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Original Paper

Canine Companions in the Digital Age: Exploring Pet-Centric Social Media through the Lens of the Extended Self Theory

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Abstract

This study investigates how Dutch dog owners use non-commercial Instagram profiles for their dogs and how managing these profiles relates to identity construction and self-perception. Guided by Belk's Extended Self Theory, the study employed a cross-sectional qualitative design and semi-structured interviews with 10 Dutch women who actively managed Instagram accounts for their dogs without seeking monetization. Narrative analysis focused on structure, style, identity, context, and theme, followed by thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: memory preservation; the human-pet bond; social interaction and community; expression and identity; and consumer behavior and pet products. Participants described Instagram as a digital archive for shared memories, a medium for presenting dogs as family members, a site for developing relationships and support networks, and a space for expressing personality, values, humor, and expertise. The accounts also exposed participants to pet products and peer recommendations, influencing consumer knowledge and behavior. Taken together, the findings indicate that pet Instagram profiles operate as digital extensions of owners' selves, linking personal identity with the represented identity of the dog and with the social networks surrounding the account. The study extends discussion of the Extended Self Theory into everyday, non-commercial pet-centered social media use.

Keywords

extended self theory, digital identity, pet ownership, Instagram, social media, self-expression

1. Introduction

Social media has created new ways for people to represent relationships, memories, interests, and aspects of identity. One increasingly visible practice is the creation of social media profiles dedicated to pets. These accounts may resemble ordinary personal profiles: owners publish photographs and videos, write captions, respond to comments, follow other accounts, and participate in communities. Unlike

commercial pet-influencer accounts, however, many pet profiles are maintained primarily as hobbies. The everyday, non-commercial character of these accounts raises questions about what owners are doing when they communicate through a profile that is ostensibly devoted to another living being.

The present study examines this practice through Belk's Extended Self Theory. Belk (1988) argues that the self is not limited to the physical individual but can encompass possessions, relationships, experiences, and other meaningful extensions. Objects and relationships can become symbolically connected to identity, helping people express who they are and maintain continuity in their self-concept. Belk (1996) subsequently examined pets as emotionally significant extensions of the self, while Belk (2013) revised the theory for the digital environment, emphasizing processes such as dematerialization, re-embodiment, sharing, co-construction of self, and distributed memory.

This theoretical development is particularly relevant to pet-centered Instagram use. A dog can already function as part of an owner's identity through companionship, family life, lifestyle, and consumption (Belk, 1996; Jyrinki, 2011; Kylkilahti et al., 2015). Instagram adds a digital layer to that relationship. Photographs, captions, Stories, comments, and interactions can transform everyday experiences with a dog into a persistent and shareable digital narrative. The account therefore has two intertwined dimensions: it represents the dog and, at the same time, communicates something about the owner.

Previous research has documented the symbolic role of pets, pet-related consumption, and the growing visibility of pet influencers online. Studies have also examined dog-centered social media as a space for joy, identity expression, community, and commercialization (Brittz, 2020; Maddox, 2020; Myers et al., 2022; Ngai, 2022). Yet research has often emphasized influencers, micro-celebrity, or commercial activity. Less attention has been given to ordinary owners who maintain pet accounts without a primary intention to monetize them. This distinction matters because the motivations and meanings attached to a hobby account may differ from those associated with professional influencing.

The Dutch context provides a useful setting for examining this phenomenon. The thesis on which this article is based reported approximately 1.8 million dogs in the Netherlands, corresponding to about 18% of households (Dibevo, 2023). Instagram was also widely used in the country, making it a relevant environment for digital representations of everyday life (Kemp, 2024). Within this context, the study asks: How do pet Instagram profiles influence the identity construction and self-perception of Dutch dog owners, within the framework of the Extended Self Theory?

Three subsidiary questions guided the empirical investigation: (1) What motivates Dutch dog owners to create Instagram profiles for their pets and how are these motivations connected to identity construction? (2) How does Instagram facilitate the extension of the self for Dutch dog owners? and (3) How does sharing pet-related content on Instagram contribute to the identity construction of Dutch dog owners?

By addressing these questions, the study contributes to research on the Extended Self Theory, digital identity, human-animal relationships, and social media practices. It also provides implications for

organizations operating in the pet-care sector by showing how memory, community, self-expression, and peer knowledge can intersect with pet-related consumption.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Extended Self Theory and Pets

Extended Self Theory conceptualizes identity as extending beyond the boundaries of the individual body. Belk (1988) proposed that possessions can become incorporated into the self because they carry personal meanings and help individuals communicate identity. Such extensions can support identity continuity, express uniqueness, and communicate social meanings. The concept has subsequently been applied to relationships and consumption, including the relationship between people and companion animals.

Belk (1996) specifically described pets as metaphorically meaningful relationships. Rather than being understood only as objects of ownership, pets can become emotionally significant components of a person's life narrative. Subsequent studies similarly indicate that pet ownership is intertwined with identity and consumption (Hill et al., 2008; Jyrinki & Leipämaa-Leskinen, 2005; Jyrinki, 2011). Owners may select products, services, lifestyles, and activities in ways that reflect how they understand their relationship with their animals.

The concept is especially relevant to dogs because canine companionship frequently extends into family life and everyday routines. Research has described pets as family members and emphasized the relational significance of companion animals (Cohen, 2002; Walsh, 2009). The owner's self-concept can therefore include not only the dog itself but also the practices, values, experiences, and relationships that surround the dog.

2.2 The Extended Self in the Digital Environment

Belk (2013) extended the theory to digital environments, arguing that online profiles and digital possessions can become part of the extended self. Five processes are particularly useful for understanding pet-centered Instagram use. Dematerialization describes the movement from physical possessions and records to digital forms. Re-embodiment concerns the representation of self through digital personas. Sharing emphasizes the social circulation of identity-relevant content. Co-construction highlights how identity is shaped through interaction with others. Distributed memory refers to the way digital platforms store and make accessible memories over time.

Instagram combines these processes. A photograph of a dog can function simultaneously as a memory, a representation of the owner's lifestyle, an invitation to interaction, and a contribution to a continuing narrative. Captions and comments can add interpretations to the image, while likes and responses provide social feedback. Research on digital identity similarly emphasizes that social media users construct and negotiate identity through selective self-presentation and interaction (Ganda, 2014;

Marko, 2023; Seidman, 2013).

Digital memory is particularly relevant to pet profiles. Personal digital archives can become emotionally valuable, and social media can operate as a repository through which memories are revisited and shared (Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010; Zhao et al., 2023). At the same time, reliance on commercial platforms introduces vulnerability because access to digital memories depends on platform infrastructures and policies (Marshall, 2008; Sas & Whittaker, 2013).

2.3 Pet-Centered Social Media and Identity

Research on dog-centered social media suggests that online representations can take several narrative forms. Brittz (2020) identified self-representation, anthropomorphic, domestic, adventure, and companionship narratives in dog-related Instagram content. These categories show how images of dogs can communicate more than information about the animal: they can also represent family relationships, lifestyles, values, humor, and shared experiences.

The distinction between commercial and non-commercial pet accounts is important. Dog influencers can attract substantial audiences and participate in brand partnerships (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Myers et al., 2022). In contrast, Maddox (2020) and Ngai (2022) draw attention to everyday pet accounts, showing that owners may use them for enjoyment, relationships, identity expression, and forms of micro-celebrity without necessarily seeking professional status. This study builds on that line of inquiry by focusing specifically on Dutch dog owners who manage non-commercial profiles.

Social interaction is another important component. Social media can provide spaces for belonging, informal learning, and identity formation (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Within pet-centered communities, users may exchange practical information, participate in events, and form relationships around a shared interest. Parasocial relationships may also develop when users become emotionally invested in animals or owners whom they have never met (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Tukachinsky & Stever, 2019).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

The study used a cross-sectional qualitative design. Qualitative methods were selected because the research sought to explore motivations, meanings, identity processes, and experiences rather than measure the frequency of predefined behaviors. Cross-sectional qualitative research is appropriate for examining complex consumer motivations, values, and attitudes in a particular context (Burney et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2021).

3.2 Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. A call for participants was published on the researcher's Instagram account dedicated to her dog. Purposive

criteria required participants to be Dutch dog owners who actively managed Instagram profiles for their pets without seeking monetization. A €10 voucher for a dog-related webshop was offered as an incentive. Saturation was considered to have been reached after eight interviews; two additional interviews were conducted to examine the stability of the emerging themes.

Ten participants took part. All were Dutch women, aged 25 to 58. Their accounts had been created between 2014 and 2024 and represented a range of breeds and mixed-breed dogs. Participants were identified as P1-P10 to protect confidentiality.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age	Account created	Dog/breed
P1	Female	26	2021	Chihuahua and Pomeranian
P2	Female	52	2018	Pug
P3	Female	25	2024	French bulldog
P4	Female	40	2017	Pug
P5	Female	53	2014	Mongrel
P6	Female	27	2019	Yorkshire terrier
P7	Female	34	2022	Australian shepherd
P8	Female	38	2022	French bulldog
P9	Female	58	2019	Jack Russell
P10	Female	37	2016	Two pugs

Note. Participant characteristics are reproduced from the study's participant table; names and Instagram account identifiers were not reported in the article in order to maintain confidentiality.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted remotely using Microsoft Teams. Interviews were conducted in Dutch, the participants' native language. Audio was also recorded using an iPhone Voice Memo Recorder as a backup. Transcripts were produced with Sonix and subsequently checked against the audio recordings. The interview guide covered motivations for creating the account, Instagram as a tool for self-expression, content sharing and identity construction, interaction management, narrative styles, and general changes in behavior or self-perception.

The interview guide was used flexibly rather than as a fixed script. Probing questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, and minor adjustments were made between interviews as insights emerged. Before each interview, the researcher had examined the participant's

dog profile, enabling questions to refer to particular types of content, such as forest walks, portrayals of dogs as family members, or humorous narratives.

3.4 Data Analysis

The analysis combined narrative and thematic approaches. Narrative analysis considered the structure and composition of participants' stories, the language and style used, how participants presented themselves, the broader context surrounding their accounts, and recurring themes (Cortazzi, 2001; Riessman, 2007). After transcription verification, the researcher manually examined the material with particular attention to structure, style, identity, and context.

Thematic analysis was then used to organize material relevant to the research questions. A custom GPT model was used as a supporting analytical tool: anonymized interview transcripts were provided as the knowledge base, and prompts were used to generate candidate codes, themes, and quotations. The researcher did not treat these outputs as final findings. Instead, they were compared with the transcripts and the researcher's own selections, with final interpretations and conclusions formulated by the author. This distinction is important because the AI-assisted stage functioned as a sparring and organizational aid rather than as an autonomous source of interpretation.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants received an information sheet and informed consent form before the interviews. The materials explained the purpose of the study, the use of Instagram content for preparation, confidentiality measures, and the right to withdraw. Participant names, Instagram account names, and other identifying information were not disclosed in the research output. The interview data were anonymized, and participation was voluntary.

4. Findings and Discussion

Five themes emerged from the interviews: memory preservation; the human-pet bond; social interaction and community; expression and identity; and consumer behavior and pet products. Although presented separately below, the themes were closely interconnected. In particular, participants' accounts suggest that the same Instagram activity could function simultaneously as memory keeping, relationship expression, identity work, community participation, and consumer learning.

4.1 Memory Preservation: Instagram as a Digital Archive

Memory preservation was a central motivation for creating and maintaining pet Instagram accounts. Participants described Instagram as a place where photographs and experiences with their dogs could be collected, organized, and revisited. P3 explained that the profile creates "your own folder of memories" because a phone gallery can become difficult to manage. P2 compared Instagram explicitly with a traditional photo album, explaining that a long-standing interest in photography and physical albums naturally connected with Instagram when digital media became more common.

These accounts illustrate Belk's (2013) concepts of dematerialization and distributed memory. Experiences that might once have been represented through printed photographs are now stored as digital posts and Stories. The account can therefore become part of the owner's autobiographical record. The dog's life is not simply documented; the owner's experience of living with the dog is also preserved.

The emotional importance of this digital archive became particularly visible in P9's experience. After receiving a warning that the account might be deleted, P9 attempted to recover a five-year record of memories and described experiencing sleepless nights while trying to resolve the problem. This account illustrates that digital pet content can acquire value beyond ordinary social media content. The potential loss of an account was experienced as the potential loss of a personal archive.

This finding is consistent with research showing that digital photographs and other digital possessions can have emotional significance (Brewer & Piper, 2016; Petrelli & Whittaker, 2010). It also raises a tension within the idea of distributed memory: digital platforms make memories easier to organize, share, and revisit, but they simultaneously place those memories within infrastructures controlled by third parties. Participants' reliance on Instagram therefore illustrates both the usefulness and the vulnerability of digital memory practices.

4.2 Human-Pet Bond: Representing the Dog as Family

The second theme concerns the way participants represented their dogs as integral members of the family. Several participants described taking their dogs with them wherever possible and treating them as comparable to children or other close family members. P7 summarized this perspective by stating that a dog "really belongs to the family" and should be able to come along.

Instagram provides a visual and narrative environment in which this family relationship can be made visible. Everyday activities, celebrations, walks, visits, and domestic routines can be represented through the dog's profile. The account therefore documents not only the animal but also the relationship between the animal and the owner. In Extended Self terms, the digital representation of the dog can become an extension of the relational self.

Participants also described changing attitudes toward dog ownership. P7 contrasted her approach with that of her father, who believed that a dog should be able to remain home alone and obey. For P7, by contrast, bringing the dog along was preferable when the dog behaved appropriately. The Instagram account consequently became part of a broader representation of what responsible and enjoyable dog ownership meant to her.

These findings correspond with literature describing companion animals as family members and emphasizing the relational significance of human-animal bonds (Cohen, 2002; Friedmann et al., 2015; Walsh, 2009). They also extend that literature by showing how social media makes these relational identities visible and interactive. The owner is not merely documenting a dog; she is presenting a

particular understanding of what living with a dog means.

4.3 Social Interaction and Community

Participants described Instagram as a community space rather than simply a broadcasting channel. Interaction through comments, direct messages, likes, groups, and events enabled owners to meet people who shared their interest in dogs. In some cases, online relationships developed into offline encounters and organized dog walks.

P1 described meeting new people through Instagram and attending dog walks where she felt accepted. She emphasized the feeling of belonging and contributing to a community. P2 similarly reported that organizing dog meetups had resulted in a fuller social calendar than she had previously experienced. These accounts demonstrate how a pet profile can function as a bridge between digital and offline social life.

Participants also described the exchange of practical knowledge. P5 and P8 mentioned learning about dog health and products through other owners, while P3 described learning which harnesses were useful. The community thus operated as an informal information network. Social interaction was not limited to emotional support; it also involved learning and problem-solving.

Participants reported emotional investment in dogs they followed online. P2 said that when a dog was sick, she checked for updates every day. P4 described being deeply upset when a dog she had followed for a long time died despite never having met the animal in person. These experiences indicate the development of parasocial bonds around animals represented through social media. Such bonds have been examined more broadly in media research as relationships that can provide companionship and emotional involvement despite the absence of direct interpersonal contact (Dibble et al., 2016; Horton & Wohl, 1956; Stever, 2017).

The community dimension also relates to identity verification. By participating in a network of people who share similar interests and values, owners receive feedback that can affirm their understanding of themselves as committed dog owners and community members. In this sense, sharing and co-construction in Belk's (2013) digital Extended Self become visible: the profile is shaped by the owner, but its social meaning is also produced through interaction with others.

4.4 Expression and Identity: The Dog as a Vehicle for Self-Presentation

Expression and identity emerged through the content, tone, aesthetics, and narratives that owners selected for their dogs' profiles. Participants did not all express identity in the same way. Some emphasized humor and personality, others education or animal welfare, and others everyday authenticity. What connected these approaches was the use of the dog's account as a medium through which owners could communicate qualities they associated with themselves.

P4 provided a clear example of identity being expressed through narrative style. Her first pug had a "sassy" personality, and she created posts that matched that character. When a later pug turned out to be

sweeter, P4 found that the resulting content felt less enjoyable. She subsequently shaped the dog's persona through playful stories and cheeky humor. The profile thus became a creative vehicle for expressing her own preference for humor and not taking things too seriously.

Other participants used their profiles to communicate values and expertise. P6 described the account as having an educational purpose centered on life with a shelter dog and on helping people who needed support. P10 connected her account to many years of experience in dog behavior and animal welfare. Her choice of dog and the content she produced were understood as reflections of her expertise and interests.

P1's approach demonstrated another form of identity expression: deliberate resistance to highly curated Instagram aesthetics. Rather than presenting a consistent visual theme, she described her account as chaotic and connected this to how she understood her own personality. The account's lack of visual uniformity therefore became meaningful rather than accidental. It represented an aspect of self that she did not want to conceal.

These examples support research showing that social media enables selective self-presentation and identity construction (Seidman, 2013; Whiting & Williams, 2013). They also resonate with Brittz's (2020) observation that dog-centered narratives can function as forms of human self-representation. The dog provides a socially acceptable and often playful focal point through which the owner can communicate humor, lifestyle, values, expertise, and emotional attachment.

The findings also illustrate re-embodiment and co-construction in the digital Extended Self. Owners give the dog a voice, personality, or narrative identity, but this identity is intertwined with their own. The account can therefore be understood as a hybrid representation: neither a simple portrait of the dog nor a direct personal profile, but a shared digital persona constructed through the relationship between human, animal, and audience.

4.5 Consumer Behavior and Pet Products

Although participants were selected because their accounts were non-commercial, Instagram nevertheless influenced consumer behavior. Participants encountered products, brands, recommendations, reviews, and information through the pet community. Some occasionally received products from brands even though they did not operate their accounts primarily for financial gain.

P1 described receiving products as a form of recognition, explaining that it felt like an honor when a brand liked her content enough to send something. The recognition was interpreted partly as recognition of her dog. This suggests that brand interaction can have symbolic value beyond the product itself: it can affirm the identity of the owner as a committed pet enthusiast.

Peer recommendations were particularly important. P3 described learning which harnesses were useful, while P5 reported learning about dog supplements. P6 gave an example of purchasing a leash sleeve after seeing another owner use it for a dog with similar behavioral needs. These examples suggest that

perceived similarity and lived experience can make peer recommendations relevant to purchasing decisions.

Instagram also facilitated collective activities involving products. P2 organized large dog events and sought sponsors that could provide discount codes or giveaways. P8 described "Instaswap" activities in which owners exchanged packages for their dogs. Such activities demonstrate that consumer behavior can be embedded within community practices rather than occurring as isolated transactions.

The findings are consistent with research on pet-related consumption and social influence (Cheong & Yi, 2014; D'Souza et al., 2023; Jyrinki, 2011). They also complement work on influencer marketing by showing that commercial influence does not require an account to be formally commercial. Products can enter a community through peer recommendation, gifting, event sponsorship, or organic sharing. For marketers, the implication is that credibility and relevance may depend on how products fit into the existing relationships and experiences of the community.

4.6 Integrating the Themes Through Extended Self Theory

The five themes can be interpreted as interconnected mechanisms through which the pet Instagram profile becomes part of the owner's extended self. Memory preservation turns the profile into a repository of autobiographical material. The human-pet bond positions the dog as a meaningful relational component of identity. Community participation embeds the owner in a social network. Expression and identity use the dog's persona as a medium for self-presentation. Consumer behavior connects the profile to choices, knowledge, and practices associated with pet ownership.

These mechanisms correspond closely with Belk's (2013) digital extensions of the theory. Memory preservation reflects distributed memory and dematerialization. The creation of a pet persona illustrates re-embodiment. Posting and interacting with others involve sharing. The meanings of the account develop through feedback and relationships, illustrating co-construction. The findings therefore support the usefulness of the Extended Self Theory for examining ordinary digital practices that are not centered on commercial self-branding.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that participants consciously created pet profiles in order to construct identity. Several accounts were described simply as hobbies, and some participants initially found explicit questions about identity difficult to answer. Identity emerged more clearly when participants were asked about concrete choices: why they posted particular photographs, why they used humor, why they portrayed the dog as a family member, or why they interacted with particular communities. This suggests that identity construction can occur through routine and relational practices without being an explicit objective.

5. Implications

5.1 Implications for the Extended Self Theory

The study contributes to the application of Extended Self Theory in three ways. First, it shows that the theory can be applied to digital profiles that represent a relationship with a living companion rather than a conventional material possession. The Instagram account is meaningful precisely because it connects owner, dog, memories, and community.

Second, the findings illustrate the importance of interaction. The profile is not a static representation. Comments, messages, feedback, community events, and peer recommendations continuously add meaning to the account. This supports Belk's (2013) emphasis on co-construction and suggests that digital extensions of self are relational as well as representational.

Third, the study highlights the role of non-commercial identity practices. Existing research on pet-centered social media often focuses on influencers and monetization. The present findings indicate that identity work also occurs in smaller hobby accounts, where the motivations are memory keeping, companionship, community, self-expression, and learning.

5.2 Implications for the Pet-Care Industry and Platforms

For pet-care organizations, the findings indicate that pet owners may respond to communication that recognizes the emotional and relational dimensions of pet ownership. Campaigns that focus only on products may overlook the meanings attached to memories, family relationships, community, and responsible care. The thesis proposed that brands could use authentic owner stories and develop products or experiences that fit community practices.

Social media platforms could likewise consider how users employ pet profiles as memory archives and community spaces. Features supporting archiving, resurfacing older memories, organizing pet-related events, or distinguishing pet profiles could align with existing practices. At the same time, additional features should be evaluated against concerns about interface complexity and data privacy. Transparency about data use and accessible privacy controls are particularly relevant when users treat platform content as a personal archive.

These implications should not be interpreted as evidence that all dog owners share the same motivations. The sample was intentionally focused on Dutch non-commercial account managers, and the diversity of pet ownership experiences means that further market research would be needed before applying the findings broadly.

6. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of only 10 participants. This enabled detailed qualitative exploration but limits transferability to other populations. Second, all participants were women. Although previous research has identified gender differences in the use of social media

for animal-related content (Hagan et al., 2017; Maddox, 2020), the perspectives of men and other gender groups were not captured in this study.

Third, the research focused specifically on Dutch dog owners. Cultural understandings of pets, family, consumption, and social media vary across contexts, and therefore the findings should not be assumed to apply directly elsewhere. Fourth, the data were self-reported. Interviews can be influenced by recall and social-desirability biases, even when probing is used to deepen responses.

Fifth, the cross-sectional design captures experiences at one point in time and cannot show how identity practices or motivations change longitudinally. Pet accounts can exist for many years, and major events such as acquiring a new dog, illness, or loss may alter the meaning of an account. Longitudinal research could examine these changes more directly.

Sixth, technical problems occurred during two remote interviews, including a frozen video feed and audio echo. These issues did not prevent the interviews from being completed but illustrate the need for technical checks and backup communication procedures in remote qualitative research. Finally, the study used AI-assisted thematic analysis as a supporting step. Although the researcher independently checked the outputs and formulated the final interpretations, future methodological work could examine how AI-assisted qualitative coding affects interpretive consistency and researcher reflexivity.

Future research could expand the sample across genders, age groups, cultural contexts, and types of pet ownership. Comparative studies could examine whether the same Extended Self processes occur for cats or other companion animals. Longitudinal studies could investigate how the meaning of a pet profile changes over the animal's life. Research could also examine the relationship between non-commercial pet communities and commercial influencer ecosystems, particularly how trust develops when peer recommendations and brand partnerships overlap. Finally, further research could investigate digital legacy and ownership, given participants' emotional dependence on platform-based archives.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how Dutch dog owners use non-commercial Instagram profiles for their pets and how these practices relate to identity construction and self-perception. Across 10 interviews, five interconnected themes emerged: memory preservation, the human-pet bond, social interaction and community, expression and identity, and consumer behavior and pet products.

The findings indicate that a pet Instagram profile can become more than a collection of photographs. It can operate as a digital archive of shared experiences, a public representation of the human-dog relationship, a gateway into a community, a creative medium for self-expression, and a source of consumer knowledge. Through these functions, the profile connects the owner's personal identity with the dog's represented identity and with the social relationships formed around the account.

Within the Extended Self Theory, these practices can be understood through dematerialization, re-embodiment, sharing, co-construction, and distributed memory (Belk, 2013). The study particularly highlights that such processes do not require commercial ambitions or deliberate self-branding. Everyday practices—saving photographs, writing captions, following other dogs, exchanging advice, organizing meetups, or sharing a product recommendation—can collectively contribute to an extended digital self.

The study therefore positions non-commercial pet Instagram profiles as a meaningful site for understanding contemporary identity construction. They provide a lens through which the relationships among people, animals, technology, community, memory, and consumption can be examined. Further research with broader and more diverse populations can establish how far these findings extend beyond the Dutch context and how pet-centered digital identities develop over time.

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