

Gendered Zootopia on Instagram: Curation of Pet Accounts and Identity Representation

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Abstract

The social media landscape is replete with images of animals that users share, repost, and like. The various nonhuman species that have become a part of the social media ecosystem are no longer merely models for different content formats but have their own accounts and become influencers almost like humans. Instagram’s gender-related politics do not regulate images of animals; one can hypothesize that pet accounts could serve as spaces, tools, and sources of creative content for gender representations free from stereotypes or undermining gender norms. This article aims to answer two main research questions: In what sets of actions is gendered human–animal identity performed in pet accounts? What curating strategies and platform tools are selected by owners to perform gender in pet accounts, within the limits of the platform affordances? To answer these questions, the article addresses three theoretical fields: (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) the politics and affordances of digital platforms. Based on previous research in these fields, the authors suggest an analytical approach comprising account architecture (content of the header, saved/pinned stories, and relationships with other pet accounts) and account content (format in which content is created and presented). The empirical part is based on the analysis of six regularly updated accounts run on behalf of pets that were active at least three months prior to the beginning of the research.

Keywords

platform affordances; gender; human–animal relationships; identity; Instagram; pet accounts; representation; social media

1. Introduction

The social media landscape is replete with images of animals (Lupton, 2023; Maddox, 2021) that users share, repost, and like. Various nonhuman species have become part of the social media ecosystem (van Dijck, 2013),

ranging from cute kittens and puppies to exotic dragon lizards. Some of these animals have their own accounts, which are run by human owners on behalf of their pets. Jessica Maddox notes that the use of animal “voices” is not a new cultural practice (Maddox, 2021) since, for instance, writing social letters in an animal’s voice was already known in the nineteenth century. Katherine Grier, in her book *Pets in America: A History*, provides numerous excerpts from letters written by adults and children on behalf of dogs, cats, and birds (Grier, 2006, p. 73). By the 1870s, animal “autobiography” became a popular literary device in literature, inviting readers to hear the voice of an animal in the first person, “to assume the identity of the suffering animal through the ‘I’ in the story” (Grier, 2006, p. 175). For example, Anna Sewell’s (1993) famous novel *Black Beauty* invites readers to immerse themselves in the autobiographical memoir of a horse.

Today, social media pet accounts that use animal voices are more than just a narrative or dramaturgical technique. Such accounts are not only created on behalf of pets; they also follow each other, like and comment on each other’s posts, share photos and videos, share experiences, and represent expertise. Some of these accounts have attained the status of “petfluencers,” which is comparable to that of human influencers in a certain sense. They are classified as “celebrity pets,” and their fame is not directly associated with human celebrities, as it used to be a decade ago (Giles, 2013, p. 119). The American Influencer Awards, which honors top social media influencers, has added the Pet Influencer of the Year nomination to its Lifestyle category. This category also includes parenting, LGBTQIA+, and couple-influencers, who impact people’s lives through their experiences and expertise (<https://www.aiaawards.com>).

This research focuses on Instagram pet accounts maintained by humans on behalf of animals. Human users can create more than one Instagram account, for themselves and for their pet separately, which is allowed by the platform’s policy (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). According to Instagram’s mission, it aims “to bring you closer to the people and things that you love” (Instagram Help Center, n.d.). Yet, pets are unable to create their own accounts to connect with the people and animals they love, which indicates that pet accounts continue, in some sense, the above-mentioned cultural practice of using animals’ voices.

Pets and other non-human animals are highly prevalent on the photo-sharing platform Instagram, where they are incorporated into a wide variety of visual images and communication practices. Digital culture researchers note that pet accounts emerged as an integral part of Instagram’s animalistic system (Leaver et al., 2020; Maddox, 2022) and became embedded in the creation and sharing of aesthetic visual content, which is the core purpose of this social media platform (Manovich, 2017). Since Instagram allows users “to curate” (Kompatsiaris, 2024) their accounts, utilizing not only visual content tools but also the option to choose the type of account, then pet accounts could serve as the stage for hybrid human–animal representations. At the same time, pet accounts can be analyzed as creative content products, digital communication spaces, and tools for representing oneself, one’s pet, and the relationship between them within the Instagram ecosystem.

As a part of social media, Instagram pet accounts are shaped by the policies, economics, and affordances of the digital platform (van Dijck, 2013). At the same time, the anthropocentric orientation of the platform and its algorithms (Poell et al., 2019, p. 3; van Dijck, 2021) is oriented toward human rather than animal creativity. With this in mind, one might suggest that hybrid human–animal representations in pet accounts form a gray area within platform politics and possess the potential to create a space free from stereotypes (including stereotypical identity representations), possibly enabling a “zootopia,” a space where anything is

possible. The concept of the internet as a space for the “plurality of life worlds” (Giddens, 1991, p. 83) has previously been applied to Instagram, “where multiple identities are negotiated” (Serafinelli, 2018, p. 151), and can be extended to pet accounts.

Multiple studies indicate that Instagram’s gender-related politics is unbalanced and biased, often favoring heteronormative femininity and masculinity over more diverse forms (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 24). As Caldeira et al. (2018, p. 28) put it:

Instagram’s Terms of Use, for instance, directly regulate what can be shared on the platform and what is liable to be deleted. They impose direct constraints over the self-representations shared on Instagram, prohibiting the sharing of images with full or partial nudity, of sexually explicit or pornographic photographs, as well as of violent, discriminatory or illegal content.

Instagram thus allows for less divergence in assigned gender roles, thereby reinforcing stereotypes (Aran-Ramspott et al., 2024; Fernández & González, 2017), complicating feminist practices for young women (Santos & Figueras, 2020). The construct of gender on Instagram also involves repeated body stylizations within regulatory cultural frameworks that do not expand but rather replicate existing gender norms (Caldeira et al., 2018). Moreover, stereotyped gender roles represented in social media are not only affected by gender norms and other regulatory cultural frames but also affect them (Caldeira et al., 2018), thus making identity performance even more complicated.

Instagram’s gender-related politics do not regulate images of animals (Instagram Help Center, n.d.); one can hypothesize that pet accounts could serve as spaces, tools, and sources of creative content for gender representations free from stereotypes or undermining gender norms. Our analysis of pet accounts on the platform focuses on performing gender (Butler, 1990) and representing identity, acknowledging that gender is not a fixed identity but rather a dynamic set of acts or performances: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p. 33). Multiple aspects of identity frequently interact and co-occur with gender, including social roles and biological sex. Gender performances allow individuals to uphold or challenge traditional norms. To analyze the representation and performance of gendered identities in pet accounts, six accounts were selected representing different social roles and biological sexes. An analysis of these accounts will allow us to examine how an animal account is built, used, and functions at the intersection of gender-related politics on Instagram, its affordances, and “*zootopian creativity*.”

This article proposes an analysis of Instagram pet accounts as products of creative curatorial work based on the performance of a hybrid identity, particularly around gender, and the affordances of the digital platform. The research is built on three overlapping fields: (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) the politics and affordances of digital platforms. In the subsequent sections of the article, we will first discuss each of these fields, shaping a framework for analysis, and then perform an empirical analysis of pet accounts. This article addresses two research questions regarding the performance of gender within the platform ecosystem, including its politics and affordances:

RQ1: In what sets of actions are gendered human–animal identities performed in pet accounts (what aspects of identity co-occur with gender and which gender norms are being undermined or reproduced)?

RQ2: What curating strategies and platform tools are selected by owners to perform gender in pet accounts, within the limits of the platform affordances?

2. Representation of Human–Animal Relationships in Pet Accounts: Performing Identity in Media

The cultural forms of human–animal relations in different periods influence the way that animal images function in the media (Grier, 2006; Ritvo, 1989). Therefore, an analysis of pet accounts should be preceded by contextualizing contemporary human–animal relations. Katherine Grier explored human–animal relationships in the late nineteenth century, highlighting key aspects of how these ties were formed at that time. She noted that the metaphor of companionship implies an active, peer-like relationship and a broader community formed through mutual recognition among species. Although pets can be deeply loved like human friends, their transient nature may create emotional distance, complicating the definition of “friend,” especially when applied to “four-footed” companions (Grier, 2006, p. 176). This dynamic can be reflected in media culture in various ways. Therefore, in the history of complicated and dramatic human–animal relations, attention is focused on two approaches.

First, in the functional approach, humans see animals as objects and utilize them as pre-industrial machines, sources of materials and energy within a logistics system, and tangible products. This means that “men depended upon animals for food, work, transport, and clothing” (Berger, 2009, p. 2). Braidotti employs the term “zooproletariat” (Braidotti, 2009, p. 528) to describe this form. This term defines the subordinate position of animals only to some extent because there is an ultimate alienation; the objectified bodies of animals are not only sold, bought, and exchanged but also consumed (literally eaten).

Second, in the metaphorical approach, animals are perceived by humans not as part of their own reality but are rather used as a signification system for Others or “to symbolize human identity and human values” (Baker, 1993, p. 34). Animal images as metaphors serve as a coding system for the “moral and cognitive bestiary” (Braidotti, 2009, p. 527). Baker (1993) analyzes the forms and types of images of non-human animals “as a ‘natural’ resource for saying-things-about-humans” (Baker, 1993, p. x), while Shukin (2009) interprets animal images in a fetishistic manner from both Marxian and psychoanalytic perspectives.

Researchers note a reconfiguration of human–animal relations under capitalism (Berger, 2009; Braidotti, 2009). Non-human animals are replaced by machines for industrial purposes but remain confined within an exploitation system rooted in classical metaphysics constructing a hierarchy of species (Braidotti, 2009). Consequently, non-human animals become associated with Otherness, positioned beyond inherently “anthropocentric, gendered, and racialized” normality (Braidotti, 2009, p. 526). In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams (2015) highlights parallels between the objectification of animals and women in a patriarchal system, while Creed and Reesink (2015) argue that media representations of animals imply those of marginalized groups. Thus, animals exist within the circle of Others, with both functional and metaphorical relations performed during this period.

The posthuman turn in culture and the humanities suggests reconsidering human–animal relationships by dismantling the hierarchy of classical metaphysics, including speciesism, proposing forms of interspecies kinship, “cross-species sociality” (Haraway, 2003, p. 4), and a “radical breakdown of the human/animal

distinction” (Calarco, 2015, p. 6). While this performative suggestion could reassemble human–animal relations symbolically, animals are still exploited in practice. Their bodies are part of the consumer basket as “meat,” and their images are used for cartoons, children’s books, memes, etc. Animals are part of the capitalist system of “cute economy” (Maddox, 2021), in which “cuteness” generates income following the platform economy (Lukács, 2020). Thus, animals in the digital cute economy function as tools of media labor used to produce “cuteness” that is then traded.

Human–animal studies (Belk, 1996; Greenebaum, 2004; Veevers, 1985) register a reconfiguration of relationships, primarily applying to pets. Veevers (1985) lists some of the social functions of pets: the sociability function, the surrogate function, and the projective function. First, pets serve as social catalysts, forming the base for various types of pet lovers’ communities. Second, “pets may supplement human-to-human interaction or serve as a substitute for it” (Veevers, 1985, p. 11), functioning as friends, partners, family members, or as “fur babies” (Belk, 1996; Greenebaum, 2004). As a result, human–pet relationships are performed as a “symbolic extension” of the human self (Veevers, 1985, p. 11). Animals, along with objects, are extensions of human identity, “clothing, automobiles, homes and home decor, the places we frequent, the people we know, and the books we read are also partly constitutive of our selves” (Belk, 2016, p. 50). Whether or not a human–animal interaction is intentional, pets become integrated into a person’s self-image and represent the human “extended self” as part of an assemblage with other individuals, places, and objects (Belk, 2016).

Simultaneously, digital platforms and social media have their own tools, rules, and policies for use, offered to users to curate their extended self-image and perform their identity. Digital platforms are increasingly integrated into human–animal relationships, “configuring animal-human-digital assemblages” (Lupton, 2023, p. 17). At the same time, all three actors (human, animal, digital platform) influence the configuration, which remains fluid. We will discuss these curatorial tools and the limitations of platforms in the next part of the article.

Instagram pet accounts run by human owners on behalf of their pets are organized through what we call, following Lupton, animal-human-digital assemblages (2023, p. 17). This indicates that these accounts represent the nature of human–animal relationships, identity performing, and media communication trends, including the politics and affordances of digital platforms. The approach (whether functional or metaphorical) and type of human–animal relationships (social roles) should be interpreted through performing “cross-species” identities (Haraway, 2003). Simultaneously, the identity performance requires agency from a combination of actors involved in the creation of an Instagram pet account: the human curator, the pet itself, and Instagram as a platform with its policies and affordances. This constellation of actors can be analyzed using Latour’s (1992) approach to understanding the functions of non-humans. To do this, one needs to imagine what humans or non-humans would need to do without the presence of non-humans. This imaginary substitution helps reveal the role or function of that object (Latour, 1992, p. 230).

To answer the question of how gendered human–animal identity is performed in pet accounts—that is, what curating tools and techniques are employed for this—we will analyze published photos and videos in selected accounts. Since pet accounts are analyzed within the context of contemporary human–animal relations and the user agreements and policies of digital platforms, we will perceive them as extended human self-representation. To reconstruct the acting of gender identity within the account, we will highlight the

functions and roles of both human and non-human characters presented, describe how their relationships are visually and implicitly represented, and analyze the platform tools used for performing gender identity.

3. Platform Policy and Affordances: Choosing Curatorial Tools

The third aspect we address in this research is the politics of digital platforms with a set of tools to curate one's identity by creatively using the possibilities that platforms offer their users. Simultaneously, platforms play their roles in the assemblages described by Lupton by presenting a set of tools, but also by promoting more variable interactions with these technologies.

The platforms, mostly created to be transparent in the technical functionality they provide, suggest that over time users associate a platform with specific expectations regarding what and how will be communicated through it (Hepp, 2019, p. 8). Such expectations, in turn, stabilize communication patterns (Hepp, 2019, p. 8), thus narrowing down the full spectrum of creative curation of representations. This process of stabilization of a narrower range of usage tactics is also supported by seeing commonly exercised forms as “natural” ones because the platforms are perceived “as coded like this” (Couldry & Hepp, 2016, pp. 51–52). Thus, the curation of a pet's account can also take standardized forms that seem natural for depicting either human–animal relations or human social roles through animals' accounts.

Some platform functions might not be used to their full extent, which reduces the range of curatorial strategies available. Here, we should take into consideration that the decision not to use a platform in a certain way may be caused by so-called “cultural constraints,” or limitations that forbid certain actions while promoting others due to social and cultural values and norms (Norman, 1999). As an option, it can be connected to a lack of platform literacy, when the curator simply doesn't know about existing technical possibilities or variations in the usage of a function.

Platform usage, in turn, does not depend on the curator only as the platform itself has limited options of what and how can be done by a user. Moreover, not all the tools and functions are explicitly shown on the platform, which leads us to the theoretical concept of affordances—the intersection of subjective perception of technology with its designed qualities. Some functions and tools can be explicit, which means they make *perceptible affordances*, “in which there is perceptual information available for an existing affordance” (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). The knowledge about the function, though, does not necessarily mean that a user will use this function, that is why we are talking about assemblages of platforms that offer some technical possibilities, curators that choose among them, and animals that also have their own limitations and agency in creating content. Thus, it's up to the curators whether they want to familiarize themselves with all the existing technical tools of Instagram or not. At the same time, the information on some existing functions might be missing, thus the users face *hidden affordances* (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). In case “information suggests a nonexistent affordance, a *false affordance* exists upon which people may mistakenly try to act” (Gaver, 1991, p. 80). This variety of user interactions with hidden and false platform affordances is particularly interesting to us, as it introduces flexibility in the interpretation of a platform.

Thus, a theoretical analysis of the reasons to (not) use the platform in specific ways is usually seen through the idea of affordances as a sensitizing tool for a researcher to reflect on the “interaction between technologies and the people who will use them,” paying attention to the characteristics of both the subject (human–animal

assemblage) and the object (the platform) (Gaver, 1991, p. 79). This concept also allows the researchers to have regard to social affordances (Falahatpisheh & Khajeheian, 2020, p. 2) as the connection between social structures, which in our case are seen through depicted gender stereotypes, and technical ones, which in our case can not only be analyzed through the description of existing Instagram tools, but also appear to be tightly connected to the body of the animal and what visual content it allows to create, the curator's level of proficiency in using the platform, and the chosen types of visual representations.

In our research, we will address cultural affordances as well as cultural constraints from two perspectives: (a) by analyzing gendered human–animal relationships acting in the selected pet accounts; (b) by seeing Instagram's "Terms of Use" (Instagram Help Center, n.d.) as a document representing cultural and social constraints as an additional set of boundaries.

4. Instagram Pet Accounts: Representation of Human–Animal Identity and Gender Performance

Our data collection was built on the following account selection criteria: (a) the account should be run on behalf of a pet, which is stated in the profile (in its header and/or account name); (b) the account should be active and regularly updated with new posts during the whole period of research—to ensure the selection of active accounts and to avoid accounts of a deceased animal, we decided to choose accounts that we had been following for several months prior to the beginning of the research; (c) consequently, accounts should not be completely new and have been active at least three months, providing enough content for analysis. Since our focus was on qualitative features of pet accounts and curatorial practices, we did not take into account such quantitative indicators as the number of followers and their activity or involvement, which are relevant for studying influencers/celebrities. Because of that, accounts with both several hundred and several million followers appear in the sample.

We aimed to capture various aspects of the hybrid human–animal identities within the selected accounts. As we stated before, we see Instagram accounts dedicated to pets as reflections of human–animal relationships. These accounts represent an extended form of human self-representation that includes both animal and human characters, their social interactions, and the exploration of their "cross-species" identities. Thus, to analyze the representation and performance of gendered human–animal identities in pet accounts and study the curatorial strategies, we selected six accounts. These accounts were grouped into pairs, which allowed us to identify and compare differences and common features in gender representation and performance regarding characters (both human and animal) and role performance.

The first pair of accounts demonstrate different levels of anthropomorphism: Zoey (@zoey_fatcat)—a cat that acts as a character herself, performing a cat-animal character; Noodle (@noodlesthepooch)—a dog that acts as a businesswoman, performing a human office worker. The second pair consists of Lenny the lizard's (@whosagoodlizard) and Honeybelle (or Honey) the cat's accounts (@princesshoneybelle): they belong to different species, but they play human characters associated with the service sector—a cook and a café customer, respectively. The last pair of accounts consists of Teddy (@aguyandagoldenn) and Tucker (@tuckerbudzyn): unlike the previous pair, they are of the same species (even the same breed—golden retriever), but their social roles (characters) and gender dynamics are represented in different ways. One of them has a male owner, and the other has a female owner, which determines the nature of the character performed in the account.

In each one of the selected accounts, 40 posts were analyzed, starting from the top as of May 27, 2024. The dates for the selected posts were random, but, as the analysis of the posts shows, the date does not affect the results of the research. The number of analyzed posts was determined after examining the average frequency of publications in the accounts. Usually, new content is posted every two or three days; thus, the selected number of publications allows us to analyze content published within three months. The analysis of the content published during this period provides data for capturing changing media trends recurring across different accounts, such as the use of the same sound effects (sound memes), music tracks, video memes, or challenges. At the same time, it allows us to identify repeated features in the accounts and reconstruct consistently performed identity.

Selected posts (published photos and videos) from six pet accounts were analyzed to answer the question of how gendered human–animal identity is performed in these accounts—that is, which tools and techniques are used for this by curators (pet owners) within the limits of the platform affordances. By combining the fields described above, namely (a) human–animal relationships, (b) the representation and performing of identity, and (c) politics and affordances of digital platforms, we propose the following framework for analyzing pet accounts, their content, and social media account architecture as a whole:

4.1. Social Media Account Architecture

Firstly, the content of the account header is an affordance of Instagram that allows the curator to position the pet in terms of gender or other attributes and to either employ multiplatform representation logic by including links to external platforms or create an additional account (there are cases when the link in the header leads to another account that has a paywall). In terms of the suggested typology of affordances, it might be seen as a perceptible affordance to show all the actors creating and curating the account but can also work as a false affordance in case it represents a reduced set of such actors.

Secondly, we focus on the presence/absence of saved (pinned) stories in the header above the posts: This is the affordance of Instagram to emphasize certain content. This could be a welcoming post with information about the account and the pet character, or the tool to draw the users' attention to some posts that are preferred by the account curator. If such pinned stories exist, we analyze their content as well. When used, it can function as a perceptible affordance, in case nothing is pinned it could also mean that this affordance might have gone hidden depending on the level of "Instagram literacy" of the curator.

Lastly, addressing networking and community development, we check (a) whether the account in focus *follows* other pet accounts and (b) whether they are *followed* by other pet accounts. This works as a perceptible affordance, since Instagram is aimed at creating communities, as stated in its policy. However, this might be seen as a false affordance, misrepresenting the agency involved in creating and curating an account. Such accounts can also serve as hidden markers of income, as not everyone who owns a pet can afford to maintain them. Moreover, these communities are not maintained by the pets themselves but by their curators, who manage interactions, support, and mutual following. On the contrary, this affordance is part of platform policy that leads to specific activities that would increase the visibility of an account, thus promoting it and having other pets contribute to the income.

4.2. Social Media Account Content

Regarding the format for presenting content, Instagram as a platform has this perceptible affordance to upload visual content, obviously used by all relevant accounts. At the same time, we see video and photos as very different types of content in terms of how the human needs to be present within the published content, so the pet can be depicted in specific situations or playing a specific role. In other words, different species of animals are able to perform certain movements or posture in certain ways while others are not. Thus, the physical characteristics of pets influence the selection of curatorial tools, which in turn affects gendered images in a pet account. Animals might seem to exist independently in their accounts without the visible presence of the human. Moreover, the use of the video format is a curatorial choice opening up editing possibilities and allowing the creation of more complex characters through the use of voiceovers, titles, and other elements. Thus, we will analyze the text present in the posts, although it is not the visual content that plays the primary role for Instagram.

As for creating content, the content illustrates the range of themes presented in the posts by depicting an animal in unique circumstances or during its daily routine. The imagery is crafted in a manner similar to that used in human Instagram accounts, featuring expressive clothing, automobiles, homes, home decor, as well as locations, people, and other elements. This curatorial strategy, on the one hand, highlights the nature of a pet's account as an extension of human self-representation in digital space. On the other hand, this is connected with the anthropocentricity of the platform itself. Moreover, if we focus on gendered identity, these Instagram accounts:

Not only exhibit the pre-existing gender expressions of the photographed individual—through their clothing, styling and mannerisms—but also create gender expressions in the process of taking the photographs, conveyed by the choice of what to photograph, how to pose, what facial expressions to present, etc. (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 27)

As we emphasize above, poses, and expressions are limited by the pet's species, so they may be unable to express certain ideas, but that encourages the curator to choose other tools to show (hybrid) identity. This choice is, though, limited by the above-mentioned cultural constraints or so-called filters, “the social norms and expectations, rules and conventions that shape our photographic creations. They teach us, often unintentionally, to mimic societally approved images in our own photographic practices” (Caldeira et al., 2018, p. 28). Thus, the curators are limited in their choice by the physical characteristics of the pets and their species, but also by their own stereotypes of how to create visual content that also has to be successful from the perspective of the platform so as to raise its visibility. As we read the content of Instagram pet accounts from the “animal-human-digital assemblages” perspective, we see animals and humans emerging as characters who play roles and possess their own functions. And these human and animal characters and their relationships can be analyzed as enacting identity.

4.3. Analysis of Instagram Pet Accounts: Architecture and Content

Thus, based on the described framework, we will highlight the functions and roles of both human and non-human characters presented, describe how their relationships are visually and implicitly represented, reconstruct the performing gendered human–animal identity within the account, and analyze the platforms' curating tools used for performing gender.

As for the social media account architecture, we see it as a space for performing identity and a set of possibilities for the primary positioning of the pet, particularly in terms of gender. The most obvious indication of gender we can see in the account of Teddy the golden retriever is that the name contains the indicative word “guy” pointing to the gender of the pet. However, contrary to our expectations, the header space is mostly used for promotional representation and is not focused on gender. Thus, all the accounts have some information in the header, but not all of them are complete, some of them are only partially filled. The type of account varies from a public person and digital content creator to a pet. The account header may also indicate gender and gendered social roles; however, it is not often utilized for this purpose.

In the account of Zoey the cat as well as Noodles the dog, gender is marked through the pronouns “she/her.” The indicator of gender can be also traced in the short description in the header, where Noodles is called a “queen,” whereas in the account header of Tucker the golden retriever, gender is conveyed through the role of “dad,” as he is stated to be a dad of another dog (@toddbudzyn) who also has an account.

It’s also important that the header space can be used to represent the gender role of the owner and serve as one of the first indicators of the animal-human relationships to be shown in the account. Thus, the relationship between Teddy and his curator is marked as family, with the dominance of a human as “father.” The relationship between Tucker and his curator is represented using professional media production language—through the verb “feature.” Moreover, Tucker’s curator calls herself “momager” in the header of her account, combining both the economic relationship with her pet and the parental role (also expressed in many posts where she describes Tucker’s actions as if he tells her something, addressing her as “mom”), which we also see in Teddy’s case.

Thus, regarding the actors involved in the performance of pet identities, this set of tools seems to be neutral from the perspective of what the platform offers, as humans are made visible in some cases and invisible in other cases—for example, through indicating “parents” or, vice versa, referring to the pet’s independence. A thing that remains invisible in all cases is the platform itself, although its logic of creating attractive, inclusive, participatory content affects the representations.

Despite these gender indicators, the header space is most actively used to promote links to other accounts (some of them promote specific platforms, for example, Zoey promotes her TikTok account), while others use Linktree—an external (in relation to Instagram affordances) tool that helps collect all personal links in one place. All six accounts that we analyze insert as many links in the header as possible. Such an unbalanced usage of headers to represent gender identity versus promotional info shows us that the curators try to strengthen the affordances allowing them to promote their pets on multiple platforms or promote multiple accounts and, since the headers are sometimes only partially filled in, they seem to ignore the affordances already available on the platform. Thus, for this part of Instagram accounts, the promotional function prevails essentially. This is supported by the fact that the header is largely used to promote collaborations (some of the accounts, like the account of Chef Lenny the lizard, communicate the starting year for collaborations—“Product collabs since ‘19;”—while others list the products they are promoting, like Tucker—“Tucker’s Products”) and the channels that should be used if someone wants to collaborate.

Most of the pinned stories and/or posts are used in the same way: they represent collaborations, contacts with the press, mentions by other accounts, or also ads. The number of pinned themes for stories also varies

from zero to 22 within our sample. We found zero pinned stories in the account of Zoey, which does not use many other affordances of Instagram either, while a maximum of 22 pinned stories is found in the account of Tucker the golden retriever and Honey the cat. Despite the variations in number of pinned stories, their content is still mostly promotional, whether the account has only one pinned story—like the account of Chef Lenny the lizard, published under the label “cool stuff” but in fact recommending things to buy—or there being many of them. Still, having 22 pinned stories makes the content more diverse. For example, Tucker’s account has 22 categories, some of which sell products, while others just depict Tucker’s character—for example, how sensitive he is to his curator’s physical state while working as a therapy dog for her. This account also uses two pinned posts to advertise Dyson and to describe Tucker’s spa routine. As such, the strategy of combining ads with something that describes Tucker is consistently used in this account but cannot be traced in other ones.

One more strategy that we could trace and that could be seen as a more professional usage of this technical affordance is having seven pinned collections of stories, like in the account of Noodles, as this number ideally fits the desktop screen and the follower can see all of them while looking at the page from the desktop, or four stories like in the account of Teddy, ideally fitting the screen of a smartphone. It’s worth noting that Teddy’s account uses this affordance in a very selective way, emphasizing only charity work related to the account and links to other Teddy’s accounts (Facebook and YouTube). Given these slight variations, if we generalize, this means that, despite these tools serving as instruments for identity performance, they are predominantly used to generate income for the curator. It’s interesting that sometimes this issue is raised in the content of accounts, as in the typed comment over the short video feeds in the pinned stories of Chef Lenny the lizard that states: “Full disclosure, I do receive a small commission on all of my recommendations, but I only recommend what I love.” The networking tools (i.e., follow other representatives of the community and be followed by them) are used by all the accounts. Let’s take a look at more details in several accounts.

Zoey’s header is partially filled, providing minimal gender positioning by including only the pronouns she/her and the main idea of the narrative (“I’m a rescue who loves to rock my bowl!”—and many posts actually describe the way the cat interacts with her bowl). It serves primarily as a promotional space, featuring links to other accounts associated with the same pet. We can see the link to her TikTok account in the description and a link to Linktree, right on the next line. This tool is also used by Chef Lenny the lizard. There are no pinned posts in the account of Zoey, but the account follows and is followed by other pets. The type of account states that it is a pet account. This is an example of the use of affordances directly aimed at promotion through link-building. Zoey’s account, which doesn’t use many tools, can be seen as less commercial and, according to the header, not so much focused on gender.

As for the two golden retrievers, both accounts actively use the header for positioning the pet itself, either through a concise description of activities—“Dog | Comedy | Travel | Charity”—or through such public achievements as being twice the “Pet Influencer Award Winner.” The header is also used to add external links either selling specific products or leading to other platforms, thus incorporating the pet into the economic approach to using animals, making them sell products relevant to the account. At the same time, in cases of both retrievers, the curators are explicitly represented despite our expectations that they might be hidden, although the roles of the curators are represented differently, an aspect which we will cover in the next paragraph. Both accounts follow and are followed by other pet accounts, thus reproducing one of the strategies to raise account visibility and exploit the hidden affordances of the platform.

Moving towards content analysis, we will first provide a preliminary comparative description of the selected pairs of accounts. We will start with characterizing the format (photo and/or video) and examine the dramaturgy (some visual, textual, auditory, and musical elements). Then, we will reconstruct the non-human and human characters performing gender roles and describe some of the curatorial techniques used to create characters.

Looking at the first pair of accounts, we find different strategies of content curation for gendered animal performance in the media. Both accounts belong to female animals (as stated in the account header) and are run by their female owners. But in the first case, a cat named Zoey acts as a pet (a non-human animal), and in the second case, a dog named Noodles plays a whole spectrum of female human roles (businessperson, beauty guru, gal pal, etc.), as if she were living an everyday human life in a TV show. The dramaturgy and narratives of the posts and videos from Zoey's account are quite simple: in the foreground, Zoey rocks her bowl; in the background, the owner sits and is in no hurry to serve Zoey. The owner's presence is not concealed; on the contrary, the pet-owner relationship is performed right in front of the camera. At the same time, the cat's image looks quite stereotypical, showing her as an arrogant pet who is the main one in human-animal relations and needs to be served. The gender aspect in Zoey's image is not articulated through the narrative as it could be absolutely the same even if either the owner or the animal's gender were different. In addition to the central character, Zoey, and her owner, the account features a golden retriever with whom Zoey competes for the owner's attention. The conflicts depicted in the account's narrative are not based on gender contradictions, but rather on interspecies stereotypes about demanding and arrogant cats and silly retrievers. The relationship between Zoey and her owner is represented in the account as a parent-child dynamic. However, this relationship is not a key plot element, except when Zoey is unwell or when she celebrates something (for example, a birthday). The techniques selected for the account curation are quite simple, as already noted, with few details such as special clothing or decor, and the posing is monotonous, contributing to a comic effect. Ultimately, Zoey performs the cat character with some anthropomorphic traits.

Noodles' account demonstrates different tendencies. It is a selling account, so the header is filled, the content is structured and styled, and the narrative is in the form of sketches. The pet performs the function of an actor, playing female human roles. The owner's presence is hidden; the pet plays human roles by herself, so human presence is redundant. A variety of decorative details (such as a desktop, a lounge chair, and a soft blanket), clothing items (including hats, costumes, and dresses), and accessories (like glasses and a scrunchie), as well as different locations, contribute to the expression of gender identity in the pet's account. The character performed by Noodle the dog is portrayed as anthropomorphic and feminine, curated by its owner. This is achieved through the use of pre-existing gender expressions in the media (including photography, cinema, television, etc.), such as posing on a sun lounger with a drink or in an image of an everyday beauty routine. The animal performer's body cannot represent all human movements, so the dramaturgy is based on short montages, using in-frame text and sounds.

In the second pair of analyzed accounts, those of Princess Honeybelle and Chef Lenny the lizard, human curators chose strategies of anthropomorphic identity representations. The pets belong to two different species, but they perform similar characters in terms of social roles. The first one is Princess Honeybelle's account, representing a "cat chef, fashionista, and world-famous catfluencer." Other cat characters, Mocha and Kody, as well as their owner, are also shown in the account, but Princess Honeybelle (or Honey) is the

main character. The account is fragmented by format, including the role of cats (chef or barista) and content showing behind-the-scenes routine (or life with cats). In the first case, the owner's presence is hidden through montage and detail shots; in the second one, the owner is visible and audible. The chef's format is carefully curated in terms of color and atmosphere, representing stereotypes: animal (a cat loving the "dolce vita"), cultural (the atmosphere of a French café), and gender (pink for girls).

The other account, Chef Lenny the lizard, belongs to three lizards (Lenny, Betty, and Samson) and their female owner; they also cook, but in their small kitchen for lizards, and their food is not always actually edible. The strategies are very similar to those used for Honey's account, but due to species differences, the cooking process is performed differently. Another perspective is opened up by comparing two accounts that are created for the same species, but performing different gendered roles. As with Noodles' account, the anthropomorphization of the pet character often conceals the owner's presence. Similar to Zoey, the owner only appears in the role of "pet parent" in rare instances. Thus, the representation of the pet-owner relationship, including the gender aspect, is confined to a parent-child dynamic. And regardless of the animal species, the curation of gendered images is influenced by gendered affordances. Thus, a pearl necklace will adorn a woman's neck (or that of a female lizard), while a bow tie will embellish a man's neck (or that of a male lizard or cat).

The last pair of accounts that we analyzed belong to two golden retrievers, Teddy and Tucker. Although both dogs are male, Teddy's curator is a young man while Tucker's is a young woman. One might assume that the characters portrayed would be diverse and differ significantly; however, this is not the case. In general, the accounts reflect the aforementioned strategies of representing and performing gender identity. Both accounts primarily use short vertical videos extensively edited and with complex montages, and they are remarkably anthropomorphized. For example, in both accounts, one can see videos in which golden retrievers seem to write something on paper, thus delivering the viewer some form of message. In these videos, the dogs' forepaws imitate the movements of a human arm typically used for writing. As for the content, it mostly reproduces communicative situations that can be seen as deeply stereotypical. The gender aspect is not the primary factor in shaping the conflicts within the characters' relationships. The plot of the sketch can be based on a pet's "selective hearing"—i.e., he or she is interested mostly in food (and this actually represents a pet as a pet), or a situation when a flatmate brings home his girlfriend (in this case, a pet is more included in human types of relationship and is anthropomorphic).

The curatorial strategy in both accounts is mixed and uses different social roles to represent the pet. Unlike the cat or lizard accounts, these accounts use fewer small details (such as accessories, new interiors, and clothes) in the images, which may be due to the size of the pets and their activities. The performance of gender identity is embedded in videos representing social and cultural practices, and this is the most interesting aspect of the accounts. Therefore, the representation of gender identity is expressed in one case through the pursuit of opportunities to earn extra money, while in the other one, it is demonstrated through beauty routine and massage. The owner/curator is guided by their own preferences and roles.

Summarizing the analysis of the accounts based on the suggested perspective, we can conclude that the social media account architecture provides means for performing gender identity in different ways: through account names, header contents, pinned stories, and posts. However, these are mostly used as promotional tools. Moreover, the most perceptible affordance for that purpose is seen as inserting links wherever

possible and even using an additional digital tool (Linktree) to strengthen this focus and add even more links. At the same time, it's worth noting that in some cases this space is used in a more creative way and shows the features of a pet's character (like sensitivity) or routine (which could be advertising at the same time). By curating content for pet accounts, owners create characters, plots, and conflicts, choose the format (photos or videos, sketch comedies or cute pictures, etc.), and make creative decisions about what should be displayed and how. The pets are "invited" into this process as lead actors or main characters; therefore, an animal character in an account largely depends on the size, activity level, mobility, and distinctive appearance based on the species of the pet. Dramaturgical techniques, such as curation, depend on the degree of anthropomorphism attributed to the pet. The higher the level of anthropomorphism of the animal, the less prominent the human presence; this is emphasized through short montages, cropping, and other techniques. Moreover, more conventional and stereotypical elements are employed to create these anthropomorphic pet images. Human-animal relationships and the associated identity (such as the role of a pet parent) typically do not become central themes in such accounts, showing up only occasionally.

5. Conclusion

Despite the long history of using animal voices in the mediated space as extensions of human identity, be it letters, early photographs, or anything else, this interaction fundamentally changes when a social media platform gets involved. Together with global changes in human-animal relations, the integration of platforms leads to configuring "animal-human-digital assemblages" that not only represent animals or, to be more precise, pets, but also perform identities. Simultaneously, digital platforms, namely Instagram, have their own tools, rules, and policies that create space—sometimes perceptible, sometimes hidden, or even false—for such representations. With technical limitations on the one hand and types of human-animal relationships, as well as social roles on the other hand, curators perform hybrid human-animal identities, including gendered ones, despite not creating an ideal "zootopia" of "cross-species sociality." The pets' Instagram accounts become not merely a space where a human's "expanded identity" is represented or performed, but also a digital stage where human-animal (commodified) narratives unfold, with the pet in the lead role and the owner serving as the curator.

Based on research in the fields of human-animal relationships, cultural representation, identity performance, and digital platform politics, we proposed an analytical perspective comprising two parts: account architecture (content of the header, saved/pinned stories, and relationships with other pet accounts) and account content (format for presenting and creating content). We analyzed six active Instagram pet accounts that had had regular updates for at least three months prior to the beginning of the research.

Taking into account the hybrid nature and transformation of human-animal relationships in the media, the first research question focused on acts of performing gendered human-animal identity in pet accounts. The analysis of Instagram account architecture reveals that not all platform affordances are utilized for performing gendered identity; some are primarily used for promotional purposes. Headers, pinned stories, and pinned posts mostly contain links to related accounts or advertisements. Rarely, an account name may reference gender (e.g., "a guy") or indicate gender through pronouns ("she/her" next to the pet's name). The descriptions published in the header are usually more representative of professional roles (e.g., "chef," "beauty guru") rather than gendered ones. Thus, "gendered zootopia" appears as a hidden affordance, while the more perceptible ones assist in promotion.

From the perspective of content, pet accounts are consciously curated; they rarely feature random posts. Pet characters are designed with specific functions and memorable traits, meaning that the performance of gender identity is not incidental but is carefully planned by the owner/curator and enacted by the pet character (e.g., a female cat in pink baking pies or a female poodle lounging by the pool).

The design of a gendered character mostly relies on the animal's sex and the anthropomorphism of the pet's image. Regardless of species, the curation of gendered images is shaped by culturally gendered affordances and gendered filters. Thus, a pearl necklace adorns a woman's neck (or that of a female lizard), while a bow tie embellishes a man's neck (or that of a male cat).

RQ2 addresses the curating strategies and platform tools that are selected by owners for performing gender in pet accounts within the limits of platform affordances. Examining analyzed accounts' architecture reveals that platform limitations do not directly affect curatorial strategies, as Instagram is well-suited for producing visual content. Two characteristics of the platform can be seen as important in this regard: (a) rapid consumption of content by the audience, which makes the curators make the content short and standardized to be more easily accessible; (b) monetization of the account that emphasizes all the tools that help the curator promote products.

The influence of the platform can be also traced through cultural restraints and gendered stereotypes that affect the limits within which the curators create content. The imagery in pet accounts is curated similarly to that in human Instagram accounts, showcasing expressive clothing, cars, homes, decor, and various locations and people. This is in line with both Instagram's mission and the representation of an "extended identity."

One important aspect of curating a pet account is selecting objects, locations, decorations, clothing, and accessories that convey the gendered character's traits and habits in a recognizable way. Partly for this reason, stereotypical techniques are used in enacting gender (e.g., pink for girls and dark glasses for rugged men), because the images of speechless characters (videos and photos) must be interpreted unambiguously.

Since the primary element ("lead actor") of the account is a pet, the selection of curatorial strategies and tools largely depends on its size, activity level, mobility, and distinctive appearance based on species. Dramatic curation techniques are influenced by the degree of anthropomorphism attributed to the pet. A higher level of anthropomorphism minimizes human presence, which is emphasized through techniques such as montage, voice-over, text overlay, close-up shots, and music tracks, among others.

Ultimately, the analyzed pet accounts reveal a tendency to reproduce traditional, stereotypical gender performances that are often meticulously curated and thoughtfully composed in detail by their human owners. Although gender-related politics on Instagram does not cover images of animals, pet accounts are not used as spaces for creative gender content or gender activism, and "zootopia"—a space where anything is possible—remains only a potentiality.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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