pukila, 2017)

2.5 Presentation of the Self

The concept of personal branding is supported by self-presentation (Johnson, 2017). The literature surrounding brand identity, brand image, and personal branding are underpinned by the self and, therefore, within this study the theories surrounding it are explored. The concept of "self" refers to an individual's overall learned beliefs, judgments, and attitudes they have about themselves (Wehrle & Fasbender, 2018). The old saying, 'Don't judge a book by its cover' does not always ring true. Seminal author and leading advocate of symbolic interactionism Erving Goffman (1956) in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* explains that people gather visual information or signs from an unknown person in advance in order to predict what they can expect from such an individual. People look for visual clues in appearance and behaviour in the hopes of applying a known stereotype to a person they meet for the first time (Goffman, 1956). A person being investigated by others can control this situation by expressing themselves in a way that is in accordance with the way he or she would like to be perceived by others, thus strategically influencing the outcome of that situation (Goffman, 1956). Zizi Papacharissi, a distinguished professor and communications researcher supports this idea by stating that people play an 'information game' daily by strategically controlling the information being shared that directly influences the impressions being formed by others viewing the information (Papacharissi, 2009; 2002). When people include various brands, products or even dogs in their online personal branding, they do so with purpose in order to acquire a desired response or outcome.

Interestingly, Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) note that in a postmodern consumer culture, the self is something that people actively create through the consumption of brands and products. An individual's understanding of their self-concept is what fuels how they would like to be perceived by others. Mishra (2016) defines self-concept as the driving force behind an individual's behaviour and states that people will behave and act in the way that they view themselves within a specific moment. People's behaviour, personality patterns, and how they view themselves are all motivated by their self-concept and are controlled by their concepts of who they are or who they would like to be and thus it is vital to their self-expression (Mishra, 2016). With regards to branding, when people are creating their personal brand identities, they start by reflecting and evaluating their self-concept to

understand who they are and how they would like to be seen. Likewise, a brand needs to determine and reflect on what makes it unique, what its aims, vision, and personality are, and what differentiates it from other brands in order to create a lasting brand identity (Janonis *et al.*, 2007).

One's self-concept is constructed through identity. Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith (2012) state that an individual's identity is shaped through characteristics, roles, and social relations and can be directed by who that person is, who that person wants to be, or who they fear they might become. People can construct and express their identities as their 'actual self' as their 'ideal self' and thus a person's identity is grounded in reality and the imagination (Durante, 2011). According to Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015), individuals visualise the self through the imaginable possibilities of the self, which means that any individual can have a variety of actual selves, the way they are in actuality and any number of ideal selves, that is, how they would like to be seen. Yilmaz (2023) comment that Erving Goffman compared people's everyday social interaction to a theatre play complete with actors, a stage, an audience, and backstage. This comparison of a theatre by Goffman is flexible because it can relate to the offline as well as the digital world through the use of social media platforms (Yilmaz, 2023).

It can then be argued that people might strategically choose to include dogs as part of their daily online performance in order to create a version of themselves that they consider ideal or worthy of being observed. Hogan (2010) supports this argument by stating that individuals choose what they would like to display on their social media profiles in an effort to manage the impression they create. Interestingly, Papacharissi (2009; 2002) mentions that how people present themselves online has always intrigued researchers, especially how individuals go about manipulating, reinventing, and exposing their identities in online communities. This statement is encouraging as it points out the need for a more in-depth understanding of how people brand themselves in the online space and how dogs are being used within these online personal brands.

An extension of self-concept is self-image (Oyserman *et al.*, 2012). These two concepts are very much intertwined and, according to Bailey (2003), it can be viewed as another way of looking at self-concept. Self-image deals with

understanding an individual's measurable qualities. These include genetic attributes that a person is born with, the shape of their bodies, and the colour of their eyes and hair. It also pertains to the material belongings that a person chooses to enhance his or her self-image with, like wealth, goals, and acquired possessions (Bailey, 2003). Individuals might even consider including dogs as a means through which to enhance their self-image. People can place so much emphasis on the importance of their material possessions that these become fused with their self-concept and self-image. Hatvany, Burkley and Curtiz (2017) explain that fusion in this context means that the physical objects, accomplishments, and even other people who individuals surround themselves with, become integrated within their self-concept, which can shape their lives considerably.

People construct their self-concept through the consumption of symbolic objects that they strategically place in order to create an image of themselves that can tell a story of their identity (Hatvany *et al.*, 2017; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Through the construction of stories, people come to know who they are (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998), and on social media, dogs can be used to help create these narratives. Objects that become highly fused with an individual's self-concept and self-image increase in value to the point that the possessions become part of who they are (Hatvany *et al.*, 2017). People's views of their self are very much influenced by the things they love and through the inclusion of these things in the creation of the self, individuals can ease any identity conflicts they might experience (Achuvia, 2005).

Dogs can be grouped alongside the many things that individuals personally love and thus it can be argued that by including dogs as an extension of the self, people can construct their own identities in the online space with more ease. The literature surrounding self-image and the fact that it can be seen as an extension of the self underpins the theory of brand extension. Seminal author Belk (1988), who is a leading authority on consumer culture and the digital self, states that people regard their possessions as part of themselves and they do this intentionally or unintentionally, which gave rise to the concept of the 'extended self'. Objects allow people to extend the self and provide them with the tools to achieve things that would not be possible otherwise. Possessions symbolically

extend the self and can even convince people that they can be different to their true selves (Belk, 1988). The extended self also paves the way for communication and feedback. Belk (1988) explains that by using objects as part of the extended self helps an individual to create a self that is open to feedback from others, unlike a reluctant self that is un-extended. People using dogs as part of their extended self might find that their online profiles get a higher number of views and that it entices more of a response in terms of comments from people viewing their posts. Technology has also fundamentally changed how the extended self gets created, consumed, and communicated (Belk, 2013). People are now doing most of their self-identity work in an online environment, which constantly demands that individuals reaffirm who they are and what they have to share (Belk, 2013). Through the inclusion of dogs, individuals can create an identity in the online space that expresses parts of who they are or would like to be. Schau and Gilly (2003) support this notion by adding that through the use of personal web spaces, people find it easier to express their true ideals than in real life. In a digital space, people are free from the material constraints of the real world and thus individuals are free to develop creative strategies for inventive self-presentation (Schau & Gilly, 2003).

If a person's self-image and self-concept are measured and valued by their material possessions, goals, and wealth, it can stand to reason that their choice of dogs might also influence their self-image. Pets in the twenty-first century can aid people in creating and expressing their identities and people can deduce information and characteristics of others through the pets that they own (Tripper, 2011). Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) state that people develop, control, and express their multiple identities through the use of symbolic meaning. They give the example of how a person who would like to be seen as confident and successful might decide to wear Manolo Blahnik Classics to work and a pair of Birkenstock Clogs to a Christmas dinner to express a more dependable and caring self to others. Consumers create and express these self-images by adopting brands that give symbolic meaning to themselves and others (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) point out that if people have a choice to consume, they will consume things that have a specific symbolic meaning that they can share with others. They give the following examples: individuals who choose to use recycled envelopes might

symbolise to others that they care for the environment, or people choosing to support gay rights might indicate to others that they are open-minded.

This study explored if the same applies to people using dogs in their online personal branding. It can be argued that dogs have their own symbolic meaning when used alongside their owner's social media profiles and that a person's choice of a dog, or deciding to incorporate a dog as part of their online identity, might do the same for the self as an established brand.

2.6 A Shift in the Function and Value of Dogs

This study examines why and how people are using dogs in their online personal branding, thus after reviewing literature regarding branding, brand identity and brand image, personal branding, online personal branding, and self-presentation, it is imperative that literature is reviewed that concerns the function that dogs play in personal branding and how their value has shifted from a purely functional to a more emotional one. As Sanders (1990) states, 'As a unique element in commercial culture, the companion animal provides comfort, protection, love, health, companionship and an enlarged definition of the self like no other thing which can be bought, sold or traded'.

Dogs have emerged as one of the world's earliest domesticated species, forging a profound, intertwined narrative with humanity. This unique connection allows them to engage with the intricate emotions and relationships humans share with other species and the natural world. They have significantly shaped human evolution, just as we have impacted theirs (Armbruster, 2018). Studies that investigated what roles modern dogs play in people's lives established that it comes down to three main functions (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). Firstly, dogs today serve a projection function whereby they are seen as an extension of a person's social self. Secondly, they serve a social function and act as a social lubricant when meeting strangers and interaction is needed. Lastly, dogs function as a substitute for human companionship. Seminal author Sanders (1990), who is a professor of sociology and a leading expert in cultural production and deviant behaviour, supports the above by stating that pets can help people to interact with each other face-to-face, thus helping them to enhance their concept of the self. With regard to this study, it can be argued that dogs still provide the

abovementioned functions to people's lives even in an online environment. People who use dogs in their online personal branding might benefit from their pets initiating interaction and responses from others that can enhance an individual's concept of the self and their own brand identities.

Hirschman (1994) argues that the human–dog/pet relationship has changed; dogs/pets have become objects in a consumer world and an extension of the owner; a means for creating and expressing the owner's personal brand. The above statement is supported by seminal author Russell W. Belk who is a respected research professor and expert on the extended self, digital consumption, and the meanings of possessions. He theorises that the extension of the self occurs when people can control, create, habituate, live with or have extensive knowledge of an object (Belk, 1988). Dogs have been developed, loved, and controlled for millennia; thus, they have become a perfect fit for people's extended identities. People are thinking about dogs differently today, and according to Kavin (2016), it is more about aesthetics and how dogs visually exemplify an individual's economic standing, and less about what makes a dog a good pet. Pets are being seen as ornamental objects and accessories, especially in wealthy societies (Armbruster, 2018) and acquired for their aesthetic significance and, as a result, have become status symbols.

Brands have also seen a shift from being purely valued for their functionality to consumers placing more value on what brands can represent. Maurya and Mishra (2012) state that modern consumers find value not just in a brand's functionality but more so in their personal experience with the brand, its heritage, and how that brand reflects on the individual's social standing. A brand's value today is much more than just a functional one. People attribute values such as social acceptance and emotional value at the top of their list when choosing which brands to adopt. How a brand emotionally connects with an individual and how it makes that person feel carries immense value when selecting a brand. Product choices are made based on aesthetics, novelty, and epistemic values that relate to people, and as branding became more symbolic and less functional, people began to realise that brands were more than just mere identifiers, assisting in distinguishing similar products and services from each other (Cunningham, 2021; Guzman, 2004). Brands have become part of people's extended identities just like dogs

have today.

Today, purchasing a dog has become more than just a decision based on which breed will make a good companion, but rather one that could visually communicate something about that person. People have started to place value on what a dog can represent rather than what it was bred to do (Kavin, 2016). Likewise, in the discipline of branding, literature theorises that brands are offering consumers a way to expand on their social persona. Brands allow people to create their personal identity and to either differentiate themselves from the crowd or belong to a particular group of like-minded individuals (Bastos & Levy, 2012). Dogs have the power to excite, thrill, and emotionally connect with consumers. Advertisers exploit the dog-human relationship to create strong associations with various brands. This method is so successful because the bond between humans and dogs has such a rich and strong history that it allows for a deeper connection between the brand and its consumer (Baunwart, 2015; Cramer, 2018). This connection has also made the dog an easy-to-use accompaniment in creating a more valuable personal brand for many people online. Purebred dogs have always been somewhat of a class divider. In the article, *No Mongrels Need Apply*, Harrington (2009) writes that social critic, Thorstein Veblen, views the breeding and owning of purebred dogs as a means by which the owner can display his/her social status and economic standing. Today pedigree dogs, to some degree, still symbolise status and social privilege because they are still considered unique and expensive to acquire as well as representing other aspects of the self and self-identity (Sanders, 1990).

The literature consulted explored the shift in value from a dog's basic functionality and companionship to that of a fashion statement or status symbol (Anderson, 2021) that can benefit a person's online personal brand. According to Harrington (2009), a new breed of status dog has made its appearance, and it accompanies its celebrity owner from one social event or media appearance to another. For example, celebrities like Paris Hilton (Figure 6), Britney Spears (Figure 7), and Lady Gaga (Figure 8) have been known to let their small breed companions accompany them in the presence of the media and they reap enormous amounts of publicity from this.



Figure 6: Image of Paris Hilton holding a chihuahua.
(Getty Images, 2022)



Figure 7: Image of Britney Spears holding a puppy.
(Broadimage/REX, 2014)



Figure 8: Image of Lady Gaga holding a French bulldog wearing a Santa costume.
(Backgrid, 2021)

Another emerging phenomenon within the value shift from companion to status symbol is the rise of social media accounts created specifically for dogs, especially on Instagram. The profiles that are successful on Instagram again prove that aesthetics is valued and trump functionality. Williams (2018) states that Instagram followers are placing the 'cuteness of dogs' over traits such as intelligence or obedience when deciding which pages to follow. When comparing the most popular dog breeds in North America with those on Instagram, it is easy to see where the values of the consumer lie. According to the American Kennel Club, the most popular dog breeds are the labrador, golden retriever, German shepherd, English bulldog and beagle, which apart from the bulldog are all seen as more service and obedience dogs compared to the most popular dog breeds on Instagram, which include pugs, French bulldogs, terriers, chihuahuas, and huskies. The latter are more popular for their 'cute looks and comical personalities' (Williams, 2018). A person owning one of these dog breeds might be able to increase his/her status online through the sheer popularity of these dog breeds on social media. By including a popular dog breed as part of their online personal branding, people might find that their social status amongst their fellow Facebook and Instagram users will rise.

This status shift from the physical to the digital world seems to be in line with the pace at which the world is changing with regard to the use of technology. Sixty percent of the world's population are now making use of social networks and blogging sites (Chaffey², 2023). Facebook has grown to an estimated 2.89 billion active members who spend roughly two hours and 24 minutes surfing the platform daily, while four billion video views take place on it every day (Outsource Access, 2023). This kind of exposure has had a big impact on branding, especially from a personal branding perspective. Branding scholars theorise that through advancements in technology, individuals have found an easier way to document and display their daily lives, express their identity, construct social roles, expand their social networks (Lund, Cohen & Scarles, 2018), and flaunt their social standing through the creation of their online personal brands. People can instantly share their preferred brands, values, and views beyond their social circles, and

² The statistics on the number of active users on social media platforms gets updated annually. Therefore, the data quoted here was correct at the time of the study (2023).

according to Bastos and Levy (2012), the rise and advancement in technology has modified how individuals showcase their status and brand themselves. Today, more than ever, people can include almost anything to enhance their online personal brand. Social media platforms have given people the ability to share their brand globally in an instant, but with this ease of sharing content also comes the difficulty of controlling who sees the content being shared. Without much control, individuals branding themselves online with the aid of their dogs might not be aware of the possible ethical considerations that they need to be mindful of when using their dogs.

2.7 Considering the Ethics of Using Dogs in Online Personal Branding

The literature explored indicated some ethical considerations regarding using dogs on social media platforms as well as an extension of personal branding that cannot go unmentioned. The shifts in the value of dogs have left an undesirable mark on the dog world. As Tripper (2011: 86) states,

In the seventeenth century, the philosopher Descartes summed up prevailing thinking (and set the agenda for centuries to come) when he asserted that animals could not feel pain because they had no minds – they were merely bodies and therefore more like machines.

Interestingly, Tripper (2011), Redmalm (2013), and Redmalm (2019) mentions that society is overindulging in the consumption of pets, which leads to pets being treated as disposable commodities. Unfortunately, unlike material goods, dogs cannot just be disposed of 'by taking out the rubbish'. Sources have also pointed out that breeding dogs purely for their aesthetic value have had negative consequences for certain popular breeds over the years. Our relationships with companion animals such as dogs should not be one of 'master versus slave' and should not reflect an undesirable desire to control and dominate them (Hens, 2008). People using dogs as part of their online personal branding might not be aware that they are supporting the need to breed for aesthetic value by constantly showcasing their dogs on their social media accounts. This showcasing can lead to a high demand for certain popular breeds. English bulldogs, pugs and French bulldogs are fashionable on Instagram and Facebook because of their pushed-in faces, big protruding eyes and stout compact bodies. They are bred with these exaggerated features in mind and by doing so dogs are created who are prone to numerous genetic defects and health problems causing deliberate pain, which is

unethical and unnecessary (Brandow, 2015; Wunderman, 2016).

These breeds suffer from abnormalities that include breathing difficulties, poor vision, and impaired mobility because they are in such great demand. It can be argued that some of this demand can be linked to their popularity in the media like movies, TV, and on social media, which could have a direct impact on the amount of unethical and careless breeding that takes place to meet this demand (Weir & Kessler, 2022). Kavin (2016) states that dog breeding is a big business and that dog breeders are not only breeding purebred dogs, they are also experimenting with creating new breeds with novel features to entice consumers. Designer dogs are yet another ethical conundrum to consider. According to Beverland, Farrelly and Lim (2008), the designer dog trend represents a concerning aspect to dog ownership because it supports a society that enjoys conspicuous consumption³ and not a society that places the welfare of their companion animals first. Control, authority, consumption, and status are all some of the ethical implications that need to be taken into consideration with regard to pet ownership (Beverland *et al.*, 2008), which includes using dogs as personal brand extensions.

The literature reviewed further suggests that people using dogs as part of their online personal branding might also experience some negative effects as well as their dogs. Interestingly, Belk (1988) mentions that people can overindulge by investing too much of themselves and their time in creating a world that includes their pets as part of their extended self. These worlds are carefully constructed by pet owners and in some cases, these narratives being created can cost the owners and their dogs their dignity (Teitel, 2016). For example, dogs may be placed in unnatural settings where they are expected to act like humans, resulting in the pet owners being scrutinised for their behaviour by some of their online viewers. From an ethical perspective, this study explored whether people are aware that their actions and desires might have a negative impact on how society views and consumes pets. Possible ethical implications include the health and ethical breeding of dogs as well as the potential negative implications for individuals and consumers spending too much of their energy and time engaging

³ Conspicuous consumption is defined as purchasing things or services to publicly display riches rather than meeting basic needs (McAuliffe, 2023).

with these online platforms. Sanders (1990) supports this notion by stating that society needs to remove pets from the category of consumer goods that have commercial value and rather acknowledge them for all the benefits they add to people's lives.

In conclusion, the literature consulted indicated that there is ample extant research surrounding brand identity, personal branding, the presentation of the self as well as the use and value of dogs in today's society, but not much has been documented with regard to why and how dogs are being used by people in their online personal branding. Some of the sources reviewed have alluded to this phenomenon but it has not been documented in its entirety. The literature surrounding dogs and the evolution of dogs is interesting, and some sources do make the link between dogs and personal branding, but again it is not well documented, or it seems to be dated. There appears to be a definite gap in the literature for understanding why and how people are using dogs in their online personal branding more closely. The literature reviewed has established a foundation for exploring the research question further and enables the researcher to connect existing research with new findings in order to analyse and understand this phenomenon in greater detail.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The research methodology employed to explore why and how people use dogs in their online personal branding is introduced and outlined in this chapter. Important insights were gathered during the literature review that guided and informed the chosen methodology. Research conducted in Chapter Two revealed that the concept of the self underpinned personal brand identity and that self-presentation plays a very important role in how people conduct and define themselves in their social media accounts. It also revealed how the relationship between people and dogs has evolved and the shifting value that dogs have in modern society. Chapter Two further explored how dogs can be used as part of an individual's personal brand extension and how that can be applied in an online environment.

Based on the literature, it is evident that there may be ethical considerations to be aware of when people are using their dogs as part of their online personal branding. To understand these findings, this study made use of an exploratory methodology approach and placed qualitative research at the centre to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a; Welman, Kruger & Mitchell, 2005), whereby dogs become part of people's extended online personal brands. This approach was selected to allow the researcher to explore what motivates people to use their dogs as part of their online personal branding and how they have chosen to do so.

This chapter begins by explaining why this study was conducted from within an interpretive paradigm, which is rooted in a qualitative research approach. The research design is then discussed and the population, population parameters, unit of analysis, sampling method, and sampling size are outlined. The researcher then defines and justify the data collection methods and data collection instruments used. The appropriate methods used to analyse the data collected are also discussed in detail. Lastly, in this chapter, the matter of trustworthiness and how it was achieved, as well as ethical issues that needed to be considered, are addressed.

3.2 Research Paradigm

The study is embedded within an interpretive paradigm⁴ as the research process makes use of the interpretation of people's subjective experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a; Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021) with regard to how they construct their online personal brands with the aid of their dogs and what motivates them to engage in such behaviour. An interpretive perspective was best suited to this study as the researcher's objective was to conduct an in-depth exploration into the phenomenon of online personal branding to discover new insights into this phenomenon whereby people are using dogs as part of their online personal branding. Furthermore, the researcher also wanted to investigate if the participants were aware that their actions might hold some ethical implications when using their dogs to promote or position themselves favourably online. This phenomenological approach assisted the researcher in exploring and understanding how and why people were including their dogs as part of their online personal branding (Nieuwenhuis, 2020b).

The theoretical framework underpinning this study draws upon a paradigm or worldview rooted in epistemological and ontological interpretivist positions. In the works of Du Plooy-Cilliers (2021) and Nieuwenhuis (2020a), epistemology is characterised as the exploration of knowledge and the diverse methodologies of understanding, while ontology is defined as the study of reality or truth, encompassing assumptions about specific phenomena. From an interpretive epistemological viewpoint, knowledge is not exclusively scientific and true facts depend on social context and an individual's interpretation of information. Within interpretivism, the ontological belief is that reality cannot be expected to be experienced in the same way by everyone and an individual's culture, circumstances, and experiences influence how that person experiences their reality (Du Plooy-Cilliers, 2021). This interpretive epistemological and ontological perspective is particularly relevant to this study, as it delves into a phenomenon rooted not in scientific certainties but in individuals' subjective experiences—specifically, exploring why and how individuals incorporate their dogs into their online personal brands. Each participant's perspective on this phenomenon differs based on their unique realities and contextual factors. Given the

⁴ A paradigm is a set of ideas, views or opinions about the basic aspects of reality which gives rise to a certain world view (Nieuwenhuis, 2020a).

interpretive epistemological and ontological positioning, the study is guided towards a qualitative research approach. This aligns with the nature of the phenomenon under investigation, which is inherently subjective and not solely grounded in empirical facts. By applying an interpretive lens, the research methodology acknowledges and values the diversity of individual experiences and realities, providing an in-depth understanding of why and how people include their dogs when creating their online personal brands.

3.3 Research Approach

The research follows an exploratory and qualitative approach as the study places importance on understanding the reasons people are using their dogs as part of their online personal branding. Further, it explores how they go about achieving this. The literature review discussed theories pertaining to the inclusion of dogs in personal branding which provided a foundational understanding of this phenomenon. However, to delve deeper into the research problem and gain a clearer understanding of why and how it exists, an exploratory approach was necessary (Davis, 2021). Since the study delves into a phenomenon centred around people's perceptions, emotions, and subjective experiences as the primary motivators of their actions (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2021), the researcher adopted a qualitative strategy. This strategy aligns with an interpretive paradigm, allowing for an in-depth exploration and insight into the complex aspects of individuals' subjective experiences and motivations when including their dogs in their online personal brands. The most suitable methodology for this study is qualitative in nature. This approach empowers the researcher to delve into individuals' experiences with precision, making use of specialised research methods such as content analysis, observations, or in-depth interviews. Through this method, the researcher can discern key insights from the viewpoint of the study participants to comprehend and interpret the meaning, behaviour, and overall experience related to the investigated phenomenon. In adopting a qualitative approach, the researcher can engage with subjects in their natural settings, striving to interpret and make sense of the data derived directly from the participants (Hennink, Hutter & Baily, 2020). While a qualitative approach proved optimal for exploring the research question, the researcher acknowledged specific limitations inherent in the chosen methodology. These concerns encompass the human interpretation process, which has the potential to constrain

the generalisability of findings and conclusions. Additionally, the intricate nature of data analysis introduces a risk of researcher bias that can influence outcomes (Mwita, 2022).

3.4 Research Design

This study is qualitative because it engaged people in trying to understand and make sense of their social experiences (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 2016) of why and how they use dogs as part of their online personal branding. Following a quantitative approach would have been unfeasible because as Terre Blanche and Durrheim (2016) state, quantitative research makes sense when the researcher knows what the various variables are and how the study can measure and control them. With regards to this study, the variables were initially unknown and thus an exploratory, qualitative study was most appropriate. The study explored desk-based secondary research to achieve the first objective, which explored a brief history of dogs and how they have assisted people to create their personal identities, focusing especially on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Primary research was applied to achieve the second objective of this study where interviews were conducted and analysed. This analysis and the results generated have contributed towards answering the last objective, which explored why and how people use dogs in their online personal brands and considered any ethical implications that presented themselves from the results generated.

3.4.1 Population

The population of interest that this study perused comprised individuals who included their dogs frequently on their personal social media accounts. This population have been analysed in order to draw specific outcomes (Welman *et al.*, 2005) from their Instagram and Facebook accounts. Some of the population parameters that were established included looking at accounts of people only on Facebook and Instagram. This was done firstly to narrow down the scope of existing social networks and secondly, because it was found that these two platforms are some of the most popular social media platforms globally. According to Walsh (2023), Facebook was placed at number one out of the ten biggest social media sites in 2023 at 3 billion active users globally and Instagram came in at number three with around 2 billion active users. X (Twitter) came in at

number six and LinkedIn at number nine respectively but were discarded as they are mostly seen as newsworthy and professional business platforms. The nature of the study called for online platforms that are more social and that are utilised mostly for showcasing people's personal lives outside of work. The researcher considered including the popular social video sharing platform TikTok, but it was still a relatively new platform at the start of this study, and the participants had more established online personal brands on Facebook and Instagram than TikTok. However, TikTok is quickly becoming a social media giant, and according to the most recent data of the world's most popular social networks, TikTok is placed fourth with 1,2 billion active users (Walsh, 2023).

3.4.2 Unit of Analysis

Individuals who have online personal accounts on Facebook and Instagram were the units of analysis that this study was focussing on. The unit of analysis is rooted in empirical research as it aims to investigate the human behaviour (Babbie & Mouton, 2001) of individuals using dogs as part of their extended brand identity online. This study was not concerned with the sex, race or nationality when defining the unit of analysis. Data collection methods in the form of semi-structured interviews happened via Zoom and Microsoft Team calls, thus the unit of analysis location was not problematic. Some parameters that were included in the unit of analysis were age and the inclusion of dogs within the individual's personal online platform. The study looked at social media accounts where the individuals were at least 18 years of age and have used their dogs as part of their account frequently through posts showing themselves with their dogs or their dogs unaccompanied.

3.4.3 Sample and Sampling Method

As a sampling method, the study used a non-probability approach. This method was chosen because gaining excess to the complete population of the study would be extremely challenging (Pascoe, 2021) as the number of people using dogs as part of their online personal branding globally are significant. The elements of this phenomenon were varied and thus they were purposively chosen by the researcher. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to select elements with certain qualities (Pascoe, 2021), which in this study assisted the researcher in selecting online personal brands with key research aspects and characteristics. A purposive sampling method was then implemented whereby the researcher

decisively chose the online accounts to be included in the sample by using their judgment while still adhering to the population's parameters (Pascoe, 2021). The study made use of a small sample size as it is a qualitative research study rooted in phenomenology, which strives for depth as opposed to breadth and generalisable results. Saturation was used to determine the size of the sample, where the saturation point is usually between seven and ten (Cresswell & Creswell, 2018). As the researcher progressed through the interview stage of the study, saturation was indeed achieved as the participants started to respond with the same kind of answers on some of the questions. In the end, the accounts that were used as part of the sample have been selected based on the following criteria:

- Frequency of the inclusion of their dogs on their accounts
- The individuals should be the primary face and brand of the account and not their pets. This criterion holds significance as the study centres on online personal branding and examines how individuals' dogs impact their online presence and identity. Erica Fudge, in her article *"The Dog, The Home, and the Human: Ancestry of Derrida's Cat,"* reinforces this notion by arguing that narratives concerning dogs are fundamentally narratives about the individuals who weave them (Fudge, 2007).
- The number of likes and comments being made with regards to the posts of their dogs
- Accounts that have at least 100 to 200 followers or more
- A good indication of accounts actively pursuing and being known for using their dogs as part of their online presence (unfortunately, as discussed later in this chapter, this proved to be a limitation to some degree as the researcher struggled to secure participants that all had accounts that were famously known for including their dogs).

A participation letter of invitation was designed on Microsoft Forms to make it easier for the researcher to attach it via a URL link when contacting the selected participants on social media. Screenshots of the participation letter can be viewed at **Appendix 1**. This meant that the participant could easily and effortlessly read through the participation letter and get a more detailed understanding of what the research was about and what would be required of them should they accept and give their consent to go ahead with the process. The Microsoft Form process also

meant that the researcher could almost immediately see via the response tab on the form when a participant accepted and agreed or disagreed to go ahead with the interviews. Eleven respondents accepted and indicated that they would like to be part of the study, but only seven of these materialised into successful interviews.

3.4.4 Limitations

Securing the ideal sample and getting participants to commit to an interview proved to be two of the main limitations the researcher encountered in the study. Early identified participants who had personal online accounts where their dogs were noticeably being used as an extension of their online brands and had followers well over the 50,000-mark remained unfortunately out of reach. The following explanations are given as to why these units of analysis were not secured:

1. Making contact with these individuals proved to be difficult as the only channel that the researcher could use was to directly message them on their social media accounts. The majority of the selected participants did not respond and the reasons for doing so can only be speculated upon, but some reasons might be the availability of time, messages getting filtered, or they were untrusting of an invitation from a stranger asking them to be part of a study that seems disconnected from what they are trying to achieve with their online personal brands. One participant did respond but declined the invitation as they were uncomfortable with participating in research studies and another participant's public relations manager responded and declined the invitation based on the individual's lack of available time.
2. Another limitation seemed to be the absence of a personal link or connection. The participants who were secured in the end, responded because there was a link between the researcher and them, either through mutual acquaintances, working in similar industries, or through employers. The ability to make a personal connection seemed to be the difference between successfully securing a participant or not.
3. Lastly, a few individuals who had been secured in the early stages of the process were unresponsive when trying to schedule an interview date and time.

These limitations forced the researcher to rethink and re-evaluate the required sample. Eventually, participants were secured that mostly included individuals who are South African, very active on their social media accounts, and include their dogs but do not have the numbers of followers breaching the 50,000 mark.

3.4.5 Data Collection Methods

Data collected for this study is anchored in qualitative methods to ensure that rich and in-depth data is gathered (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2021) to examine and understand this phenomenon where people are using dogs as part of their online personal branding. A field research approach was adopted in collecting data from the sample population. The researcher conducted field research to interact with the participants in an effort to better understand this phenomenon from their point of view and experiences (Strydom & Bezuidenhout, 2021). The researcher conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with all seven of the participants in an attempt to understand why and how they use their dogs as part of their online personal branding and whether they were aware of any ethical implications that such practices could have for dogs. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to make use of fourteen well-structured questions developed in advance that, according to Nieuwenhuis (2020b), allows for freedom to explore new emerging lines of thought that can present themselves in interviews. Hour-long interviews were conducted online as some participants lived in a different province or a different country (Zambia), and most participants indicated that online was their preferred method of conducting the interview. The interviews were conducted over a month-long period and were all concluded at different times and dates. All interviews were recorded with consent and later transcribed using the software programme Otter AI. The interview guide can be viewed at **Appendix 2**. The transcriptions were then quality-checked and processed manually by the researcher to ensure the correctness of the transcription to be used later during the data analysis phase.

3.4.6 Data Analysis

The study used a thematic analysis approach in its search for themes to systematically organise narratives and analyse complex data (Dawadi, 2020). This study explored the connections produced by the data and then analysed any patterns of interest regarding the sample's behaviours and experiences (Durand

& Chantler, 2014), regarding why and how the participants use dogs within their online personal brands. The transcribed interviews were imported into the qualitative analysis program Quirkos and then thematically analysed by the researcher to identify dominant themes and patterns as well as provide insights required to get an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Using this qualitative method assisted the researcher in exploring why and how the participants use their dogs as part of their online personal branding and whether they were aware of, or even considered, the ethical implications of doing so.

The data was then interpreted in order to address the research problem and gain valuable insights and meaning into this phenomenon. This study focussed on using a hermeneutic approach when analysing the data. Hermeneutics is grounded in interpretivism and investigates human comprehension of textual evidence (Nieuwenhuis, 2020c), which aligns well with the qualitative methodology of this study because the goal of a hermeneutic data analysis process in relation to the research is to interpret and decipher the hidden meaning of the rich textual data collected during the interviews and make sense of it. A hermeneutic approach enables researchers to grasp the entirety of a dataset by facilitating an interplay between the specific details of the data and the broader, general context of the phenomena under examination (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2021).

The following steps were taken when analysing the data collected:

1. Firstly, the researcher prepared the data. The data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews were organised and transcribed into written word, which served as text to be analysed (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2021) by using the transcribing software program Otter AI. The researcher then finalised the transcriptions by manually going over each one and doing a quality check. While the researcher applied the quality checks, possible themes started to emerge and were noted.
2. The transcribed data was then loaded into a data analysis program called Quirkos. Once the data was loaded, colour coding units were identified to help analyse the data by re-examining the transcribed data numerous times. These analytical units included descriptive words or sentences that aided the researcher in identifying themes, categories, and patterns (Nieuwenhuis, 2020c).

3. Once all the colour coding of the collected data was done, themes and categories were established to provide the researcher with insight into the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2020c). Quirkos allowed the researcher to visually construct the themes and categories in the form of ‘themed bubbles’ in a single space. This aided the researcher in getting a visual snapshot of all the created themes and categories on screen and made it easier for the researcher to add, merge, and delete themes and categories as the data analysis process continued. Figures 9, 10, 11, and 12 provide snapshots of the progression in finalising the thematic groupings.

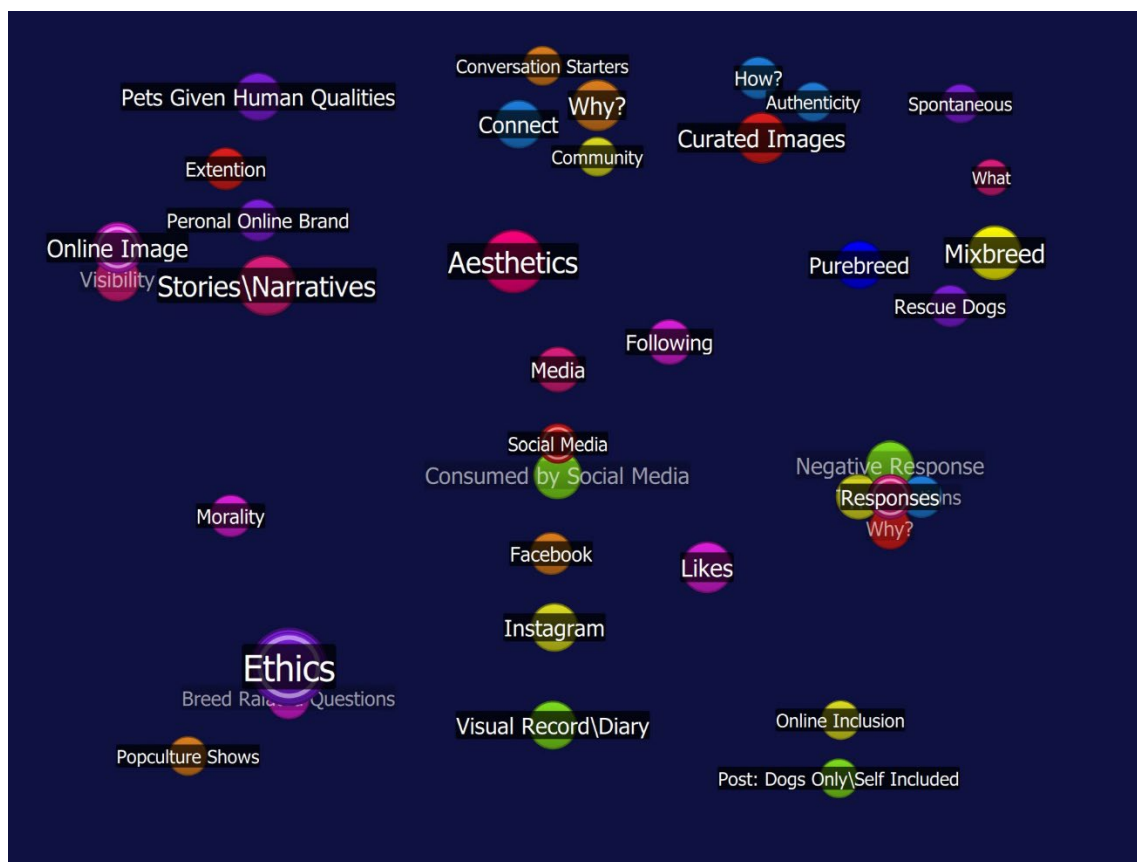


Figure 9:Initial thematic groupings using the data analysis software program Quirkos

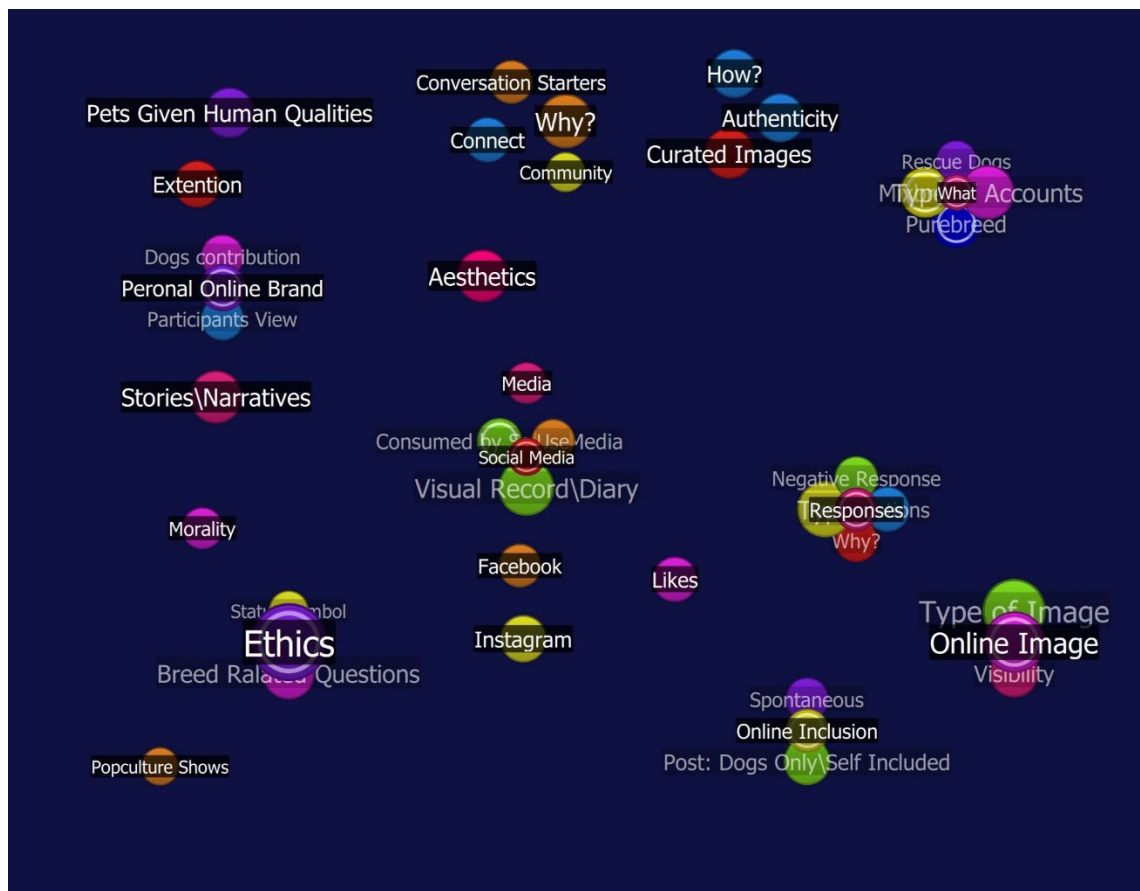


Figure 10: Progression of thematic groupings

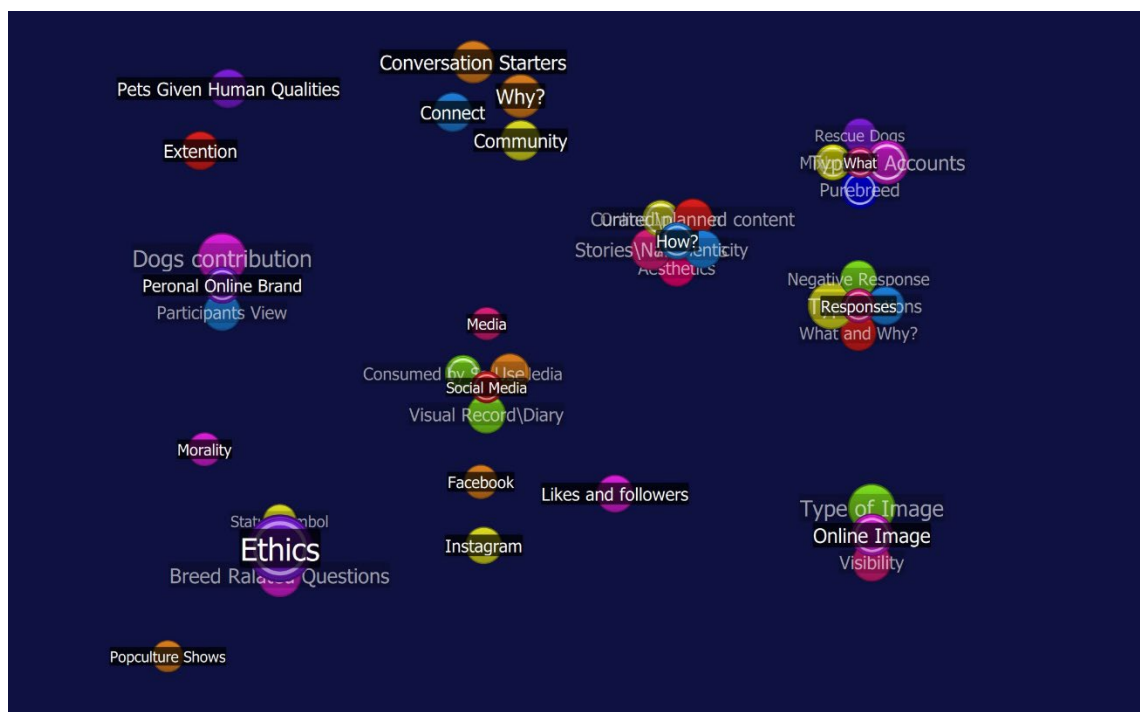


Figure 11: Refinement of thematic groupings

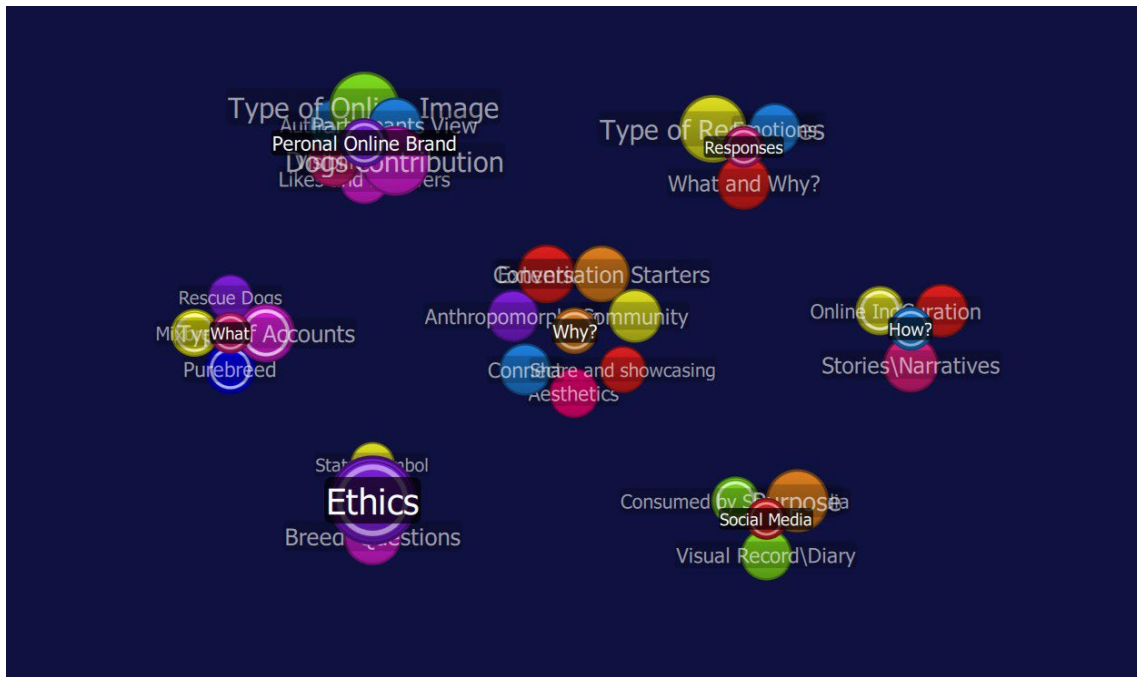


Figure 12: Final thematic groupings

4. The fourth step included interpreting the analysed data. The researcher expanded on the analysis of the data by including their interpretation, reason, and meaning as well as consulting existing theory to get to the core of the research problem being studied (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2021). A hermeneutic data analysis approach was applied in an effort to decipher hidden meanings when interpreting the data rich in value and significance (Bezuidenhout & Cronje, 2021).
5. Finally, conclusions were drawn through interpreting the data as the final step in the data analysis process. During this last step, the researcher analysed and interpreted the data that revealed insights that might enrich the existing theories surrounding the phenomenon (Nieuwenhuis, 2020c) or confirm what was already speculated or known. The researcher also concluded that future research could further explore this phenomenon.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

During this study, the researcher remained ethical by applying principled and professional standards when conducting the research and always acted with integrity and responsibility (Louw, 2021). This study obtained ethical clearance from the IIE (The Independent Institution of Education). To view the ethical clearance granted, please see **Appendix 3**. Consequently, the researcher obtained informed consent from all the participants. As per good practice (Louw,

2021; Maree, 2020), participants were all informed about the nature of the study and what was required from them prior to their participation. Permission to record the interviews was requested in writing. A consent form stating all the above information, including confidentiality and how the results would be used, was provided to all participants to read and sign before any interviews commenced. Louw (2021) and Maree (2020) point out that having this information in writing and on record is preferable. Confidentiality was ensured by substituting the actual names of participants with labels such as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. when referencing them in the study. The study abstains from mentioning or displaying the online personal brand names and posts of the participants. Additionally, pseudonyms were used to replace their pets' names. Ensuring confidentiality is crucial to safeguard the identity of participants and prevent their personal information from falling into unauthorised hands (Maree, 2020). The researcher did not harm any of the participants and all participants were made aware that they would not suffer any physical or emotional harm during the process and that they could withdraw at any time (Welman *et al.*, 2005). Lastly, the researcher made sure that all the data captured and analysed happened ethically and that no falsifying of information, distortion of results, misuse of results or the use of unsuitable research methods was implemented (Louw, 2021). Recordings and transcriptions were stored according to The IIE guidelines, with confidentiality ensured.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the research design and methodology adopted in this study proved to be comprehensive and robust in the exploration of why and how people are incorporating their dogs into their online personal brands. The interpretive approach chosen allowed the researcher to delve deep into the subjective experiences, motivations, and ethical considerations related to this phenomenon and the encountered limitations that were addressed shed light on the challenges faced when securing a specific sample. Data collection in the form of semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed for the gathering of rich findings whilst the thematic analysis process produced insightful themes, categories, and patterns. Ethical considerations were diligently addressed, with a focus on informed consent, participant well-being, and data integrity. The findings and conclusions from the data analysis will be discussed in the following chapter as well as the

motives, experiences, and ethical issues around the usage of dogs in the participants' online personal branding.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Chapter Four presents the main findings and discussions based on the data gathered from the seven interviews conducted. As a starting point for exploring why and how people use dogs as part of their online personal branding, the findings have been prepared in accordance with the literature review, which is built on the concepts of brand identity, brand image, brand extension, online personal branding, and self-presentation. Key themes and categories that were identified through inductive coding are introduced in this chapter. According to Bezuidenhout and Cronje (2021), inductive coding allows the researcher to recognise and pinpoint emerging themes by examining the text. These themes and patterns are typically expected to be discovered in the data as well as derived from the literature review. To ensure that the objectives of this study were met, and the research questions were answered, the researcher used inductive coding to divide the data into various themes and categories. Seven themes with twenty-six sub-themes emerged and were expanded upon using thematic analysis and inductive coding. These are depicted in Figure 13.



Figure 13: Main themes and sub-themes

Chapter Four also discusses the findings and insights in relation to the key concepts in the literature review. The purpose of these discussions is to explore and gain a better understanding of the phenomenon in which people use their dogs as part of their online personal brands. This study will first discuss themes one to four, with the objective of answering the questions regarding why and how participants use their dogs in their online personal accounts. Theme one focuses on providing some context regarding the participants' type of dogs that they own as well as discussing the type of online accounts that they follow. Themes two and three investigate why and how participants include their dogs on their personal social media accounts, while theme four explores the purpose of social media in the day-to-day lives of the participants. These four themes provide context and set the stage for the study's exploration of personal branding and ethics. The fifth theme focuses on the participants' perceptions of their online

personal brand and the role their dogs play in it. Theme six examines the types of responses the participants receive online and how those responses affect them, while the final theme explores whether the participants have ever considered the ethical implications of including their dogs on their social media accounts. These final three themes investigate how dogs assist participants with their online personal brands as well as the possible ethical implications this may have.

4.1 Theme One: Context



Figure 14: Theme one with sub-themes

The speech bubbles are visual elements that present the sub-themes and the data analysed with the qualitative data capturing program Quirkos. The different sizes of the bubbles indicate prevalence of mentions on the information gathered.

It was important for the researcher to first establish some context about each participant's dog breed preferences as well as the types of social media accounts they follow and what they use their personal accounts for. From these questions, the following categories and codes emerged.

4.1.1 Pedigree, Mixed Breed or Rescues

When the participants were asked what dog breeds they owned, it was interesting to note that they quickly made the researcher aware of the type of dogs that they had. It was established early whether they had a purebred, a mixed breed, or a rescue dog, and interesting findings emerged when the researcher probed further by asking why the participants chose their preferred breed of dog. All seven participants stated that they still have or have owned a pedigree dog at some point in their lives, even though some of their breeds come from breed-specific shelters such as the Pekingese Rescue. Participant 3 stated:

I don't think it's all just about having the perfect looking dog that is gorgeous, though. And... but I think that comes down, you know when people decide they want a dog, the first dog is inevitably going to be a thoroughbred, you know, it's kind of, that's the way things go.

When Participant 3 was asked why he believes people tend to get purebred dogs as their first dog, he replied: *"I think, yes. I think that it's a function of upbringing and childhood for those adults"*. This statement is intriguing because it implies that dog breeds, like brands, represent something more, such as trust, familiarity, a specific image, or a lifestyle.

According to Sanders (1990), owning a pedigree dog represents aspects of the self and self-identity to some extent, confirming the concept that most people value what a pedigree dog can represent and that participants who own purebred dogs chose their breed of dog selectively for various reasons. For example, Participant 4 stated that their choices were based on the compatibility of the dog breed with their personality: *"So, we do love the breed and, and it suits our personality so well"*. This line of thought is consistent with Dotson and Hyatt (2008), who stated that a modern dog's function is to project an image of their owner and that dogs are now viewed as an extension of a person's social self. The following responses provide more insights into why the participants chose pedigrees, mixed breeds, or rescues.

For some of the participants, mass media and social media played a role in them selecting their breed of dogs. Participant 1 confirmed that some of her choices directly relate to what she has been exposed to:

So, I think, yeah, what I've been exposed to, in terms of the media that I watch [...] I think I've watched a lot of TV where they have Dobermans, like, growing up with Magnum P.I., he had Dobermans. I also watch a lot of TV shows like about crossing borders with...what are those other dogs called, Malamutes?

Participant 2 stated that the popularity of the French bulldog breed on social media was not the reason for getting a French bulldog puppy, but it did grab his attention: *“But it was definitely far more of a focus when you are on social media and that every second person or post of a dog has been a French bulldog”*. These responses suggest that the popularity of certain dog breeds can be directly linked to their presence on television or social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. The influence of the media can be illustrated by the effect that Walt Disney's *101 Dalmatians*, released in 1961, had on the surge in demand for Dalmatian puppies. Similarly, celebrities such as Lady Gaga, who posts selfies on Instagram with her pets, have single-handedly made the French bulldog one of the world's most popular breeds (The Economist, 2023).

Aesthetics also played a big part for some of the participants when selecting their breed of dog, as Participant 5 noted: *“Beard... I like the beard. I'm very fond of bearded dogs”*. Kavin (2016) explains that people's attitudes toward dogs have shifted and that in most cases the aesthetics and appearance of a dog are more important than whether it will make a good companion. Functionality or purpose was mentioned by Participant 7, who stated that her husband selected a Rottweiler for their family as a security measure: *“You know, so my husband was like, you know, a Rottweiler, people are scared of them as well, you know, so it was a bit of a security thing as well”*. Participant 7's response is intriguing because it again connects to the idea that the Rottweiler breed represents something more than just a dog. It projects certain values and abilities such as guarding, power, and safety (Saletan, 2005).

Other participants mentioned that they continue to select the dog breeds that they grew up with. This breed preference is intriguing because it represents the same type of brand loyalty or intergenerational brand preference that is sometimes associated with other purchases like cars, for example. According to Anderson, Kellogg, Langer, and Sallee (2015), intergenerational brand preference is when children base their brand preferences on the brand choices of their parents. These preferences are typically associated with childhood nostalgia, trust, and dependability. Choosing to adopt rather than shop as well as opting for mixed-breed dogs was also mentioned by some of the participants. It is interesting to note that Participant 3 grew up with pedigree dogs and owned recognisable breeds for most of his life until a few years ago when he decided to adopt rescues, which consist mostly of mixed breeds: *"But also, I kind of enjoyed just how crazy and dishevelled and how nonconformist, you know, in Parktown, in the parks in Joburg, and, you know, everybody has thoroughbred dogs"*. Participant 3 states in his responses that he enjoys the fact that his mixed breed dogs are *"nonconformist,"* and that everyone else in his affluent area seems to own purebred dogs. This finding suggests that Participant 3 enjoys the idea that his mixed-breed dogs represent something different in a world where pedigree dogs are mostly the norm. Brands allow people to create identities that can help them differentiate themselves from the crowds, as Bastos and Levy (2012) state, and like brands, it can be assumed that a person's choice of dog can do the same. Surprisingly, it appears that owning a mixed breed today can communicate a person's self-identity and image in much the same way as owning a purebred dog. Having a mixed breed dog can represent certain values and perceptions that are valued in today's world, a function that was only reserved for pedigree dogs a decade ago. Interestingly, Andre Arden confirms that it has become very popular today to adopt rather than to shop. She also explains that people choose their dogs based on their moods and that people's moods are affected by world events such as war, social issues, and the economy (Forbes, 2010).

4.1.2 Type of Accounts

All of the participants acknowledged that they follow accounts that feature dogs when asked what type of social media accounts they follow online. They also stated that some of the accounts they follow are solely created to promote a specific dog. Some participants were more focused on following accounts with

dogs specifically as Participant 1 noted: *“And then I follow a lot of dog people, specific dog people”* and: *“I follow some Dalmatian sites and all of that type of dogs I’m into”*, while others, like Participant 2, simply happened to follow dog accounts more by accident:

My personal account, not too many sort of if you want to call it pet accounts, that’s more, more so on the account I created for, for the dogs. Yeah. And then on their page, we follow, we follow a lot of other dog pages.

Most participants emphasised that they follow accounts that include dog breeds to which they can relate. Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015) state that people buy into certain brands or products because those brands reflect the individuals' personalities and values. It can then be suggested that the participants follow accounts featuring the same breed of dog as them because those dogs reflect their own realities and values in some way: *“Following then a breed that that has, has of similar interests, and particular a breed that has, if you want to call it, quite unique needs”* (Participant 2).

Interestingly, some participants stated that they follow dog accounts because it is good to see other people treating their dogs the same way they do: *“I think one resonates with your dog's personality and other people's images and see, you know, that they're actually doing the same thing. And yeah, it's just interesting to see the behaviour of other Russians”* (Participant 5). Machaz and Shokoof (2016) state that the need to be popular or accepted is a human trait. The above response suggests that some participants follow certain online accounts because it makes them feel 'normal' and accepted. They follow these accounts because they reflect their own lives with their dogs, and they benefit from them because they feel more secure knowing that there are other people out there who adore their breed of dog as much as they do.

Lastly, some participants mentioned that they follow breed-specific accounts to learn more about the breed and gather important information. Participant 6 mentioned: *“...when I followed the spaniel group, the worldwide one, it was interesting to see what people feed their dogs, there was a lot of information”*. The insights presented above suggest that people tend to follow other dog-related online accounts because they identify with people who own the same breeds of

dogs. People also find that these accounts, to some extent, reflect their own lives and relationships with their dogs, creating a connection that makes them feel less unusual. Finally, people follow dog-related online accounts because it provides a forum for them to learn, educate themselves, and ask breed-specific questions.

4.2 Theme Two: The Why?



Figure 15: Theme two with sub-themes

Theme two examines findings regarding why the participants include their dogs in some form or another in their online platforms to promote their personal brands. Most participants said they include their dogs because they see them as an extension of themselves as well as members of their family. This finding is supported by Belk (1988) who stated that people see their possessions as a part of themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, giving rise to the concept of the extended self. Additional categories that surfaced encompassed concepts related to community, connection, conversation starters, aesthetics, and the integration of pets online. This is driven by people's desire to share and showcase

their lives, with their dogs playing a crucial role in this dynamic.

4.2.1 Extension of Self

When the participants were asked why they included their dogs on their online personal accounts, the concept of dogs becoming an extension of the self emerged. Participants mentioned that they view their dogs as an integral part of their lives as shown in these quotes: *I think firstly, because they are so much a part of my life, I adore them, I love them, I worship them* (Participant 1), *They're part of my life, and they're part of my story* (Participant 3), and: *So, they are such a part of me as a person* (Participant 6). Interestingly, in the responses, Participant 1 mentions that her dogs "reflect" who she is, whereas Participant 4 believes that we see ourselves in our dogs: *And I think it's because we see ourselves in our dogs*. These are strong statements, and they are supported by the literature in Chapter Two that explains how brands, products, and even dogs can help create and shape personal identities.

According to Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* (2015), brands can help establish people's identities and a brand's extended identity, which includes elements outside of a brand's core identity and can aid in expanding an individual's brand personality (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2009). The participants' dogs are such an important part of their lives that they feel compelled to include them in all aspects of their daily lives, including social media. Hatvany *et al.* (2017) support this notion by stating that people can place so much importance on their material possessions that they become fused with their self-concepts, which, in return, can shape their lives considerably. From these insights, it is clear that the participants include their dogs on their online accounts because they are viewed and valued as more than just pets but as extensions of their realities and identities: *Another friend said to me... she said to me, your gravestone...I will make sure that it has a Cocker Spaniel on your gravestone* (Participant 6).

4.2.2 Connect

The participants' responses varied when asked if they posted pictures of their dogs on social media in an effort to interact with other users. According to Sanders (1990), dogs can improve people's self-perception and their ability to engage with others in person. Participants 4 and 1 affirmed that this concept also

applies to the online world when they stated:

...there's another person that I know that I went to school with, and she also has a Pekingese. So, we often comment on each other's posts with regards to our dogs just because we know the breed and we find similarities. (Participant 4)

...he'll say things like about Mila's importance or whatever. So, it's to connect with other people who do that with their pets too. (Participant 1)

Participants also provided reasons why they think that dogs can aid in creating connections. Sharing a love for the same breed of dog, their aesthetics as well as observing like-minded people were mentioned. Participant 5 stated: *"I think one resonates with your dog's personality and other people's images and see, you know, that they're actually doing the same thing"* and Participant 2 mentioned: *"And then to connect with other people as well. Like, I had this one guy, Fred, who's a fine artist in New Mexico, I've never met, but we share an interest in similar things and aesthetics"*. These insights suggest that the participant's ability to connect with other users increased or was aided by including their pets in their online personal accounts. It can be argued that these connections arose accidentally or spontaneously, but the reality remains that the participants' dogs were the stimulus that formed these new connections.

4.2.3 Conversation Starter

Surprisingly, the majority of participants acknowledged that their dogs have occasionally sparked conversations or communication with strangers in their posts or in real life. Participant 3 stated:

If you go walking around Delta Park, you know, if you are single or you're alone, and you've got dogs with you, people will stop and talk to you and say, hey, tell me about your dog. You know, and I think many a love story has started as over the meeting of, of dog lovers, you know.

When asked if they believed that posting pictures of their dogs on social media had ever initiated conversations with random people, Participants 2 and 7 responded by noting:

Yeah, I definitely think that, I mean, even from my Facebook account, where I have had um...where I think my pictures with Harvey... um,

and I've had random messages saying 'Oh, I love your dog like so cool, where did you get them?' ... like that kind of thing so definitely attracts... (Participant 2)

Oh, sometimes they develop into, into more personal like friendship levels and then we discuss, you know, we chat as the people behind the accounts. (Participant 7)

The conclusions drawn from these findings suggest that dogs do play a role in being communication facilitators or social lubricants (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008), in real life and online as Participant 5 confirmed when stating: *"If they take Lulu on the beach, then she's a kind of a vehicle for me... she's a conversational tool"*. These insights also suggest that by including their dogs in their posts, the participants have become more approachable and that strangers feel more comfortable commenting on their posts: *"So, so people, friends of friends start commenting on your Facebook, and you're not friends with them"* (Participant 6).

4.2.4 Community

Analysis of the data revealed a pattern of inclusion. Insights indicated that through sharing posts that include their dogs, a sense of community and belonging is created with like-minded people. Participant 1 even stated: *"Yeah, I'm not a freak [laughing]"*. This strong statement suggests that the participants' dogs are attracting people with similar interests, which creates a sense of belonging among the participants and their followers, as exemplified by Participant 4: *"So, I guess it's also kind of finding that tribe, like finding similar-minded people. And you'll engage with those people more, I think"*. Dogs can serve as social catalysts, assisting people to feel included and recognised in community spaces (Bould, Bigby, Bennet & Howell, 2018), which today can include online platforms as Participant 7 experienced by stating: *"Rottweiler community is beyond amazing on Instagram"*.

These insights suggest that dogs, like brands, have the power to connect people with other similar people (Dommer, Swaminathan & Ahluwalia, 2013) and that they play an integral part in forming communities of like-minded individuals. These communities provide support and opportunities for people to become close friends as Participant 7 noted: *"We built these friendships up over so many years,*

you know, that we sort of so familiar with each other, it feels like we've met and that we know each other's dogs". According to the literature, the desire to belong is a fundamental human need and one of the primary motivators for wanting to be a part of social groupings or communities such as those on social media platforms (Li, 2022). By joining like-minded communities, individuals fulfil their need to belong, establish social connections, and enjoy interacting with others who share similar interests (Laroche, Habibi, Richard & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). In the context of this study, this could include becoming part of an online community that shares a passion for dogs or have the same breed of dog. Engaging with communities that share common interests, such as brands or, in this instance, dogs, can assist individuals in shaping their self-identity. This is achieved through the recognition and identification by others within the community (Laroche *et al.*, 2012).

4.2.5 Showcasing and Sharing

Finally, a theme of sharing and showcasing emerged when participants were asked why they included their dogs in their online posts. Participant 4 stated: *"They are there and then when they do something cute or like I, I experienced that they've been cute...it's something that I, that I like to share"* and Participant 6 noted: *"That, that I can't see, see any other way of not sharing my love... my life with my dogs with my friends and out there. It's just a normal thing for me".* This theme is closely linked to the notion that participants see their dogs as an extension of themselves that also aid them in constructing and expressing their identities (Tripper, 2011) especially online: *"And I think including Ruby, as well as just kind of like showcasing this is my family"* (Participant 4). The participants consider their animals to be family members (Tripper, 2011) and consider it natural to share that aspect of their lives with the rest of the world. It is worth noting that Participant 4 mentioned that she also showcases her dogs on social media to advocate for rescue dogs, stating: *"So, from his side and sharing, sharing photos of him on my social media, it's kind of like the advocating side of rescues".* Through advocating and sharing her passion for helping rescue dogs, Participant 4 is presenting a version of her identity that provides viewers with information about the kind of person she is and what is important to her (Stone *et al.*, 2022). If a brand can reflect an individual's unique personality and help add value to their personal identity (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015), it can be argued

that the participants' dogs are doing the same by being featured in their online posts. Participant 4's dogs, for example, add value to her identity because they are rescues and she is a strong advocate for shelter dogs. Thus, her dogs reflect her personality and help to showcase her identity to the outside world.

4.3 Theme Three: The How?



Figure 16: Theme three with sub-themes

After gaining insight into why the participants use their dogs in their online personal branding, the researcher investigated how the participants go about including their dogs in their social media feeds. The following themes emerged when participants were interviewed about how they included their dogs.

4.3.1 Narratives

When asked how they include their dogs in their posts, five out of the seven participants confirmed that they went beyond just posting images of their dogs on their social media accounts. These participants establish or create narratives to accompany their posts, implying that they enjoy providing context surrounding their content and enjoy the interaction they generate with viewers. When asked why some of the participants create narratives surrounding some of their posts, Participant 1 stated it is to bring the personalities of her dogs alive: *“I will try and bring through the dog's personality or the personalities that I've placed onto the dogs I suppose it is”*. Participant 1 elaborated further by commenting:

So, I will sometimes hashtag Harley as being handsome but not that clever or hashtag Lulu, with all the personality traits I put on her. The pack leader, the bigwigs, the big dog there, at that time, create a narrative around their personalities and then Abby hashtag as the golden child and justice for Abby since she was a rescue. Yeah, so I create a narrative of their personalities around that.

Similarly, Participant 7 stated: *“But generally, if you read my posts 90% of them have a story or a backstory or something to tell the pals, there's always something that we want to say, it's not just... it's not just a post”*. When asked why some of the participants create narratives surrounding some of their posts, Participant 1 stated it is to bring the personalities of her dogs alive: *“I will try and bring through the dog's personality or the personalities that I've placed onto the dogs I suppose it is”* and Participant 2 mentioned that he would like to give some backstory to some of his posts:

So, I mean, with in particular, you've... that examples for birthdays we've done it with, with Christmas. There's a couple of others where we are at the park and that. So definitely it has some sort of thought that runs to the backstory of what the post is going to be.

These findings suggest that creating narratives surrounding some of their posts that include their dogs occurs regularly and is sometimes curated. These narratives are created to provide context as well as entertainment, interest, connection, and engagement as Participants 1 and 6 confirm:

It's also like, for example, Mr X who I told you about who had this cat, he will playback, this stranger I don't even know any he'll say things

like about Lulu's importance or whatever. So, it's to connect with other people who do that with their pets too. (Participant 1)

If I now look at an example last year my last Spaniel was 13 years old and died during COVID time and then that became like a story because I started posting more and more photographs of him when he was so ill. I actually had a barbecue here with my friend, a greeting barbecue to say goodbye to my dog before we had put him down in the next few days and we took a photoshoot. So that became like a story and, you know, everyone on my Facebook got involved, and, you know, sympathised... (Participant 6)

Interestingly, Participant 6's response connects dogs' ability to bring people together and, on social media, give a sense of community even during difficult times. Li (2022) confirms this notion by stating that people have found their digital tribes on the Internet where they find recognition, a sense of belonging, and friendship around the world.

Although these narratives are created online by the participants, they still seem to create an environment for connecting and engaging with others as well as influencing perceptions (Lund, Cohen & Scarles, 2018), as demonstrated by Participant 1: *"The ones that I like to follow, like I said, are the ones that have like some narrative about their dog and you can tell it's just because they love their dog so much"*. Interestingly, crafting stories and narratives about their dogs may also assist individuals in garnering more followers. Lund *et al.* (2018) explains that a post with a captivating narrative has the potential to go viral and spread globally, reaching beyond an individual's immediate network. Dogs have the power to excite and emotionally connect with people and this strong dog-human relationship can create a deeper connection between a personal brand and its viewer/consumer (Baunwart, 2015; Cramer, 2018).

4.3.2 Online Inclusion

The researcher attempted to establish the following regarding how the participants included their dogs in their online posts:

- a. How often do they include their dogs in their online posts?
- b. Do they only include their dogs in their posts, or do they include themselves with their dogs in each post?

- c. Lastly, do they include them spontaneously or is the inclusion planned?

When asked how frequently they included their dogs, the overwhelming response was that they did so on a regular to almost constant basis: *“And maybe like every second post will be about them”* (Participant 4), and:

Yeah, 70% to 80% of the time. And I mean there is not a lot of photographs without any dog near me or sitting on my lap or next to me. You know lying on the floor. They are always with me.

(Participant 6)

Considering how frequently the participants' dogs are included in their online posts, it can be concluded that their dogs are a significant part of their online personal brands. The participants' dogs form part of their online identity and image, which they share with the outside world.

When attempting to determine whether the participants made a point of including posts that only featured their dogs or if the majority of their posts included themselves with their dogs, Participants 1, 2 and 5 mentioned the following: *“But sometimes I do force them into selfies with me (cheerful laughing)”*, *“Um I think a bit of both so there is, there are posts of the two of them together, there is posts maybe of them individually and then there's also posts of us with them. I think it's a mix”*, and: *“If I take a landscape, I'll include them in the landscape, but they're not...many of them that I don't have a landscape I just got a dog.”* Most of the participants concluded that their social media feeds reveal a combination of both. In some of their posts, it is just their dogs and then some posts include them and their dogs. Interestingly some of the participants mentioned that they prefer not to include themselves in their posts: *“Often, I'll do a selfie with a dog. But then I get embarrassed, and I feel I'm being too vain to do it all the time. And I would post more of my dogs...”* (Participant 1), and: *“I don't know. I just don't like images of myself in the first place. And it gives me much pleasure to see them and to just remember...”* (Participant 5).

Lastly, when attempting to determine whether the participants spontaneously included their dogs or planned their inclusion, Participant 3 stated: *“I mean, they just happen to be there in the moment. Yeah, no, I don't go in with an intention”* and Participant 7 mentioned: *“Harley is playing with her tail and it's just so cute.*

So, for that, like, yes, it's content that now I'm going to create. But it was completely unplanned and whatever.” These insights suggest that the participants do not stage their posts but rather spontaneously include their dogs. However, Participant 2 mentioned that he sometimes plans his posts, especially around special events:

Um I think a bit of both, I mean, sometimes, sometimes it's sort of in the moment where you're lucky so you'll, you'll take a picture and you're with him or just of him but then sometimes you, you might have a picture that you're, you're plan and then at a later date, post. I mean, particularly around sort of events. And, and sort of memories, then then you might, you might have a planned post that you put up. So, I think it's a bit of both.

Although most of the participants include their dogs in an unplanned manner, the findings do suggest that there is conscious decision-making taking place when deciding which image to post or not. This insight implies that participants are consciously aware of the content they share, indicating a heightened awareness of how their posts may shape perceptions of their online personal brand. Existing literature reinforces this idea, underscoring the importance of images in conveying coded meanings to viewers (Gray *et al.*, 2018). This suggests that participants deliberately select images with the intention of exerting some control over the interpretations others may draw from them.

4.3.3 Curation

When asked if the participants ever curated or edited their posts, the responses varied. Participant 7 commented that she actively plans and curates some of her posts: “You know, like I did some reals a few weeks ago and it was all planned” and likewise Participant 2 mentioned:

But then sometimes you, you might have a picture that you're, you're plan and then at a later date, post. I mean, particularly around sort of events. And, and sort of memories, then, then you might, you might have a planned post that you put up.

Others were more interested in doing some editing of their posts before uploading: “It's boring if they are raw. I think I'm wanting to enhance the aesthetic to show my aesthetic values if you like. I think I judge people who just put a boring photo up [laughing]” (Participant 1). Based on these responses, it becomes clear

that some participants plan, curate, and edit their posts more than others, but all the participants curate their images to some extent by selecting the ones that they feel would portray them in the best possible light. When the participants curate, edit, and select their best images to post on their online accounts they do so because they want to strategically control the information they share as well as the impressions and feedback they might receive from others viewing their posts (Papacharissi, 2009; 2002).

When analysing the data on how the participants include their dogs on their personal social media pages, the findings suggest that they include them frequently and that they do so spontaneously. The participants concluded that their dogs are such a big part of their lives that it becomes apparent that their dogs are fused with their self-concept and identity. This insight is consistent with the literature in Chapter Two, which states that fusion occurs when people incorporate physical objects, accomplishments, and in this case dogs into their self-concept, which can significantly shape their lives (Havanty *et al.*, 2017). Surprisingly, none of the participants staged their dog-related posts, but some level of planning, narrative creation, and curation does occur before their posts go live. The participants do not just post their images randomly; they think about and edit each one before uploading it to their online accounts. This insight reveals that the participants care about what their viewers think of them and hope that their chosen images and stories will resonate with them in some way. According to Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2009), brand identity is a set of associations that a brand creates in order to maintain itself. These associations must be meaningful and resonate with their consumers. The participants curate and edit their posts because they would like to maintain their identity and control the way others might view them.

4.4 Theme Four: Social Media

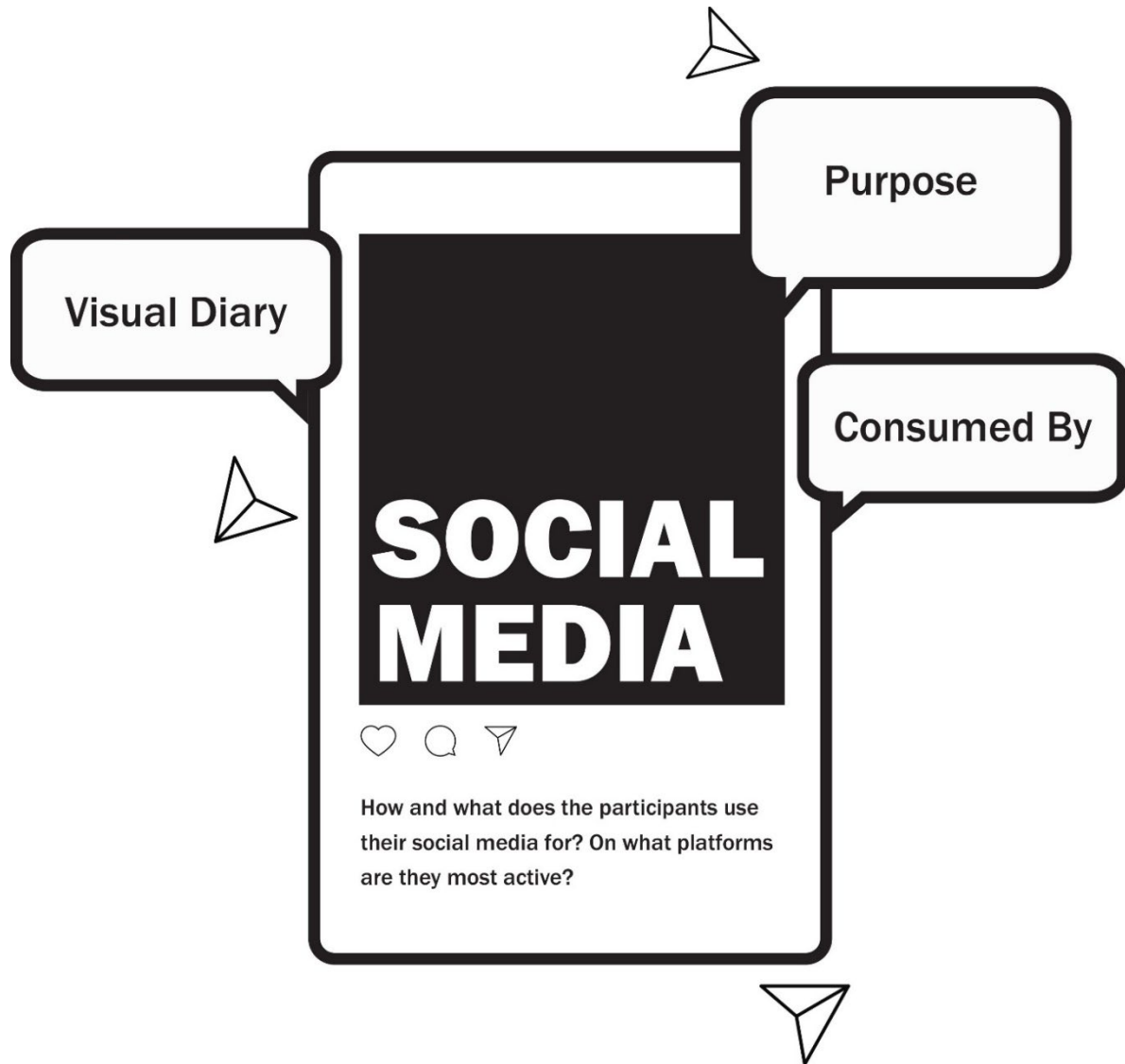


Figure 17: Theme four with sub-themes

When the participants were asked questions about which social media platforms they use and what they use them for, some interesting findings emerged. Instagram and Facebook were the preferred social media platforms, and the participants had different uses for each of them. Most of the participants acknowledged that they use their social media accounts as some sort of visual diary that records their memories or life events: *“Instagram is a lot like a sort of photo album”*. (Participant 5)

4.4.1 Purpose

The majority of the participants had personal online accounts on Facebook and Instagram, but they used them for different purposes. Research suggests that people use social media to communicate information about themselves, entertain

others, and build and maintain social ties (Stone *et al.*, 2022). Participant 1 acknowledged that she prefers Instagram to promote herself and to enjoy the freedom that it provides:

Um, Instagram, a lot of the people on my Instagram I don't know personally, and some of my friends and family are not on my Instagram so I like to have, almost that freedom from every auntie in my life. Like I say, I almost use it to promote myself to myself.

On the other hand, Participant 5 prefers Instagram because it is so visual: *"I think Instagram is different than Facebook and I, I very rarely post on Facebook. I think it's because it's so visual"*. Participant 4 mentioned that she uses social media platforms to showcase her life and share experiences:

I think it's like, I think it's about telling my life story, like sharing experiences, sharing new spaces or places that we visit. I also, like I'm quite a foodie. So, if there's new restaurants that we visit, I like to tag businesses as well. So, I think it's just like, it's just kind of sharing part of my life, on a social media platform through using my family memories, sharing memories, sharing photos, that kind of thing.

The above insights reveal that the participants use Facebook and Instagram for different purposes. Participant 1 noted: *"On Facebook, I use it to stay in touch with family and friends and know what's going on in other people's lives"*. Instagram seems to be the platform of choice for posting and sharing images about the participants' daily lives. These platforms are being used by the participants for self-presentation and self-expression, and they are treated as an integral part of their lives (Kucharska, 2017; Lindahl & Öhlund, 2013). Reasons given for preferring Instagram over Facebook include the fact that some participants believe it to be more visual and that they can be more selective about who they invite or accept into their accounts: *"But yeah from an Instagram point of view because it's private. It's really...selective people"* (Participant 5). Instagram also appears to be more aligned with the participants' personal brands compared to Facebook. When analysing the various other uses, some participants mentioned that they use their social media accounts as a sort of photo album: *"Instagram is a lot like a sort of photo album"* (Participant 5), while others like Participant 7 use it for creating content: *"Um, we love doing content creation and product reviews"*. Participant 4 sees her online personal account as a place

to be creative and to express herself: *“But just from a personal point of view, it's really just, it's not about creating content for me specifically, it's about... kind of using it as a creative outlet”*. Participants communicate, express, and present themselves through the use of their social media accounts by posting images and videos that frequently include their dogs and according to Gray *et al.* (2018), these images are powerful tools that convey meaning to others.

4.4.2 Visual Diary

An intriguing theme emerged when participants were asked what they use their social media accounts for. More than half of them said they use it as a sort of visual diary that records shared memories and events that they can later reflect on whenever they choose: *“Capturing a moment in time that I can go back on”* (Participant 2). Social media has evolved into a space of remembrance, and it now serves as a memory device, allowing people to reflect on the moments and events that they have experienced in life (Jacobsen & Beer, 2021). Participant 1 views her social media account as a place to record her daily happenings: *“Like I say, it's a record, a visual record of my days, my experience in life for others to see as well, but mainly for myself”*, while Participant 2 stated that it functions as a memory bank:

So it is, it's, it's not like it was 20 years ago, where you'd have to take a picture, and you'd have to have it developed and that was, that was it. Now in postings, and, and, and having sort of that memory sort of captured. So yeah, it's more, more that it's more of a, a, if you want to call it a memory bank.

Based on these responses, it is clear that the participants' social media accounts serve as a visual tool to capture moments and document their daily lives, and since they consider their dogs an integral part of their lives, they naturally include them as well: *“Like I said, I like to just capture a daily... like my day, whatever might be happening a normal day and they're part of it”* (Participant 1). By recording and sharing their daily lives on social media, the participants have become self-proclaimed publishers of their lives, which they share freely with the world (Rampersad, 2009). The active sharing of their daily lives online gives rise to several implications for personal branding. Participants, through the strategic use of images and stories, are able to mould the narrative of their personal brand

(Gray *et al.*, 2018), presenting a carefully crafted online image to their audiences. In adopting the role of self-proclaimed publishers, individuals engage in deliberate image crafting, allowing them to selectively curate and showcase aspects of their identity that seamlessly align with the online image they aim to project. Moreover, the creation of a social media account signifies a likely desire for an audience and a platform for connection (Schau & Gilly, 2003). The interactions, comments, and engagement received from others play a pivotal role in shaping the participants' online personal brands.

4.4.3 Consumed By

When asked if the participants felt they spend too much time on social media, more than half of the participants admitted that they do and that they are aware that it can be distracting and unhealthy at times:

I think everyone does. I think you have to start managing the time that you spend on social media, I came to a stage where it became a routine. You wake up in the morning, you go through your Facebook, you go through your Instagram... lunchtime when you have your lunch, you don't really enjoy your lunch, you go through your Facebook while eating your lunch. And that's not healthy, at night after work, you, you go lie on your bed... what do you do?... you do social media (Participant 6).

Participants 2 and 7 also mentioned similar sentiments:

I mean, I definitely think there has been times, especially when, when, when life slows down, you're not as busy, then you can maybe get, get caught up in social media and posting. I try to as best I can, when I'm working is to not, not sort of be on my phone too much. (Participant 2)

It's such a difficult balance to balance life and social media. (Participant 7)

These findings suggest that some participants find it difficult to balance life and how much time is spent being active online. Two interesting observations emerged when Participant 2 acknowledged that he sometimes gets caught up in social media when there is something he really wants to post because he is excited to see people's reactions:

But I suppose you can get caught in a trap, once in a while where you've got things that you really want to post and gets, gets to see the reactions going to be and then you maybe get consumed by that.

This insight confirms that people place value on feeling validated when sharing their posts online (Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar, 2018).

The second interesting observation was made when Participant 7 mentioned that to remain relevant on social media you need to be present all the time: *“And we all know if you're not present on social media like you're out the window, you know, people are on to the next thing”*. This statement suggests that some people work hard at being constantly visible online to keep their viewers' attention. Shepherd (2005) confirms this when stating that to create a successful online personal brand, visibility is key. Increasing online visibility not only builds brand awareness (Kaputa, 2012) but also enhances opportunities to connect with like-minded individuals. For online personal brands, it is a means to assert control over their narrative and image, ensuring alignment with their brand identity. Moreover, staying relevant and sustaining interest in the fast-paced digital landscape becomes achievable through active visibility (Shaikh *et al.*, 2018). Participants incorporating their dogs into their social media accounts may discover that their animal companions play a role in not only boosting the visibility of their online personal brand but also in maintaining audience interest. While increased online visibility has its advantages, it also implies potential negative consequences. Excessive online activity may lead to adverse effects, as some participants may find that much of their time gets consumed by the online space.

4.5 Theme Five: Personal Online Brand



Figure 18: Theme five with sub-themes

During the interview process participants were asked various questions relating to their online personal brands. They were asked whether they thought that their dogs contribute to their online accounts in some way and what type of image they thought their accounts reflect to the outside world. Themes that emerged included their views on what a personal brand is, online visibility and authenticity as well as their dog's contribution.

4.5.1 Participants' Views

When participants were asked what they thought an online personal brand was and if they believed they had one, the results were surprising. The majority of participants felt that they understood what a personal online brand was but did not consider their social media accounts to be their own online personal brands, as Participant 2 noted:

Yeah, I mean, I suppose it's... I suppose it takes on a different form than just a normal social media account. I suppose it's probably people who are far more in, sort of in that line of work where their brand is their, their social media. So, I suppose there's two different accounts, you've got your personal content, and you've got your social media accounts, or your brand accounts. Yeah, I mean, for me, I've never had a brand account. So, I wouldn't really be able to relate with that. Suppose for, for those that do have brand accounts its more, I mean, they're posting things that are really going to be buying interest, buying more followers, getting, getting more sort of interactions on their pages. And, and for the most part, to me, when I think of a personal brand, I think of these influencers, who generally are always promoting something. So indirectly, I mean, they promoting their own brand, but there'll be promoting something for someone else. And usually, that for me comes down to a numbers thing, whether they've got enough followers.

In agreement, Participants 1 and 4 expressed similar views:

I would say it's more values than image. Yeah, I'd say it's my, my, values, my life values that I am willing to share. (Participant 1)

Um, I think it's... with an online brand, it would be the individual being associated with something. So, it would be, be, whether you're like a model, when you're associated with maybe clothing, or a modelling brand. (Participant 4)

From these responses, most of the participants' idea of a personal online brand is that of self-promotion and they feel that their accounts do not reflect that: *"It is... it's something you put up there for the world to see. And I would say that not personally for me, because I'm not that type of person"* (Participant 6). Personal

branding is about self-presentation, which is accomplished through the strategic process of self-marketing (Chen, 2013; Kucharska, 2017), which most participants believe they are not doing; however, this does not mean they are not creating some sort of personal brand image online through their daily posts. These posts are coded based on social, ideological, and cultural context, and they all convey a brand image of the participants to their viewers regardless (Gray *et al.*, 2018).

Interestingly, Participant 3 indicated that he is always conscious of what he posts and how others may perceive it on social media:

I don't have a set look and feel and projection that I want to project. For me, it's just about what happens in the moment. Yeah, I don't uh, but I'm very aware of, very aware... of what you post and what it says about you know, I mean, some people you can just see straight up this person is a racist, you know, like, just, you know, and or this person is a narcissist, I mean, every post they do is, is a fake post.

This insight suggests that although the participants do not see their accounts as a personal online brand, they do package themselves online in the hopes of positively affecting the opinion that others might have of them (Lair *et al.*, 2005).

Participants 4 and 7 were the only two who had a clearer understanding of what a personal brand is. Participant 4 stated that she believes her personal brand can be perceived by others as family-oriented: *"But I think the ultimate portrayal of my social media and my brand is basically family orientated"*, whilst Participant 7 was the only individual who showed a good understanding of what a personal brand is and how to create one:

... you sort of think of your brand, and because at the time I was on social media, but it was just with Harley, and I didn't have a clue what I was doing. I was just like, messing around... was just totally for fun and what have you and I was like, okay, maybe this could be a new audience that I could tap into.

4.5.2 Dogs' Contribution

To investigate how dogs contribute to people's online personal brands, participants were asked if they believe that including their dogs in their social

media accounts helps them define their online brand image. Participant 5 even went as far as to state: *“And if, if they weren't there, then I would have no image online”* and Participant 3 mentioned: *“But yeah, I think, I think having rescues does say, look, guys, you know, lift up the downtrodden. It's a good thing to do”*. According to leading brand expert Kapferer (1997), a brand's value lies not only in its aesthetic and functional assets but also in its intangible assets. The social significance that a brand or product can represent is such an intangible asset (Mocanu, 2013), and participants are adding value and significance to their personal online brands by including their dogs in their posts. Most participants emphasised that their dogs help to define their online image, and Participant 6 even stated that her breed of dog is so much a part of who she is that they have become part of her identity: *“So it sort of becomes your identity, the breed”*. Products and brands are used to define a person's identity (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.* 2015), and dogs can do the same. Interestingly, since including her dogs in her posts, Participant 4 has discovered something new about herself: *“Or rescues as I'm, I'm definitely like I've noticed, especially after he was adopted, I can notice that I'm quite sometimes a keyboard warrior”*. If consuming brands and products can assist a person in creating a version of the self (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015), then dogs can do the same. Finally, in some cases, dogs can contribute by breaking stereotypes associated with specific breeds of dogs:

Yes, I think so. I also, I also think that, that given Lulu is a Rottweiler and the negative connotation that comes with that. Um, I definitely think that's also why we... well I use her as much is to just try and change people's perception of them. (Participant 7)

The above finding demonstrates how Participant 7's dog contributes by allowing the participant to communicate with intent (Schau & Gilly, 2003) to the outside world about her experiences with owning a Rottweiler in an attempt to influence people's perceptions of them.

4.5.3 Type of Online Image

When asked what type of online image they believe they convey to viewers, some participants said they hope their posts reflect an authentic, real, caring, and positive image of who they are, which is exemplified by these quotes: *“So, we definitely... I definitely try to be real and family orientated just family, family-ness”* (Participant 7), and: *“So, I think what I want is a positive, energetic, creative.*

Animal lover sort of image” (Participant 6). Others wanted to demonstrate that they are good dog owners and that the image they project is that of a happy animal-loving family:

Um, particularly because we do take good care of our dogs. And we make an effort of making... if you want to phrase it that way, we make an effort off of people knowing that we look after them, and they're part of the family and we do things with them. (Participant 2)

These findings suggest that the participants hope that their online brand images are received positively, and that people view them as honest and true representations of who they are: *“So, yes, so, I mean, I just, I don't have any hardened intension. I'm not building a brand as I said, you know, but I would like people to get a balanced, honest view of me”* (Participant 3). It is critical for a brand that its core values stand out and be immediately apparent to its customers (Kapferer, 2008). Similarly, the participants indicated that they do not want their brand images to confuse people and that their posts need to present an authentic and honest picture of who they are to others.

Unfortunately, it also became apparent from the findings that it is not always possible to portray a fully transparent brand image online. Participant 3 notes that people generally only include the good and the positive on their social media feeds: *“I'm sure people, a lot of people will see me as a tremendously successful business owner and all of that, but what they don't know is that I suffer from anxiety”*. Some personal brands, like product brands, struggle to create a clear brand identity and end up portraying an image of how they would like to be perceived rather than who they truly are (Kapferer, 2008). Including dogs as part of a person's online brand may help individuals create a brand image that is more genuine and clearer to others: *“And, and that often involves a dog, or a mountain, or a sunset, or a hike, or a supper with friends, or a birthday party, that sort of thing. You know, that's the stuff that's important to me”* (Participant 3).

Interestingly, Participant 2 acknowledged that he believes some viewers may perceive his online image as someone who is wealthy because he owns an expensive and popular dog breed:

Listen, I think definitely, from, I mean, it's no, it's no, it's no hidden

sort of, it's no secret that that they are an expensive breed, um, one to, to maintain and want to buy. So, I'm, I mean, not that, that's ever, would ever be the reason why I post that. I'm sure people do think, okay, well gosh, he's got two Frenchies. I mean, those are quite expensive dogs.

People view online personal brands in terms of what else is associated or affiliated with that brand, which creates a message and overall impression that viewers are confronted with (Kirilova, 2017), even if that was not the participant's intention in this scenario. He also goes on to say that his decision to purchase French bulldogs may give some viewers the impression that his dogs are some sort of a status symbol:

So, I mean, there's definitely probably, um, if you want to pull in a money element or cost element that people would think of and say, well, geez, that those are expensive dogs. The other thing would probably be maybe the thought of, oh, he's trying to chase a status symbol.

This insight implies that similar to high-value brands that can enhance a consumer's social status (Perry et al. 2015), certain breeds of dogs can do the same.

Participant 2 also raised the concept of 'adopt, don't shop', saying that he believes some viewers judge him based on his online image because he bought expensive purebred dogs instead of looking to adopt:

So, I mean, I suppose that that's probably... that might be probably the top one where people might judge from the point of view of well, why have you bought such expensive dogs when you could have, you could have saved one from that shelter.

This insight confirms that viewers form mental images of others based on what they see and perceive online. Personal branding is fundamentally concerned with people's perceptions of other people. Successful personal brands effectively manage these perceptions, expectations, and images (Rampersad, 2009). Participants 3 and 6 seem to agree with the notion of being selective in what a person posts because they both responded with the following:

I mean, you know, so you've got to be aware, people are judgmental, and I think some people that get turned off social media, because it

looks like everybody lives this fabulous life, and they get sick of seeing it. (Participant 3)

And that's why you have to be very good... careful how you portray yourself. Because it can bite you in the back. (Participant 6)

Participant 6's statement is in line with existing literature, indicating that the management of an online personal brand requires well-planned and strategic considerations when sharing content through social media platforms (Kleppinger & Cain, 2015). This is crucial because viewers tend to formulate their own perceptions while interacting with a personal brand's posts (Gujarathi & Kulkarni, 2018). Any uncurated or unplanned post has the potential to be interpreted negatively by the audience, resulting in unfavourable associations with the personal brand. Encountering unfavourable opinions and comments from viewers can also adversely impact the self-esteem of the account holder, as noted by Jan, Soomro, and Ahmad (2017).

4.5.4 Authenticity

This category emerged from the previous one, that examined the type of online image the participants believe they present to their viewers. When participants were asked what type of image they hoped their posts would project to the outside world, the word 'authenticity' or 'realness' came up frequently: *"Otherwise, I have like a feeling of guilt, like I'm not being authentic. So, it's an authentic expression of that day, which is highly curated"* (Participant 1), and: *"And I think that's what social media needs more of, realness and being real"* (Participant 7). According to the findings, the participants have very strong feelings about having a personal online brand that authentically represents who they are. Personal branding plays a very important role in conveying who a person is and what makes them unique to their viewers (Montoya & Vandehey, 2009). According to Goffman (1956), a person being investigated by others can exert control over the situation by expressing himself or herself in a manner consistent with how he or she wishes to be perceived by others, thereby strategically influencing the outcome of that situation. The participants are using and managing their online accounts to communicate who they are to others, and they hope that it represents them authentically.

Participants were also asked if they believe that including their dogs in their posts helps to convey an image of authenticity to viewers. Participants 2 and 3 responded as follows: *"Because they do... I mean, every day, they're, they're part of our life. So if they weren't included in that it wouldn't for me be authentic. So definitely from, from that point of view"* and: *"Yes, definitely"*. Participants felt that their online personal brands should reflect their real lives as closely as possible. It can then be argued that the participants choose to include their dogs as part of their daily posts to create a version of themselves that they consider authentic and worthy of being viewed.

4.5.5 Visibility

Visibility can be defined as people's awareness of another individual's personal brand (Kaputa, 2012). When asked if including their dogs in their posts increased the visibility of their online accounts to others, the majority of participants said yes:

Um, I think certainly, because I always hashtag dogs on Instagram. And that gets a whole bunch of other people who love dogs to buy into my account, I guess. (Participant 1)

Yeah, I definitely think that I mean, even from my Facebook account, where I have had um...where I think my pictures with Harley... um, and I've had random messages saying 'Oh, I love your dog like so cool, where do you get them?'... like that kind of thing so definitely attracts... is attractive to different people that maybe you don't mind that will see the picture and be like, I love the dog, like maybe I'll follow type of thing... (Participant 2)

These findings confirm that including dogs in social media posts increases the visibility of an individual's online personal brand. Some participants emphasised that their posts featuring their dogs drew more messages from strangers who would leave comments such as "I love your dog" or "Where can I get one?" Participant 3 stated that by including one's dog, a person's account becomes more interesting, thus attracting more viewers:

... but even if you're not a dog lover if you have variety in your feed and it shows a variety of perspectives that shows that you have different perspectives you're not focused on one monolithic kind of

life experience but you, you have different experiences and a variety of experiences that make you a more interesting person and, and being an animal lover definitely is one of those things for me.

Maintaining a visible online personal brand not only results in increased attention, as highlighted by Rein *et al.* (2006), but also has the potential to garner more followers and likes through a more visible online presence: *“Christiaan, I won’t lie to you, I do get excited when I see a new follower”* (Participant 1). This observation implies that some individuals find pleasure in acquiring new followers, and some are actively striving to increase the count of people following their online accounts. The growing number of followers serves as a metric for gauging the success of an online personal brand. It also signifies popularity and acceptance, demonstrating a human trait that persists despite evolving technologies (Machaz & Shokoof, 2016). Lastly, the majority of participants indicated that the number of followers and likes generated by their online accounts is unimportant to them, except for Participants 1 and 7 who clearly stated their desire to gain new followers and likes: *“Then I share it and wait for the likes to come in”* and: *“And since we’ve been featured on the Dodo, we’ve gained a whole bunch of new, new followers”*. Dogs can contribute to an individual’s online personal brand by making it more visible, and through being more visible, it has the potential to generate more attention, create fans, and generate new opportunities (Rein *et al.*, 2006).

4.6 Theme Six: Responses

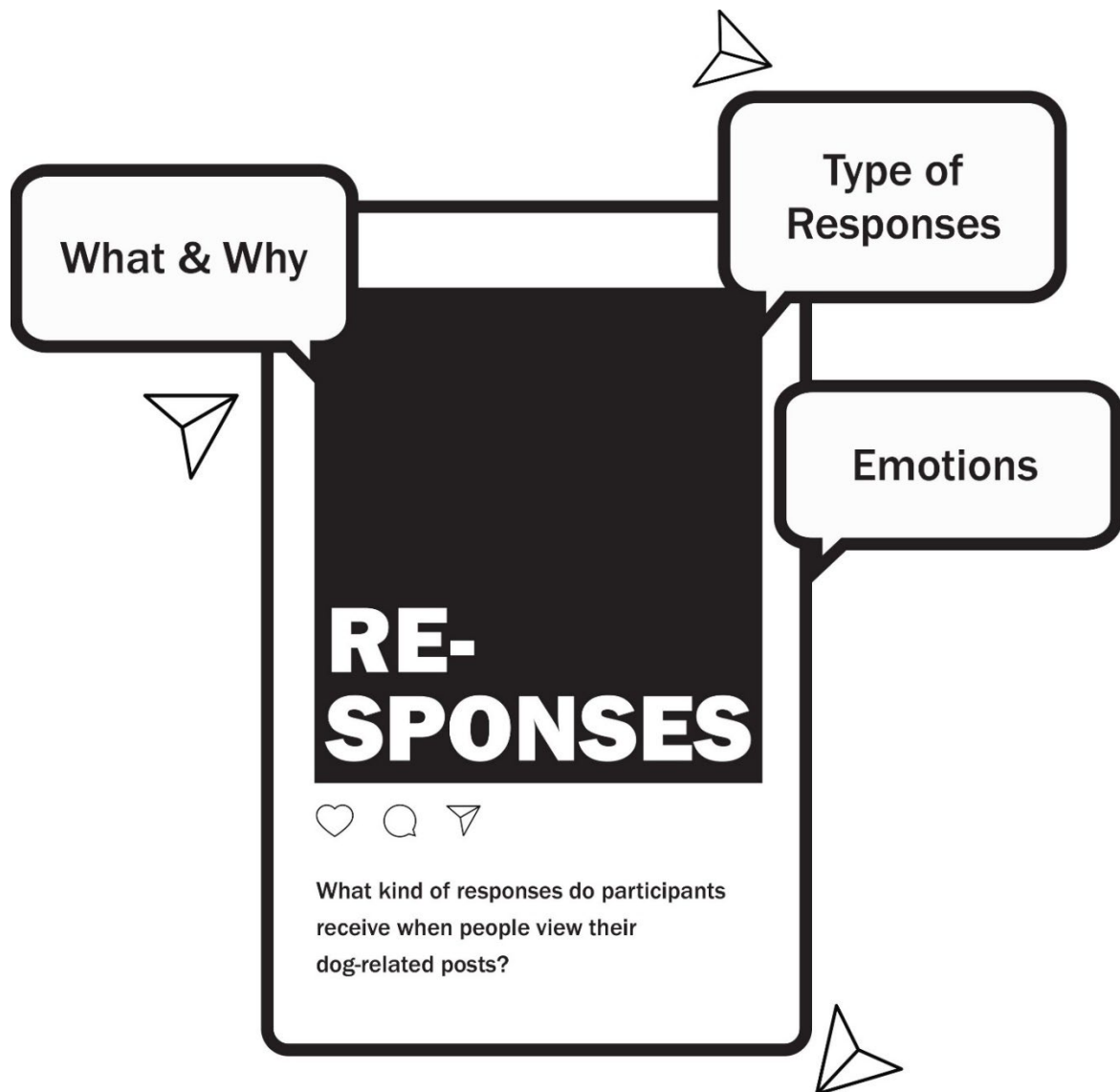


Figure 19: Theme six with sub-themes

The following themes emerged when participants were questioned about the types of comments their posts received as well as which of their posts seemed to be the most popular with their audience and why they believed it to be so.

4.6.1 What and Why?

In response to questions on the types of posts that receive the most attention, the majority of the participants' replies suggest that their posts featuring their dogs in some way earned a good amount of likes and feedback: "*.... popular posts have been me and Lulu*" (Participant 7), and: "*Any Cocker Spaniel even with me or without me, they get fantastic responses. Those ears and eyes, I mean really*"

(Participant 6). Participant 7 stated that her posts including her dog and her young daughter always garner a good number of responses, which she attributes to their close bond or friendship: *“And that again... and that will show you how much everybody loves Dorothy and Lulu together and their relationship”*. This close bond is possible because dogs play such essential roles in people's lives, one of which is to serve as a substitute for companionship (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). Another reason why dog-related posts appear to be so popular is that they evoke specific emotions in viewers as Participant 2 points out: *“... it's just friends that know the animals mostly, that, that it warms the cockles of their hearts”*. When consumers evaluate brands, their emotions play a very important part (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015), which in this case, can suggest that when viewers choose which personal online brands to follow or to respond to, they choose accounts that connect with them emotionally in some way.

Surprisingly, several participants believe that aesthetics and breed recognition play a role in their dog-related posts receiving more attention than others. Participant 1, who owns a Dalmatian, mentioned:

I think people are drawn to spotted dogs. And of course, there's a whole 101 Dalmatians, Cruella De Vil, all of that. It's a bit of a novelty to have a dog with spots, I guess, and then there is the Dalmatian community, I guess, who will immediately like another Dalmatian.

Similarly, Participant 5 who owns a Russian terrier noted: *“And it's beautiful. It's like a flag and you get so many comments from people on the beach and everywhere just complimenting her on this amazing, amazing tail”*. These insights imply that online viewers prioritise aesthetics or ‘cuteness’ when picking which posts to like and which accounts to follow (Williams, 2018). Participants who own some of these more popular breeds may notice an increase in social media comments and reactions as a result of their more recognised dog breeds.

4.6.2 Type of Responses

When asked what type of comments they generally receive from viewers or followers when they share posts including their pets, participants pointed out that the majority of the responses were positive: *“No, I think it's 99% positive”* (Participant 7), and: *“Yeah, it's definitely positive. I mean, I can't think of anybody saying, oh, what an ugly dog or like being negative about it”* (Participant 4). In

many of their online responses, participants noted that they received words of endearment such as 'cute' or 'special boy', as well as emojis such as smiley faces and little hearts: *"Yeah, if it's, if it's a funny, like my, my Airedale was quite funny... he used to sleep quite funnily and he would get a lot of laughing, smiley faces"* (Participant 5). These types of responses are consistent with the literature, which claims that humans have a subconscious bond with animals and that this bond, which includes complex feelings and emotions, is triggered when individuals see animals in the media or on social media (Braunwart, 2015). Participants 6 and 7 provided particularly noteworthy replies. Participant 6 reported that her followers were so engaged in her one dog's antics, who frequently misplaced his favourite toy, that they would continuously enquire if the dog had found it yet: *"Oh, did Harley find his panda bear already?"* Participant 7 stated that her followers enjoy seeing her dog and toddler sing together and would always respond with encouraging words: *"If I posted a video of the girls singing, it's like, 'Oh, we want VIP tickets' you know, 'When's the record coming out?'"*.

It is worth noting that Participants 1 and 2 both mentioned that some of their postings had piqued the interest of commercial dog brands and that they had received offers to collaborate with these brands:

There's always a lot of... if it's a good picture, I will get responses from pet foods and that, that want my dogs to model for them.

(Participant 1)

I mean, there has been on, on the dog's page on the on their feed, there's been interest from, from sort of brands where they've asked if they can do promotions and stuff... like we did, we did one or two when, when he was younger. (Participant 2)

Brands and advertising agencies actively leverage the human-animal bond to engage with consumers and establish various connections with brands. Animals are such powerful instruments for generating emotional responses that brands effectively use them to promote engagement (Braunwart, 2015).

Unfavourable or disapproving responses were few, however, two participants did make the following remarks:

One time I posted a picture of Harley doing, lifting his leg and someone wrote, 'How can you'? (Participant 1)

And I got one of those Karens that said, how irresponsible it was of me... like this paragraph like this, how irresponsible it is of me as a mom, to put Dorothy in the bath with Lulu, when, you know, having a bath is such a stressful time for a dog and, you know, being in that situation is just not responsible going on and on and on and on.

(Participant 7)

Interestingly, Participant 7 acknowledged that the small number of negative comments are the ones that she sometimes struggles to forget: “... *and you know, it's so funny, you get reams and reams of positive comments and they sort of just go by the wayside, but it's always those handful of negative comments that stick in your mind*”.

4.6.3 Emotions

All participants agreed that they appreciate reading all the positive reactions to their posts and that it fills them with pride and excitement: “*Oh, it makes... 100% makes me feel good*” (Participant 7), and: “*I will be honest when I get like responses from people saying beautiful, whatever, whatever...of course it makes me feel proud of my dogs and my photo skills*” (Participant 1). These findings suggest that receiving positive comments and opinions from viewers leaves participants with favourable emotions, which can have a powerful and beneficial impact on their self-esteem (Jan *et al.*, 2017). When asked why they think that these types of responses make them feel that way, Participant 4 stated: “*I think it just reinforces that they are cute. And it's not just all in my mind, because I think we can sometimes be biased, even with, even our own children*”, and Participant 5 noted: “*Yes, I think it's, you know, I mean, it's, it's nice, sort of recognition, I see you, type of thing*”. These statements imply that the participants see the positive reactions they receive from their viewers as confirmation that they belong (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012) and that they are not alone in their beliefs about their dogs. This finding aligns with existing literature that affirms the innate human need for belonging and recognition from like-minded individuals (Li, 2022). For the participants, their dogs serve as channels, facilitating the fulfilment of this desire.

4.7 Theme Seven: Ethics

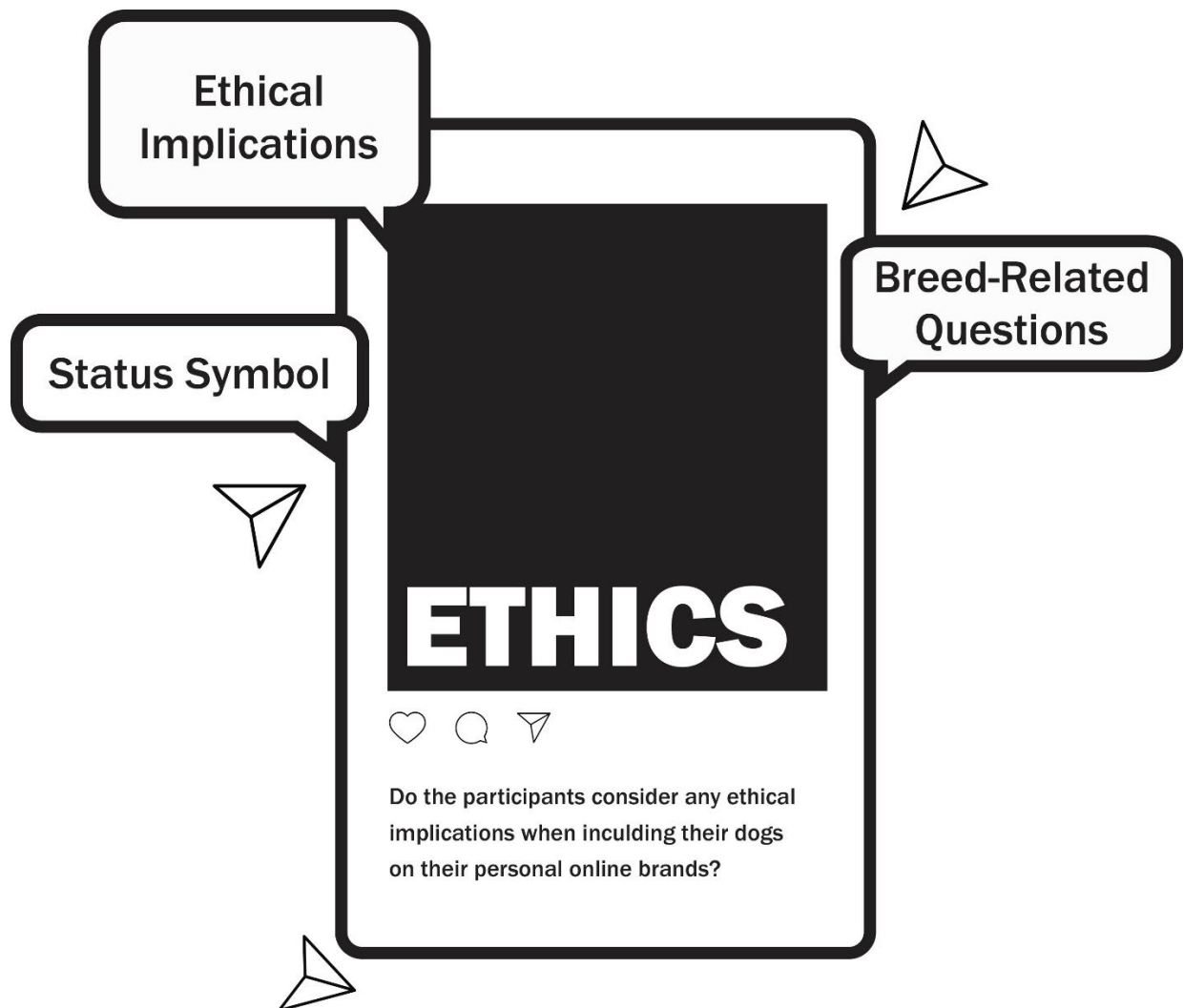


Figure 20: Theme seven with sub-themes

The participants' responses to the question about whether they had contemplated ethical considerations or potential ramifications of featuring their pets in their online personal brands were insightful. They revealed the diverse levels of awareness and thoughtfulness that participants applied when incorporating their dogs into their posts.

4.7.1 Ethical Implications

When participants were asked if they had ever considered the ethical implications of sharing posts featuring their dogs, the responses were varied: *"I think, yes, you know, people post without always thinking"* (Participant 6). Some participants felt that it was their responsibility to educate viewers on certain aspects when owning

a specific breed of dog. Participant 1 stated that because she owns a well-known dog breed, people, particularly small children, have a wrong impression of her dog because popular culture has portrayed this breed as a lovable Disney character:

And I think when I'm taking him for a walk and stuff, kids will run up to him because he's a Dalmatian. So, I will always say 'hashtag, not a Disney dog' for Jonesy, because I think there's, they are incorrectly perceived as being a friendly, happy, spotted dog, but he's actually quite aggressive.

She went on to say that she attempts to raise awareness about the breed so that people do not automatically assume that every Dalmatian they meet is kind to people: “So, I guess I try and create a bit of ethical awareness around that, if anything”. Certain dog breeds have become popular and loved through social influence and media exposure (Ghirlanda, Acerbi & Herzog, 2014; Packer *et al.*, 2017), which presents a problem sometimes because, like social media, cinema does not always portray reality. Media platforms, like movies, can influence what people might come to expect from a specific dog breed, which can lead to unreasonable expectations that can negatively impact a dog's well-being (Weir & Kessler, 2022). Participant 1's insight serves as a good example of how popular media can shape public perceptions of certain dog breeds, leading to adverse consequences for those breeds. The portrayal of Dalmatians in the well-known Disney movie *101 Dalmatians* is that of fun-loving, beautiful family dogs. Dalmatians were originally bred as working dogs with specific needs such as ample attention, space, exercise, and training. When individuals acquire these dogs based on skewed perceptions fostered by the media, they often find themselves disappointed as the dogs may exhibit aggression or unruly behaviour due to unmet breed requirements. Regrettably, these dogs frequently end up being rehomed or find themselves in animal shelters.

Participant 4 stated that they try and educate viewers about the various health issues that come from owning a Pekingese:

And also, maybe even with, with Abby, if I think about Abby, and kind of like, just kind of like educating around their health problems, I think that can also scare people away from the breed. But I think that in a sense, as maybe a better thing, that if you do know that this breed

does have health concerns, and you know that you cannot afford medical aid.

The Pekingese is a popular breed of dog, and more people are becoming acquainted with the breed through social media, despite having little actual contact and engagement with the breed. This is problematic since it limits an individual's knowledge and comprehension of the breed's behaviour, specialised needs, and health issues that can potentially lead to a dog being abandoned (Anderson, 2021). Some participants emphasised that they are aware that viewers might be attracted to large dog breeds on social media and that through their posts they want to show that these breeds need to be well trained:

I think everything I post has the underpinning of... if you have a big dog like a Black Russian, that it needs to be meticulously trained. That for me is the standard. If you don't want to put in the work, then you shouldn't have it. (Participant 5)

Literature states that the physical aesthetics of a dog seem to be more important when selecting a certain breed of dog than its specific needs or whether it matches a person's lifestyle, which can lead to dogs ending up in shelters (Anderson, 2021).

The opportunity to make money by including dogs on social media was also highlighted in the responses from some of the participants, especially when commercial brands approached them about brand collaborations. The following observations were made by Participants 1 and 5:

You know what, I don't know about this whole, like, these dog food places, and that they DM us to become a model for them and whatever. I personally think I might have a bit... I might judge that a bit like... Now I'm trying to make money off my dogs? (Participant 1)
The only thing I don't like sometimes is the... a brand. People who actually use it for brand purposes of silly clothes. (Participant 5)

Based on these insights, it appears that some participants had ethical reservations about allowing brands to use dogs to market products while also profiting in some way. Dogs are being used by brands to engage with more consumers because they have the capacity to excite and create a much deeper connection with people (Braunwart, 2015).

Another ethical consideration raised by some participants was the notion that some people choose their breed and type of dog for reasons other than companionship. Some of the reasons given include breed popularity and portraying a specific image on social media:

But yeah, I get what you're saying. I suppose you could start questioning that, are people doing it really for the right reasons? Or is it just to look good on social media, kind of thing. (Participant 2)

So, if you've got a human being that doesn't actually care that much about animals doesn't love them cannot see... Then you know, like Paris Hilton, with a little dog. It's about... remember, she was like, bringing this little dog, flash, flash, flash noise, you know, like squashed into a bag. That's disgusting. You know, I just think that, that's, that for me is... if people aren't actually dog lovers, and then they, and then they use animals to build a brand, but then the dog lies out in the cold all night, you know, like...hmm. (Participant 3)

These findings suggest that the participants are aware that there are people on social media who are using their purebred and popular dog breeds to display their social status and economic standing (Harrington, 2009), which in their opinion, goes against the true value and reason for the human and dog relationship.

Participants provided the following reasons for the importance of being aware of the ethical implications when including dogs on one's online personal accounts:

So, definitely from a French bulldog point of view, there's... I suppose you've got to be very careful of what you post and how you post it because it's attracting people to want to buy into the breed, but not understanding the implications of that and understanding the health issues related to the breed. (Participant 2)

And I think there's a lot of fake, fake dog sites as well. And I don't think people are always knowledgeable, looking into the breeding of a certain dog and the parents and the health issues and things like that, they, they just want to see the nice picture, like you said, they want to see your cute doggies, whatever and you now, behind the scene, and it's costing me this and the health or blah, blah, blah. But that's not the negative side you are going to show, you are always going to show the positive side. (Participant 6)

Some online personal brands contribute to this ethical dilemma by exclusively displaying carefully curated, beautiful images. In doing so, they fail to reveal the true challenges involved in caring for certain popular dog breeds. The continuous emphasis on the positive aspects neglects the potential downsides of owning dogs with specific breed needs. This oversight can ultimately lead to negative outcomes for the well-being of these dogs.

According to the research, when people post images of their dogs on their social media feeds, they may be motivating their viewers to consider owning the same breed of dog (Anderson, 2021), which can be problematic as the viewers might not be educated on the breed's specific requirements. Social media and popular culture can have a significant impact on the popularity of certain dog breeds (Anderson, 2021), which can also lead to a demand for puppies:

And, and definitely, I mean, you'll, you'll come across posts of breeders that are promoting litters and, and you do question, I mean, are they, are they ethically breeding or are they just breeding for, for the sake of making money, and then, and then you've got people who are buying into those, into those sort of backyard sort of breeders, which isn't good. (Participant 2)

From the literature and the responses above, people can be encouraged to acquire certain popular dog breeds such as French bulldogs and huskies by observing social media accounts that frequently feature these breeds. When the demand for these breeds increases, consumers are unwilling to wait for ethically bred puppies and instead obtain inferior dogs at a lower cost from backyard breeders. Participant 5 affirms this by stating: *"So that is definitely a concern if you are going for a popular type breed."* When people purchase puppies from unethical breeders, they risk obtaining a puppy with a variety of health conditions, which could lead to the puppy being abandoned at a shelter later in life: *"I can think of something like a French bulldog and a poodle, and huskies and Great Danes. And, you know, you have specific rescues for huskies in Cape Town"* (Participant 5).

Unknowingly, some of the participants might be creating a demand for their dog breeds by frequently posting pictures of their dogs on their social media accounts. Surprisingly, the demand for puppies may also be fuelled by difficult-to-find or

unusual canine breeds: *“And because both the Black Russian and the Airedales are rare breeds, I don't think the backyard breeding thing ever crossed my mind about them. Because there are literally, I think, three breeders in the country”* (Participant 5).

Some participants mentioned prioritising awareness when including one's dogs on social media. Participant 4 stated that people should be mindful of how visible their dog and surroundings are when they share their posts as well as the consequences of not doing so:

Um... ethicality... so, I mean, I don't really know if like, for example, with regard to the smaller breeds that like you could potentially make your dog's visible for people who might be looking, and especially if you tag kind of where you stay. That would kind of open up the gate to dog baiting [...] So, I think it's with regards to ethics there, it's just kind of considering, like, what are you posting? How are you posting? Do people know where you live?

Finally, participants shared their thoughts on placing dogs in specific situations for the sake of a good photograph:

Talking about babies and children, it is something that makes me cringe. And I have unfollowed accounts because of the fact that, that some of them might, unwittingly... think that it's okay to leave a baby and a dog together. (Participant 5)

Would ethical now mean putting your dog in a weird position or dressing the dog up, which is not really normal, except if you had a little Yorkie, and your name is Paris Hilton. (Participant 6)

Based on all the findings, the participants had strong opinions about what they considered ethical behaviour when sharing or creating images of their pets online. All of the participants were opposed to any behaviour that may be considered damaging to their dogs, such as forcing their dogs to be in specific positions or even dressing up their dogs. Some of the literature supports the participants' reactions by stating that when people attach human-like attributes, amenities, and things to dogs, they deprive them of their doggish needs (Vänskä, 2016). Dressing up dogs and placing them in unnatural circumstances can be seen as calculated constructs and stripping them of their dignity by some (Teitel, 2016).

4.7.2 Breed-Related Questions

Participants were asked during the interview process if they ever receive dog breed-related questions and comments from people when they include their dogs in their posts. Most of the explanations for the viewers' inquiries reinforce the premise that social media is a platform that fosters the demand for popular breed puppies, as demonstrated earlier in the research. Participant 2 mentioned that the most frequent question regarding his posts was where he obtained his dog:

So, the, the most common conversation would be, 'Oh, where did you get your dog from?' And then, 'Do you know a breeder,' or, 'Do you know if the breeder has any litters, or do you have their contact details?', that kind of thing.

On a positive note, several of the comments revealed that viewers ask breed-related questions to learn more about the breed or to seek advice from dog owners who own that specific type of dog:

I've got quite a lot of new followers, and they've had Rotties and they're like, ah it brings back so many memories with your daughter and Lulu, and you know, they grew up or their children grew up, and now they have grandchildren, you know, so I find that it, it's more, they've had Rottweilers, or they have Rottweilers, and maybe it'll be like an advice question. (Participant 7).

The responses suggest that social media has a significant role in influencing people's dog selection processes (Anderson, 2021) by either highlighting a specific breed or assisting potential owners in knowing more about a specific breed of dog before making a purchase. Individuals who include their dogs on their online personal brands should therefore be aware of the possible ethical implications that their actions can have on dogs.

4.7.3 Status Symbol

Lastly, two of the participants noted that some people perceive specific dog breeds as status symbols and utilise their dogs on social media platforms to increase their personal notoriety online. According to Sanders (1990), pedigree dogs symbolise status and social privilege to this day because they are still perceived as unique and expensive. Participant 2 mentioned that some people might view his posts and think that his choice of dog breed indicates wealth and

status: *“Well, geez, that those are expensive dogs. The other thing would probably be maybe the thought of, oh, he's trying to chase a status symbol”*, and Participant 4 stated: *“Whereas I think people who... people who feel that their pets are like symbols”*. From an ethical standpoint this can be problematic as Participant 2 explains:

... particularly breeds that can be, like I said earlier, like a status item or... people will get them but not necessarily with intention or, or really loving them or having them part of the family. It's really just so that they can have a post with them every once in a while and people can say, oh, cool, they've got a Frenchie but not necessarily looked after the way they should be.

When people buy a dog merely for show, the dog's requirements become secondary, which can lead to pets being abandoned or rehomed when they start creating trouble because their specialised needs are not being met by an owner who was uninformed when choosing the breed of dog. Because of this negative shift in the value of dogs, it is easy for society to overindulge in pets, which implies that they are considered disposable commodities by some (Tripper, 2011). Control, authority, consumption, and status are just a few of the ethical aspects that must be considered when it comes to dog ownership (Beverland *et al.*, 2008).

4.8 A Summarised Table of Themes, Literature and Findings

The following table provides a summarised view of the analysed data and shows how the key findings, themes, subthemes, research objectives, and the literature connect.

THEME ONE: Context	
Sub-themes	Source/Authors
• Pedigree • Mixed Breed • Rescues	Sanders (1990), Saletan (2005), Dotson & Hyatt (2008), Forbes (2010), Bastos & Levy (2012), Anderson <i>et al.</i> (2015), Kavin (2016) and The Economist (2023),
• Type of Accounts	Rosenbaum-Elliott <i>et al.</i> (2015), and Machaz & Shokoof (2016)
Research Objective	
To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.	
Discussion/Findings	
The empirical data revealed that the majority of participants still own or have owned a pedigree dog at some stage of their lives. The participants based their dog selection on compatibility, aesthetics, intergenerational preference, or media influence. The type of dogs selected reflects the owners' personal values and self-identity and confirms that dogs are more than just pets: they also project a person's lifestyle or image. Some participants chose to own mixed breeds because they signify nonconformity in a world dominated by pedigree dogs. These findings indicate that an individual's dog choices can reflect social and cultural values, much like brands do. The data further revealed that the participants follow dog-specific accounts on social media for the following reasons: personal identification with the breed; learning more about the specific breed; and because those accounts reflect their own relationship with their dogs.	

THEME TWO: The Why?	
Sub-themes	Source/Authors
• Extension	Belk (1988), Rosenbaum-Elliott <i>et al.</i> (2015) and Hatvany <i>et al.</i> (2017)
• Connect	Sanders (1990)
• Conversation Starter	Dotson & Hyatt (2008)
• Community	Laroche <i>et al.</i> (2012), Dommer <i>et al.</i> (2013), Bould <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Li (2022)
• Share & Showcase	Tripper (2011), Rosenbaum-Elliott <i>et al.</i> (2015) and Stone <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Research Objective	
To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.	
Discussion/Findings	
The participants view their dogs as integral parts of their lives, considering them more than just pets, but as extensions of their own identities and as such they also include their pets in their online personal brands. This seems to align with the concept of the extended self where material possessions become infused with an individual's identity and image. Showcasing and	

sharing their dog's activities and moments with others on social media seems natural to the participants and is part of their identity projection online. By including their dogs in their online personal brands, certain benefits of this practice became apparent. Their posts that included their dogs facilitated connections with strangers, especially with viewers with similar breed interests, aesthetics or personalities. These findings confirmed the literature that dogs can serve as social lubricants and act as conversation starters. The presence of the participant's dogs had the power to initiate conversations and interactions, fostering a sense of approachability and connection. Lastly, data revealed that posts that included dogs could create a sense of community and belonging among like-minded individuals who share common interests, which can offer support and friendship.

THEME THREE: The How?

Sub-themes	Source/Authors
Narratives	Baunwart (2015), Cramer (2018), Lund <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Li (2022).
Online Inclusion	Gray <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Curation	Papacharissi (2009; 2002), Aaker & Joachimsthaler (2009) and Havanty <i>et al.</i> (2017)

Research Objective

To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.

Discussion/Findings

The study revealed that the participants included their dogs frequently, indicating the significant role that their pets play in their online personal brands. Their posts include a mix of content, featuring just their dogs, posts that include them with their animals or scenic images with their dogs. The majority of the participants not only posted images that included their dogs in their online personal brands but the majority of them created some sort of narrative surrounding their posts to engage, provide context, entertain or connect with their viewers. These actions seem to attract audiences who appreciate storytelling and the connection these types of posts provide. While most images involving their dogs are taken spontaneously, some level of planning, curation, and editing is involved that reflects a desire to maintain a specific brand image and control the impression their posts create in the minds of their viewers. These findings suggest that the use of narratives and curated images contributes to creating a meaningful connection between the participants and their viewers, fostering engagement and a specific online personal brand.

THEME FOUR: Social Media

Sub-themes	Source/Authors
Purpose	Lindahl & Öhlund (2013), Kucharska (2017), Gray <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Stone <i>et al.</i> (2022)
Visual Diary	Schau & Gilly (2003), Rampersad (2009), Gray <i>et al.</i> (2018) and Jacobsen & Beer (2021)
Consumed By	Shepherd (2005), Kaputa (2012), Amichai-Hamburger & Etgar (2018) and Shaikn <i>et al.</i> (2018)

Research Objective

To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.

Discussion/Findings

The findings of the study revealed that the participants mostly use Facebook to stay in touch with family and friends and that they prefer to use Instagram for self-presentation, creative

expression, and sharing their life experiences. The majority of the participants viewed their social media accounts as a visual diary or memory bank of sorts where they could document and reflect on their shared memories. Because they view their dogs as being integral to their daily lives, the participants naturally include their animals in these visual records. The majority of the participants recognised that the excessive use of social media can be seen as a problem and that there is a need to manage the time spent on these platforms. Interestingly, some participants mentioned that it can be difficult to balance the time spent on their online personal brands and staying visible to maintain relevance in a very competitive environment.

THEME FIVE: Personal Online Branding

Sub-themes	Source/Authors
Participants Views	Lair <i>et al.</i> (2005), Chen (2013), Kucharska (2017) and Gray <i>et al.</i> (2018)
Dogs Contribution	Kapferer (1997), Schau & Gilly (2003) Mocanu (2013) and Rosenbaum-Elliott <i>et al.</i> (2015)
Type of Online Image	Kapferer (2008), Rampersad (2009), Kleppinger & Cain (2015), Perry <i>et al.</i> (2015), Jan <i>et al.</i> (2017), Kirilova (2017) and Gujarathi & Kulkarni (2018)
Authenticity	Goffman (1956) and Montoya & Vandehey (2009)
Visibility	Rein <i>et al.</i> (2006), Kaputa (2012) and Machaz & Shokoof (2016)

Research Objective

To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.

Discussion/Findings

Interestingly, the empirical data revealed that most of the participants understood the concept of an online personal brand but did not view their social media accounts as distinct online personal brands. They indicated that they feel that a personal brand is directly related to self-promotion and that their accounts did not reflect that. Participants did acknowledge however that online personal brands are often linked to values, associations, and particular images. The findings confirmed that including dogs in online personal brands helps to define and create specific brand images and the participants confirmed that their animals contribute significantly to how their brands are perceived online. This suggests that dogs can add value and significance to online personal brands as well as alter the perceptions that audiences might have of certain personal brands. The participants also indicated that by including their dogs, they allow for a more authentic portrayal of their online personal brands. The desired online image that most of the participants were hoping to achieve included being real, caring, and positive. The participants had a strong need for their online personal brands to be seen as authentic and transparent as possible, but this is not always achievable. The data suggested however that with the inclusion of dogs, some of these challenges can be overcome. Lastly, the findings suggest that including dogs in posts heightens visibility, attracting more viewers, engagement, and potential followers, thus contributing to online personal brand recognition and attention.

THEME SIX: Responses	
Sub-themes	Source/Authors
What & Why	Dotson & Hyatt (2008), Rosenbaum-Elliott <i>et al.</i> (2015) and Williams (2018)
Type of Responses	Braunwart (2015)
Emotions	Nadkarni & Hofmann (2012), Jan <i>et al.</i> (2017) and Li (2022)
Research Objective	
To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are using dogs to create and express their online personal brands.	
Discussion/Findings	
Posts featuring the participants' dogs in some way or another were revealed by the data to garner a good amount of attention, likes, and engagement from viewers. Reasons for this include the human-dog bond that evokes strong emotional connections with online audiences as well as aesthetics and popular breed recognition. The type of responses that the participants received with their dog-related posts was primarily positive with very few negative reactions. Positive comments received contained words of endearment, emojis, and inquiries about dogs or their antics, whilst the scarce unfavourable comments were centred around the dog's welfare and behaviour. The overwhelmingly positive comments received suggest that dogs have the ability to make brands more approachable and neutral and less likely to receive negative responses from their audiences. From an emotional standpoint, these positive responses and compliments contribute to the participants' feeling a sense of pride, happiness, and validation, strengthening their beliefs about their identities and their online personal brands.	

THEME SEVEN: Ethics	
Sub-themes	Source/Authors
Ethical Implications	Harrington (2009), Ghirlanda <i>et al.</i> (2014), Braunwart (2015), Packer <i>et al.</i> (2016), Teitel (2016), Vänskä (2016), Anderson (2021) and Weir & Kessler (2022)
Breed-Related Questions	Anderson (2021)
Status Symbol	Sanders (1990), Beverland <i>et al.</i> (2008) and Tripper (2011)
Research Objective	
To explore whether people are aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs.	
Discussion/Findings	
The data indicated that the participants considered various types of ethical implications when including their dogs in their online personal brands. Some participants felt a sense of responsibility to correct misconceptions about their dog breeds, particularly regarding temperament and public perceptions influenced by mass media and social culture. Several participants used their posts to educate viewers about the specific needs of certain breeds, emphasising health concerns and training requirements. This was encouraging as it suggested that some of the participants were aware of how exposure to social media can lead to impulsive puppy purchases. Participants recognised the role of social media in shaping breed popularity, which, in turn, can increase the demand for specific breeds, potentially supporting unethical breeding practices that can contribute to dogs having health issues and ultimately being abandoned. The data also revealed ethical concerns about displaying dogs on social media, particularly regarding their well-being, personal space, and dignity, with some participants noting that certain breeds are being used as status symbols rather than devoted companion animals online. The findings further highlighted the need for ethical boundaries when	

photographing dogs, and that a dog's well-being and dignity should always take precedence above the desire for an aesthetically pleasing image. Concerns were also raised about certain brands wishing to use the participant's dogs for product marketing and it was interesting to note that the participants had ethical reservations about brands profiting from such collaborations. Overall, the data revealed that there was some collective awareness among the participants regarding the need for responsible dog inclusion, portrayal, and consideration of well-being when including their dogs in their online personal brands.

4.9 Chapter Summary

Exploring why and how people are including their dogs in their online personal branding has revealed the remarkable evolution of the human-dog relationship. This investigation sheds light on the transformation of dogs from traditional roles as working and companion animals to contributors in the contemporary landscape of changing technologies and personal branding. When investigating the reasons why the participants included their dogs online, the data presented in this chapter revealed that they perceive their dogs as an integral part of their daily lives. Their pets have evolved into extensions of their identities, leading to a natural inclination to share, showcase, and include them as part of their personal branding that happens on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. By incorporating their dogs in their online posts, participants recognised that this practice has played a pivotal role in establishing connections, sparking conversations, and creating a sense of approachability among viewers that might not occur under ordinary circumstances. Additionally, these posts have allowed participants to feel a sense of belonging as they become members of various communities of like-minded individuals who share similar interests in dogs.

When exploring how the participants include their dogs in their online personal brands due to the integral role their dogs play in their lives, participants consistently integrated their canine companions into their online posts. The participants employed diverse methods to include their dogs in posts, with a majority crafting engaging stories and narratives. These narratives aimed not only to entertain and engage viewers but also to provide context. While the initial capture of dog photos occurred spontaneously, insights gathered showed that some level of curation, planning, and post-editing happened before participants shared their images online. This process suggested a deliberate effort by the participants to control and uphold a specific brand image among their audiences. Interestingly, the data revealed that participants employ Facebook and Instagram

for distinct purposes. Facebook is primarily utilised for staying connected with friends and family, while Instagram is the preferred choice for sharing life experiences, creative expression, and self-presentation. Upon deeper exploration of the participants' social media pages, it was noted that they view their accounts as a kind of visual diary, that is, a space to document and reflect on shared memories.

Upon exploring the concept of personal branding, the analysed data uncovered that participants did not perceive their social media accounts as conventional online personal brands. They associated personal branding with self-promotion, a notion they believed did not accurately represent the role of their online presence. However, participants did acknowledge that their social media accounts did reflect their identity and values, intimately tied to the associations and images they shared. Deeper insights revealed that participants recognised a distinct impact when incorporating their dogs into their online personal brands. The presence of their dogs played a pivotal role in shaping how their brands and their identities were perceived online. In essence, their dogs aided them in crafting and defining an online image that aimed for authenticity, hopefully portraying the participants as genuine and compassionate individuals. Further insights suggest that by integrating their dogs into their online personal brands, participants experienced a notable boost in visibility that translated into increased views, heightened engagement, and a potential growth in their follower count. Furthermore, participants disclosed that the overwhelming majority of responses to their posts featuring their dogs were positive. This positive response played a significant role in fostering a sense of pride and validation among participants, affirming their beliefs about their online identity and image. These revelations suggest that by incorporating dogs into their online brands, individuals can render them more approachable, consequently reducing the likelihood of negative comments.

Finally, the data explored the potential ethical implications associated with incorporating dogs into online personal brands. The findings indicated that certain participants perceived it as their responsibility to enlighten their followers about breed misconceptions, behaviour, and the specific needs of their breed of dogs. Recognising the influential role of social media in shaping breed popularity and

demand, participants expressed concerns about the negative impact on dogs' well-being when there is an imbalance between the demand for puppies and responsible breeding practices. Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with certain online personal brands that seemed to prioritise aesthetics and number of likes over their dogs' well-being, either by dressing them up or treating them in an undignified manner as well as using them as mere status symbols online. In summary, the data revealed a collective awareness among participants regarding the need for responsible inclusion of their dogs in their online personal brands, considering both the welfare of the animals and the potential influence on broader perceptions of dog breeds.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter Five concludes the research's key findings by addressing the research question and objectives. This study is the result of an in-depth exploration into the phenomena of people utilising dogs as part of their online personal branding. The research focussed on investigating why people include their dogs as part of their online personal brands as well as how they go about including them. In addition, the study examined the potential ethical implications that can occur when people include their pets on social media. This chapter also explores the study's limitations as well as how it will contribute to the field of branding. Finally, it will make recommendations for future research.

5.1 Conclusion and Contribution

The study explored the phenomenon of why and how people include their dogs on their social media feeds as part of their online personal branding. A detailed literature review and a thematic analysis of seven in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to discover several distinct themes and categories that answered the following question: Why and how are people using dogs in their personal branding on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and are they aware of the ethical implications of such practises for dogs?

To answer the research question, the research objectives must first be addressed. The objectives were:

1. To explore what personal branding is and why and how people are including dogs to create and express their online personal brands.
2. To explore whether people are aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs.

With regards to the first research objective, the study revealed that with the advancements in technology and the rise of various social media platforms, like Facebook and Instagram, the impact on personal branding has been extensive. Ordinary people now have the tools to shape and publish their lives (Rampersad, 2009) as well as their online personal brands with the touch of a button and the exposure is immediate. People utilise the Internet to actively establish and grow their personal brands, which are used for self-presentation and self-expression and are treated as a vital part of everyday life (Kucharska, 2017; Lindahl & Öhlund, 2013). Surprisingly, the study indicated that most of the participants did

not view their online accounts as being part of their online personal branding in the traditional sense. Many of them felt that the term 'personal brand' meant that they were actively selling a product or promoting themselves to their audience. Only Participant 7 understood and acknowledged that she had an online personal brand, and she actively strives to build a brand identity for herself and a brand image for her viewers. Even though the majority of participants were unsure about the existence of their online personal brands and the definition of a personal brand, literature indicates that personal branding is about the perception, expectations, and image that people have of a specific individual in their minds (Montoya & Vandehey, 2009; Rampersad, 2009). This implies that even if some of the participants did not acknowledge the existence of their online personal brands in their true form, it does not prevent their accounts from being viewed as such.

From a personal branding perspective, it was interesting to note that when the participants were asked if they felt that their dogs contribute to their online image, the answer was a definite yes. Participants acknowledge that by including their dogs frequently on their social media feeds, their pets help to define their identity and image online in much the same way that brands and products do (Rosenbaum-Elliott *et al.*, 2015). The study revealed that by including their dogs on their online accounts, the majority of the participants were hoping to convey a positive brand image that is real and authentic to the outside world. Some participants wanted to communicate family values while others wanted to show that they are advocates for shelter and rescue dogs. Interestingly, one participant mentioned that he is concerned that by including his French bulldogs frequently on his online account, some viewers might think that he is wealthy because his breed of dog is known for being expensive. The research also showed that the participants acknowledged that their dogs could aid in making their online brands more visible and emphasised that their posts featuring their dogs drew more likes and comments from strangers. These insights suggest that if a person wishes to establish and create a certain online personal brand image, including dogs can help shape an image that viewers are more likely to buy into. This finding is further supported by the human-dog relationship, which is so strong that it allows for a very deep connection between a consumer and a brand (Braunwart, 2015). The participants also admitted that their online personal brands had become more

visible and that they received more comments from strangers when they included their dogs. Pets can enhance the visibility of a person's brand online and increased visibility can increase the opportunity for more attention, followers, and new opportunities (Rein *et al.*, 2006).

The following was revealed when addressing why people use dogs as part of their online personal branding in objective one. The participants indicated that they include their dogs first and foremost because they consider them as an extension of themselves, a part of their identity, and members of their family. Research indicates that individuals express and define their identities through various possessions, encompassing elements such as pets (Frigiola, 2009). Because the participants' dogs play such a big part in their lives, it feels very natural for them to share, showcase, and include their dogs on their social media accounts. However, because the participants frequently included their dogs on their social media feeds, the study revealed surprising findings that can be interpreted as additional reasons why an individual may continue to include their pets on their online personal brands.

The research indicated and, in some cases, confirmed the literature that through the inclusion of dogs, participants were able to connect with people they did not know in the virtual space. Dogs aided these conversations by acting as social lubricants (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008), making it easier for viewers to like or comment on the posts of the participants. These insights suggest that if a person wants to increase the number of people who follow their online personal brands, dogs can help by facilitating connection and conversation. The results also revealed that the inclusion of dogs created a sense of community and belonging for some of the participants. Their dogs allowed them to connect with like-minded people and by continuously including their dogs on their feeds they received validation that they were not alone in the way they view their relationship with their dogs.

In response to answering how people include their dogs online, the study found that the participants included their dogs frequently and that they make use of a combination of dog-only posts and posts that include themselves with their dogs. These findings imply that the participants typically include their dogs spontaneously, lending credibility to the literature that their dogs have become

fused with their self-concepts and identities (Hatvany *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, the majority of participants also mentioned that they enjoy creating some form of narrative around their posts. These narratives are primarily intended to offer context to their posts, but for some participants, they also serve as a means of generating interest, connection, engagement, and entertainment as described by Lund *et al.* (2018). From an online personal branding perspective, creating narratives on social media has the potential to attract a global audience if it is deemed interesting and has enough appeal (Lund *et al.*, 2018) and for people wanting to grow their online personal brands, including their dogs might help their stories go viral.

Finally, the study found that while the majority of users include their dogs on their Internet accounts spontaneously, curating does occur to some extent. From the study, it became clear that the participants actively select and edit their posts before posting them. Although they do not stage their dogs to create a specific post, they do consider which photographs to post and when to post them, which can be considered a form of curating. Goffman (1956) argues that people can control a situation in which they are being viewed and investigated by others by expressing themselves in a way that is in a manner consistent with how they want to be perceived. Similarly, participants curate and edit their posts to some extent because they wish to influence how others perceive them as well as the impressions their posts create with their audience.

The research provided intriguing insights when investigating the second objective of the study, which investigated the participants' awareness of any ethical considerations that might arise while including their pets in their posts. The participants provided a variety of responses surrounding the concept of ethics when posting images of their dogs online. All the participants had strong reservations against any type of behaviour that might harm their dogs or deprive them of their doggish needs (Vänskä, 2016) in some way, like forcing their dogs to pose in a certain way for a good picture or even dressing up their dogs. Some participants felt compelled to educate their audience on the particular characteristics of the breed of dog that they own, while others informed their audience on the special needs and health difficulties of their breed. The need to educate the public about their dogs appears to stem from their understanding that

many people choose a specific breed of dog based on its physical characteristics and that they do not make a conscious effort to do research on the type of dog that they want before purchasing a puppy. When this occurs and the breed-specific needs of a dog do not meet the lifestyle of the new owners, many canines end up in rescues or shelters (Anderson, 2021). Based on these insights, it became clear that some participants were aware that their posts featuring their dogs could persuade viewers to buy into their breed of dog.

Another ethical implication raised by some participants was the awareness that certain people acquire a specific breed of dog for reasons other than pet ownership and that they use their popular dog breeds to display their social status and economic standing via social media (Harrington, 2009). According to the participants, this has an ethical element because it contradicts the genuine value of pet ownership and the dog-human relationship. Anderson (2021) points out that social media and pop culture can have a considerable impact on the popularity of certain dog breeds, which supports the data that revealed that most of the participants were aware of some ethical issues of including their dogs on their social media feeds, but not all of them considered the impact that their posts might have on the demand for puppies of their breed. This observation was reinforced by the findings obtained when participants were asked if they had received any breed-related inquiries from others viewing their online personal brands. The majority of the viewers' inquiries centred around wanting to know where they, too, could buy a puppy or whether the participant could guide them to the breeder, which supports the notion that social media might increase the demand for puppies and boost unethical backyard breeding.

In conclusion, this study revealed an intriguing link between personal branding and the inclusion of dogs on people's social media accounts. It draws attention to the impact that advancements in technology such as social media have had on online personal branding and how it has enabled individuals to shape and convey their identities online with unprecedented ease. The research revealed that the participants' dogs have become extensions of their owners' online identities and through inclusion, the participants are able to share and showcase their lives in an authentic and 'real' way. Insights showed that the participants' dogs play a significant role in establishing their online presence in much the same way that

products and brands do and, like brands, their dogs also facilitate engagement, conversations, and connections with others online, which contribute to the visibility of their online personal brands. By including their dogs, many of the participants had the chance to share their love for their animals with like-minded people, which fostered a sense of community and belonging while offering validation. The study revealed that the participants effortlessly integrated their dogs online and that they spontaneously curated their posts to reflect themselves in a way that aligns with their desired perceptions.

From an ethical standpoint, the study found that the participants were sensitive about their dogs' well-being and opposed any activities that may harm their animals in any way. Some participants even displayed a collective commitment to educating and enlightening their viewers about breed-specific characteristics, needs, and potential health concerns. The study also showed that the participants were aware of the ethical dilemma in which some people acquire certain popular dog breeds purely for their aesthetic value and to be viewed as status symbols, which contradicts the authenticity of the human-dog relationship and can be one of the reasons certain dog breeds end up in rescues or shelters. Lastly, some of the participants acknowledged receiving inquiries from viewers about acquiring puppies or the contact information of the participants' dog breeders, indicating that the presence of the participants' dogs online can inadvertently influence the demand for specific breeds, potentially fuelling unethical breeding practices. The study explored the exciting convergence between online personal branding and the inclusion of dogs in constructing online identities, revealing why and how people include their dogs alongside a consideration of any ethical concerns that these practices may have. By exploring and investigating this phenomenon it can be concluded that for individuals wishing to shape, grow, and make their online personal brands more visible, the inclusion of dogs can be a great strategic benefit. However, individuals including their dogs, should be aware of the ethical implications that it can represent and should always act in their dogs' best interests.

5.2 Trustworthiness

To determine the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, the researcher looked at credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Koonin, 2021). The

study aimed to be credible through the accuracy and believability of the data being interpreted. Credibility was achieved using recognised research methods and designs that benefit the research question being explored (Nieuwenhuis, 2020c). Trustworthiness was aided by transferability as the study made use of a sample size that included users with Instagram and Facebook accounts that all used dogs in some form of personal online branding. According to Nieuwenhuis (2020c), this assists readers of the study to make connections from the revealed data at all levels of a community. Transferability is also possible with readers who own any type of pet and who share and showcase those pets on their social media accounts. With regard to dependability, this study has systematically documented all stages of the research process from method to data analysis and conclusion in a precise and logical manner for readers to follow (Koonin, 2021). Lastly, the study is trustworthy from a confirmability point of view by producing data and findings from which its readers can determine similar conclusions.

5.3 Limitations of the Research

Sample representation can be regarded as a limitation inherent to this study. The researcher employed purposive sampling to select the requisite sample, not perceiving the lack of diversity as a hindrance. The study's specific focus is on the dog-human relationship and how it is applied online. If selecting a diverse sample was deemed of great importance it might have proven difficult to achieve, as the demographic composition of individuals who integrate their pets into their online personal branding appears predominantly skewed towards Caucasians. A United States-based study that examines pet ownership, conducted by Applebaum, Peek and Zsembik (2020), revealed that 70% of pet owners identified as White, while only 29% identified as African American. The researcher could not locate a similar recent study or documented information within a South African context. The sources that were explored only identified the percentages of the South African population that owned pets but did not segment that information according to race. A second limitation noted in this study is subjectivity. Researchers apply their own interpretation, data analysis, and theme identification, which means they could bring their own biases, preconceptions, and experiences to the study, that could affect the outcomes of the research. People may interpret the same findings differently depending on how they feel at the time, their social and cultural backgrounds, and other external circumstances

that makes qualitative research subjective (Mwita, 2022). Throughout this study, the researcher remained vigilant in acknowledging the study's subjectivity and the potential for their own bias in an effort to mitigate the potential impact on the study's validity and reliability (Bumbuc, 2016).

Lastly, the interview process in this study introduced certain limitations worth considering. The phenomenon being explored in this study is not usually well understood, and several of the participants gained new insights throughout the interview process that they had not previously considered. By encouraging the participants to articulate their thoughts that they have never articulated before, the researcher, at times, needed to make certain inferences to find meaningful interpretations (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016). The interpretive aspect of this process raises concerns about potential researcher bias, which Šimundić (2013) defines as any variation from the truth when collecting, analysing, and interpreting data in research that might lead to incorrect or unconsciously false results. Moreover, the success of qualitative interviews is dependent on the participants' ability to properly and honestly answer any questions about their lives, opinions, or behaviours (Blackstone, 2012), but in instances where prior knowledge of the phenomenon was needed to answer a specific question, the researcher encountered the challenge of piecing together fragmented information to derive meaningful insights. This dependency on participants' prior knowledge underscored a limitation in the research approach.

5.4 The Significance of this Study

The exploration of this phenomenon is of value, given the current lack of comprehensive research that investigates why and how people include their dogs in their online personal brands on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The findings of this study have the potential to contribute substantially to the existing body of literature within the field of brand communications and leadership, particularly in the context of personal branding and the construction of online identity. Additionally, the research can serve as a practical guideline for individuals seeking a deeper comprehension of both the advantages and potential drawbacks associated with integrating their dogs into their online personal brands. Lastly, this study might offer a glimpse into the evolving dynamics of human-dog relationships, shedding light on how online personal branding

influences this connection and provides valuable insights into the value of dogs within the digital landscape.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Research

As mentioned in the limitations section of this study, the researcher encountered challenges in securing the desired sample, which would have included individuals who actively leveraged their dogs to promote their online personal brands on social media – often referred to as ‘influencers’ boasting a substantial following of at least 50,000 followers or more. For any future research, it would be advantageous to replicate this study with the envisioned optimal sample and compare its outcomes with the present dataset to see if any gaps can be identified and yield any additional insights. Furthermore, it might be beneficial to consider including a more diverse sample group in future studies considering the wider South African context. Further research can also include investigating a sample that includes various types of pets like birds, cats and reptiles and so forth. Additionally, expanding the sample to incorporate individuals from various ethnic backgrounds may offer fresh and compelling perspectives and provide the researcher with new and exciting data, uncovering valuable insights into how various ethnicities perceive the incorporation of their dogs into their online personal branding.

In conclusion, this study explored and provided captivating insights into why and how people are including dogs in their online personal branding. Through analysing comprehensive data, patterns and themes it has become apparent that dogs today have become powerful allies in shaping individuals' digital identities. From enhancing relatability and creating connections to conveying narratives and increasing visibility, the presence of dogs in online personal branding offers unique opportunities for individuals who wish to express themselves and connect with their audience on a deeper level. This study has also revealed some important insights into ethical considerations and implications that should always be questioned when individuals and brands include companion animals as part of their online branding. As the relationship between humans and their canine companions continues to evolve, so too will the ways in which they are integrated into personal branding endeavours. This study underscores the importance of recognising and understanding the role that can dogs play in online personal

branding, offering valuable insights for brands, researchers, and individuals seeking to leverage this phenomenon effectively in their digital aspirations.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Online Participation Letter and Consent Form

Participation Letter for a Masters Study

To whom it may concern,

I, Christiaan Graaff am a student at **IIE-Vega** (a brand of the Independent Institute of Education) in Johannesburg, South Africa. I am currently conducting research for my **master's degree in Creative Brand Leadership** in which I am investigating the phenomenon whereby people include their dogs in their personal social media accounts. The purpose of the research is to firstly determine why and how individuals go about using their dogs as part of their own personal brands online and secondly to explore if people are aware of any ethical concerns that might present itself as a result from showcasing their dogs online.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study. In order to explain to you what your participation in this study will involve, I have formulated questions that I will try to fully answer so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any additional questions that you feel are not addressed or explained in this information sheet, please do not hesitate to contact me for more information. Once you have read and understood all the information contained in this sheet and are willing to participate, please complete and sign the consent form below.

My study has been approved by the IIE-ethics committee.

Important information regarding the interview process

What will you be doing if you participate in this study?

I would like to invite you to participate in this research because of your consistent inclusion of your dog\dogs in your social media accounts. If you decide to participate in this research, I will be in contact with you to set up an online interview at your earliest convenience. The interview will take about 60 minutes whereby I will be asking semi-structured questions regarding how and why you include your dog\dogs in your personal online and social media space. I will also be asking if there are any ethical concerns that you might have when including dog\dogs on social media platforms.

You can decide whether or not to participate in this research. If you decide to participate, you can choose to withdraw at any time or to decide not to answer particular interview questions. The data is strictly confidential and your identity will be protected.

Are there any risks or discomforts involved in participating in the study?

Whether or not you decide to participate in this research, there will be no negative impact on you. There are no direct risks or benefits to you if you participate in this study. If you find at any stage that you are not comfortable with the line of questioning, you may withdraw or refrain from participating.

Do I have to participate in the study?

- Your inclusion in this study is completely voluntary;
- If you do not wish to participate in this study, you have every right not to do so;
- Even if you agree to participate in this study, you may withdraw at any time without having to provide an explanation for your decision.

Will my identity be protected?

I will store the data in a safe online space and only myself will have access to the data. The interview is designed in such a way that neither you nor your social media account can be identified at any stage. I would like to ask your permission to participate and complete the online interview with me that will take about 60 minutes of your time.

What will happen to the information that participants provide?

The researcher will use the data provided by the participants to explore the phenomenon of why and how people include and use their dogs in their personal online brands. The data will also be used to explore if the participants are aware of any possible ethical concerns that might present itself when they showcase their dog\dogs on social media.

What happens if I have more questions about the study?

Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions or concerns about this research, or if there is anything you need to know before you decide whether or not to participate. You should not agree to participate unless you are completely comfortable with the procedures followed.

If you are interested to take part in my research please sign and return to me. Please feel free to reach out to me for more information or if you want to talk about the study.

Contacting researcher: Mr. Christiaan Graaff



Acknowledgement of participation

By clicking on the **YES** button below, I agree to participate in the research conducted by Christiaan Graaff about why and how people use their dogs as part of their personal brands online.

This research has been explained to me and I understand what participation in this research will involve.

I understand that:

- I agree to be interviewed for this research.
- My confidentiality will be ensured.
- My name and personal details will be kept private.
- My participation in this research is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time.
- There will be no repercussions should I choose to withdraw from the research.
- I may choose not to answer any of the questions that are asked during the research interview.
- I give permission for the interview to be recorded for analysis purposes only.
- I may be quoted directly when the research is published, but my identity will be protected.

Please provide your name and surname as well as email address (your email will be used to confirm a date and time that will be convenient for you to participate in the interview) below. Ideally the interviews are scheduled to happen in July of this year.

Thank you for your time in reviewing this participation letter.

1. Participant name, surname and email address *

Enter your answer

2. I hereby acknowledge and give my full consent to the participation to this study as stipulated above. Single choice. *

- ☐ YES
- ☐ NO

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

Semi Structured Interview Guide

Research Question:

Why and how are people using dogs in their own personal branding on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and are they aware of the ethical implications of such practices for dogs?

Introduction questions:

1. Which dog breed/s do you own?
2. What do you use your social media accounts for?
3. What kind of social media accounts do you follow online?

Why and how do you use your dog online questions:

1. What motivates you to include your dog\dogs in some way in your social media feeds?
2. Please explain to me how you decide on including your dog\dogs in your posts?
3. What type of posts gets the most responses?

Personal online brand questions:

1. What is your understanding of a personal online brand?
2. Do your dog/dogs play a big role in defining your online image or personal brand?
3. In what way do you think your dog\dogs help your image to be more visible online?
4. What kind of image would you like to convey to people that views your online account?
5. What kind of online conversations result from your posts of your dog or you with your dog?

Questions surrounding ethics:

1. Please explain to me if you think you ever get consumed/obsessed by posting online?
2. What ethical implications do you think potentially could arise with people using dogs on social media or as part of their daily posts online?
3. Have people ever asked you online, any dog breed related questions like "where did you get your dog"? or "where can I get one"?

Appendix 3: Ethical Clearance



Our ref.: c.10313

Date: 26 November 2018



Student name: Christiaan Graaff

Campus: Vega Bordeaux



Re: Conditional Approval of MA in Creative Brand Leadership (MACL511) Proposal

Thank you for submitting and defending your proposal entitled:



Exploring the ways in which branding has evolved dogs

We are pleased to inform you that the Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee considered and **has approved your research proposal conditionally**. Ethics clearance has also been granted.

The committee members made suggestions that can assist you with your study. These should be attended to under the guidance of your supervisors as per the attached feedback and the reworked proposal must be submitted for re-evaluation to the committee no later than the 31st of January 2019.

The committee confirms that **Dr F du Plooy-Cilliers** has been appointed as your supervisor and **Dr R van Zyl** as your co-supervisor.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the campus staff or your supervisor directly.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Franzél du Plooy-Cilliers
Dean: Postgraduate Studies

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