Digital Affective Encounters: The Relational Role of Content Circulation on Social Media

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One of the most ubiquitous practices on social media is sharing content with others to show affection or affirm an interpersonal connection. Extant consumer research has examined the circulation of objects fueled by desire or as repositories and carriers of emotion and value. The article extends this work to understand how consumer relationships are shaped through the creation, consumption, and circulation of digital objects imbued with affect. Drawing upon interviews with both managers and followers of animal accounts and netnographic data of animal content on Instagram, this work theorizes how digital affective encounters on social media transpire through the circulation of animal content. The findings highlight the processes through which content is continuously imbued with affective cues to manage parasocial and interpersonal relationships. While affect-laden content can serve as a relational token when shared between friends and family, it can also be captured and modified by large accounts. As a result, the affective force of this content can reach mass audiences and become memetic. Our article shows the significant role of affect as a mobilizing force of digital affective networks. Beyond animal content, the framework is transferable to the circulation of other social media content and consumer–influencer relationships.

Keywords: affect, companion species content, object circulation, consumer relationships, social media

"In the digital age, small gestures like sharing a meme or a video can significantly strengthen emotional bonds," wrote Edelman (2024) when discussing what is colloquially referred to as digital *pebbling*. The term pebbling describes the behaviors of Gentoo penguins who present pebbles to desired mates as tokens of affection (Schueman 2024). Like penguins, humans share online content with others on social platforms to express affection and appreciation (Travers 2024), keep in touch, and strengthen their connections (Edelman 2024; Kelly 2023). In 2023, approximately 50% of global social platform users indicated that their main reason for using this technology was to keep in touch with family and friends (Dixon 2024). Our work investigates these affective encounters on social media, exploring how such interactions shape and sustain consumer relationships. Additionally, we demonstrate how content can be curated, modified, and recirculated by large accounts and meme creators to evoke affect in mass audiences.

Extant consumer research has examined the circulation of material (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016; Kuruoğlu and

Ger 2015) as well as digital objects (Giesler 2006; Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). The former cluster of studies offers valuable insights into how material objects are circulated to mobilize collective consumer resistance and generate value in collaborative consumer networks. Conversely, the latter theorizes on the role of digital objects as gifts or objects of desire, respectively. Our study rethinks the role of digital objects in affective encounters between consumers. We argue that online content is inspired by and inspires affective flows that strengthen and perpetuate interpersonal and parasocial relationships, the latter referring to one-sided, at-a-distance relationships between consumers and media figures (Horton and Wohl 1956). We rely on theories of affect (Ahmed 2004; Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015) and indexicality (Beverland and Farrelly 2010; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000) to address the following research question: how are consumer relationships shaped and perpetuated through the creation and circulation of a digital object across a digital affective network?

We locate our investigation in the context of online animal content. Our data incorporate interviews, netnography (Kozinets 2002, 2010), and auto-ethnography. We interviewed 21 animal content creators and 12 animal content consumers. Our participants create, consume, and circulate content depicting a range of species, from the traditional domesticated animals—dogs and cats—to the unusual, such as domesticated ducks or raccoons. We conducted netnography through our own companion animal accounts and paid attention to interviews and media portrayals of animal account managers to better contextualize our findings.

Through the framework we develop using the context of the digital circulation of animal content, we establish the widespread appeal and popularity of animal social media accounts to consumers as an instance of *digital affective networks*. We build this concept on the existing work on affective economies (Ahmed 2004; Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015). We define *digital affective networks* as the relationships and encounters centered on, and facilitated by the creation, consumption, and circulation of digital content imbued with affect. We find that this network emerges through the affective flows elicited by the construction, consumption, and circulation of the content. Using Ahmed's theory on the movement of affect (2004), we demonstrate that in the context of online animal content, affect arises from corporeal encounters between humans and animals. We also borrow the concept of indexical cues (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000) to conceptualize *indexicalization*, defined as embedding indexical cues in a digital object. Indexical cues are contextually connected to the objects they represent (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000), in our case, the initial human–animal encounter. Our definition also aligns with

previous depictions in consumer research that show how consumers add indexical cues to objects to represent their value potential (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016). Since we discuss encounters that elicit affect, the digital object, in our case, is indexicalized with cues that indicate affective encounters. Our theorization follows the digital object beyond creation and into consumption and circulation, through which content cues are embedded in two other ways: *re-indexicalization* and *decontextualization*. We define the former as the realignment of the digital object's cues to represent a different context (in this case, the relationship between the sender and their friend), thereby tailoring the cues to a narrower audience for an interpersonal purpose. In contrast, the latter is the stripping and modification of the digital object's cues to render it meaningful to a broader audience.

By theorizing the journey of a digital object in the social media landscape, our work contributes by advancing our understanding of the cultural dynamics of digital consumption. In so doing, we contribute to consumer research on digital object circulation (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016; Giesler 2006) and affective consumer networks (Kozinets et al. 2017; Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015). Our framework underscores how digital objects are conceived and modified for circulation through (1) indexicalization, (2) re-indexicalization, and (3) decontextualization, thereby appealing to different relationships and audiences. This allows us to show how affective flows generated through the creation and circulation of content are central to how consumers maintain both interpersonal and parasocial relationships in their highly digitalized social lives. Our theorization of the digital object's journey also gives insights into meme culture as we demonstrate that the process of decontextualization transforms content cues into something that transcends the original context and appeals to a broad audience.

Our article is structured as follows. We first provide an overview of the theories on which we build our framework. We follow this with a description of the research context and our method. After our findings, we elaborate on our theoretical and stakeholder implications.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Digital Object Circulation in Consumer Networks

Object circulation within consumer networks and communities is a phenomenon that has been studied by researchers of multiple disciplines, such as anthropology (Foster 2008; Malinowski 1920; Munn 1992; Weiner 1992), sociology (Appadurai 1988; Appelgren and Bohlin 2015; Kopytoff 1986; Ziegler 2008), and cultural studies (Boudreau, Billen, and Agüero 2023). Consumer researchers have applied an object circulation lens to theorize

phenomena such as illicit commodity circulation (Truong, Dang, and Hall 2016) and value-building object-centric games such as geocaching (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016).

Researchers have traversed from exploring circulation in the physical to the digital realm. In Giesler's (2006) work on Napster, a music-sharing platform, he theorizes that online consumer gift systems operate beyond the reductionist frame of dyadic consumer gift giving. His work elucidates how online gift exchanges emulate classic gift giving paradigms through social distinctions, reciprocity, and ritual. Giesler's digital object—and its symbolic significance—is crafted and curated by the user, thus denoting their reputation within the network. However, the digital object itself remains untouched throughout its circulation. The music files are not modified or re-aligned symbolically to appeal to the specific recipient downloading the audio. Expanding on Giesler's work, we explore the relational dynamics behind digital object circulation by developing a deep understanding of how online content is altered as it is shared in the digital network to cater to the audience being targeted.

In their study on the creation of value in collaborative consumer networks, Figueiredo and Scaraboto (2016) use theories on indexicality (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Grayson and Shulman 2000) to investigate how the circulation of an object creates value outcomes for consumers. In their work, Grayson and Martinec conceptualize indexicality and iconicity as two types of perceivable authenticity. The scholars identify authenticity as indexical when an interpretant perceives cues as having a factual connection with the original object. Grayson and Martinec also state that "there are no purely objective criteria for deciding whether a market offering is indexically or iconically authentic" (2004, 299), thus highlighting that interpretants' perceptions of signs are highly influenced by their own socio-historical backgrounds and perceptual imperfections. Despite recognizing interdependencies between consumers within the collaborative network, Figueiredo and Scaraboto (2016) only focus on the representation of value-creating actions on the physical object and its digital representation. We build upon the literature to theorize how a digital object—whether embedded with cues about value or affect eliciting encounters—facilitates consumer relationships.

Affect in Consumer Networks

Consumer culture theory researchers implement sociological theories, such as the sociology of emotions (Anderson 2017; Hochschild 1983; Williams 1977), practice theory (Reckwitz 2016; Schatzki 2002), and institutional theory (Brown, Ainsworth, and Grant 2012; DiMaggio and Powell 1983) to investigate consumer emotions. In reviewing the sociology of emotion literature, Bericat (2016, 493) defines emotions as a "bodily

manifestation of the importance that an event in the natural or social world has for a subject". This is echoed in Ahmed's (2004, 31) work on how objects and others can impress upon an individual, producing a sensation informed by "histories of contact"—previous instances of contact—which is then experienced as an emotion. Ahmed (2004) argues that what moves a person also allows them to form attachments, thereby establishing intimacy between the self, objects, and others. Ahmed's work is appropriate to analyze digitally mediated emotions as she demonstrates the ability of emotions to move those that are not within close physical proximity: "we can feel close to others who are distant, by identifying ourselves as world or global citizens" (36). In their work on non-representational theorizing (NRT), Hill, Canniford, and Mol (2014, 387) conceptualize affect as embodied forces and intensities that precede emotion and "pass between people and objects in ways that produce changes and push assemblages into motion".

Kozinets et al. (2017) theorize digitally mediated interactions as driven by desire facilitated by food-specific content. While the type of food-centric content explored by Kozinets et al. holds important relational and cultural significance, this work does not discuss how affective intimacies and relationships are inspired, forged, and maintained through the creation, consumption, and circulation of the digital object. In considering the affective implications of object circulation, our work is informed by Kuruoğlu and Ger (2015). The scholars adopt Ahmed's (2004) theory on affective economies and collective feelings to explore the link between emotionality and materiality in the underground production and circulation of Kurdish music cassettes in Turkey. They find that the tape, an emotion-laden material object, bears the capacity to stimulate an emotional economy consisting of interpersonal, imagined, and resistive relations with family and friends, the Kurdish community, and the state, respectively. They dive into the affective potentialities of emotionally charged, mundane objects and theorize how circulation and temporality intensify the emotionality surrounding a sense of belonging to a collective body (Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015). Nevertheless, the question remains whether the circulation of an affect-laden digital object generates similar kinds of relational connections and intimacies, especially when some intimacies are forged with beings whom the consumer has not met in person. Consumer researchers have applied Horton and Wohl's (1956) concept of parasocial interaction to examine how consumers form one-sided attachments to media personalities, such as TV characters, celebrities, and influencers, with implications for marketing and perceived credibility (Aw and Chuah 2021; Conde and Casais 2023; Farivar, Wang, and Yuan 2021; Reinikainen et al. 2020). Scholars have also invoked parasocial interactions in research on the relationship between influencers and content consumers (Farivar et al. 2021; Liu and Wang 2025;

Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt 2023a). Our framework extends the literature to understand how online content moves consumers into parasocial intimacy with the content creator or the account's persona, whether it be a human, animal, or inanimate object. Next, we describe the context in which we theorize the digital affective network of companion species content.

CONTEXT

As we write this, one of the most popular animals on social media is a dog called JiffPom. This Pomeranian has over 30 million followers across TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook and has a large enough audience to not only have brand partnerships but also capitalize on merchandise and extensions, including books, toys, and calendars. Animal social media accounts—from small to big—make a digital pawprint as their content is consumed and circulated, whether in the form of memes (Milner 2016), such as Grumpy Cat, Doge, or Smudge Lord (Greenspan 2020), or posts depicting a Husky throwing a tantrum, a mischievous orange kitten, or a tiny tortoise gnawing on a relatively humongous strawberry. In 2022, a survey by the animal insurance company ManyPets reported that one-third of respondents have a social media account exclusively for their companion animals (Hollan 2022). Consumers post photos and videos of their animal companions on social media depicting them as anthropomorphic personae (Hirschman 1994; Maddox 2021; Serpell 2003) and circulate these images with friends to show they care or to make each other laugh. Alongside individual accounts, content curators act as virtual galleries curating content dedicated to animals ("Instagram 101: What Are 'Feature' Accounts?" 2015). In their quest to get exposure through high follower accounts, individual animal accounts submit their content for curators' consideration via hashtags. If selected, the content is shared by the curator as a post or story. Examples of curators that specifically post animal content are DogsOfInstagram (5.4m follows), CatsOfInstagram (13.2m follows), animalsdoingthings (4.9m follows), catsdoingthings (1.5m follows), and doggosdoingthings (2.9m follows).

In 2020, the average engagement rate of animal accounts was reportedly higher than that of any other category of social media account (Baklanov 2020). Consumer interest in online animal content explains why some creators find their animal companions go viral overnight as they become the embodiment of collective affect like the improbable labor leader Jorts the Cat, who became the hero of labor and disability advocates after a Reddit post by his human (Brennan 2022), or the rebellious diva Moo Deng the baby pygmy hippopotamus (Specter 2024). Animal content becomes widely consumed and circulated as is or memeified to represent socio-cultural themes enjoyed and further circulated by consumers across social platforms. The circulation of animal content is continuously fueled by consumers who send memes as "a great way to stay in touch" with friends on social platforms (Kelly 2023).

We contextualize our work in affective encounters through the creation, consumption, and circulation of *companion species content*—a digital object created to convey an interspecies encounter and relationship between a human and animal—across social platforms. Media scholars refer to the circulation of animal photos as the *cute economy* (Maddox 2021; Meese 2014). Consumer research projects have applied a post-humanistic lens (Haraway 2003, 2013) to theorize human–animal interactions as consumption phenomena (Bettany and Daly 2008; Grant, Canniford, and Shankar 2025). By investigating the transnational and highly networked community of Afghan hounds and their human exhibitors, Bettany and Daly (2008) propose the concept of companion species consumption—the inspiration behind our concept of companion species content—as an ontological alternative to understanding human–animal relationships. Grant et al. (2025) explore an interspecies consumption practice occurring in the wild—flyfishing—thus developing an understanding of reciprocal encounters between humans and companion species. Moving away from solely corporeal interactions, Haraway (2013) theorized an entanglement between humans, animals, and technology. In her chapter on Crittercam, she describes a docuseries that entails a camera attached by a human to a marine animal. The camera is used to observe the animal's behaviors and habitat without having to visit or intervene physically. We conceptualize companion species content as an evolution of Crittercam (Haraway 2013), in that we theorize how consumer relationships are shaped and sustained through the creation and circulation of a digital object across a digital affective network. We now describe our method for empirically uncovering this phenomenon.

METHOD

Research Design and Analytical Procedures

We used multiple data sources to triangulate our insights: interviews, netnography, and auto-ethnography. Through the latter two, we collected data via physical interactions with our animal companions as we created content with them, and through digital interactions we had with the companion species content created or consumed by our interview participants. As our context and data collection involve "entanglements with other kinds of living selves" (Haraway 2003), we categorize our ethnography as multispecies ethnography (Grant et al. 2025; Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Preceding the interviews, the first author observed cat accounts on Instagram passively (Kozinets 2002, 2010) through an account created before the study. We first chose to focus on the cat accounts because the first

author had established a presence on Instagram with such an account. This not only allowed introspective insights but also enabled the first author to credibly approach other accounts and contact them for interviews. In the second round of data collection and analysis, we included content featuring other species to ensure our findings were not restricted to a single species. While animal content can be created on and shared across various social platforms, ranging from textually driven Twitter to the video-centric TikTok, our primary research site was Instagram.

We performed iterative and inductive analytical procedures. To do this, the interviews and observations were conducted in four rounds between May 2018 and November 2021. Between each round, we analyzed the data first through open or data-driven coding. After each cycle of open coding, we moved to axial coding, upon which we revised our interview and observation protocol to better probe issues emerging from the previous round. We stopped interviewing when our data reached theoretical saturation. Our interpretation was also informed by reading mass media articles on the topic and through our reflexive participation in the practice. All data collection and analysis procedures were approved by an institutional ethics board.

Interviews

We conducted semi-structured interviews (Arsel 2017) with 21 animal content creators and 12 animal content consumers. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted from 52 minutes to 3 hours. Through purposive sampling, we specified criteria for our content creators: their animal companion account had to be public (i.e., visible and accessible without permission of the account owner) with at least 500 followers. Since Instagram does not give any public information on the dates when a non-commercial account was established, we used the minimum follower heuristic to screen for accounts established enough to develop an audience. As for recruiting animal content consumers, our one criterion was that they were following animal accounts. We recruited content consumers via an open call on social media that interpolated those who appreciate, enjoy, and interact with online companion species content. The open call was shared on the authors' Twitter accounts and the first author's Reddit and Facebook accounts.

Of our 21 interviewees with content creators, 20 are women, and one is a man. Eight of the 12 animal content consumers are women, and 4 are men. This aligns with scholars who noted the gendered nature of the context and how women predominantly participate in generating affective content (Lukacs 2015). Previous work on Instagram animal accounts also reports an overrepresentation of women (Maddox 2021), citing well-documented social media use disparities (Smith and Anderson 2018). Details on content creators and consumer participants are provided

in tables 1 and 2. We use pseudonyms for humans and animals to protect their identities.

We asked animal account managers about their relationships with their companions, the history of these relationships, their interactions, and how they perceive and want to portray their companions. Interviews also covered topics such as the drive behind the creation of animal accounts, the motivations for managing the accounts, and how they choose and edited photos, props, text captions, hashtags, tags, and comments. For animal content consumers, we first asked about their history and experiences with animals: if they have ever adopted an animal, if so, what their relationship is like with their companion, and if not, what the reasons are behind that. We then asked about their consumption of animal content, the animal accounts they followed, the type of content and species they preferred and sought out, and how the content made them feel. After this, we asked the content consumers how they interacted with others concerning animal content: how they shared animal content, with whom they shared it, and for what reasons.

Netnographic Observations

Observational data were collected through multispecies netnography of the companion species content created by our participants and beyond. To ensure confidentiality, we do not link the observational data and account names of our interviews in the article. Once our interview participants were identified, contacted, and consented, we looked through their posts, taking note of the visuals shared and the text in the post captions. Much like Marwick and boyd's (2011) research on teenagers' online privacy practices, we took screenshots of the content from the participant animal accounts for photo elicitation. We used this preparation to tailor our interview protocol for each participant. When analyzing a post's text, we noted the language, cultural references, tagged accounts, and hashtags. For the visuals, we analyzed how the animal is framed, literally and figuratively, the setting or background, and the use of props, costumes, accessories, or digital manipulation. We also analyzed the relationship between the visual and the text and how the account narrative unfolded across time. To expand our data range, we also observed other accounts through the discovery feature, tagged posts, recommendations, and content shared by our own connections. Our data consist of more than 4,000 animal companion posts from Instagram, from public accounts with followers ranging from single digits to millions.

We also acted as observing-participants (Kozinets 2010; Langer and Beckman 2005) with two of our own companion animal accounts throughout the study, creating and sharing content. This allowed us to understand the multispecies experience auto-ethnographically. When we decided to start our project, the first author's account had 468 followers and 620 follows. Additionally, the second

TABLE 1

CONTENT CREATOR PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Human pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Companion species	Companion pseudonym(s)	Follower count
Aly	F	32	E-commerce	Cat	Pedro	58.8k
Annie	F	30	Behavioral scientist	Cat	Teddy and Bear	2.118k
Blair	F	60 s	Retired	Cow and goat	Clint and Carl	71.3k
Cara	F	50 s	Animal groomer	Cat	Shuffle	530k
Carly	F	35	Graphic designer	Tortoise	Nelly	71.8k
Caroline	F	30 s	Photo Retoucher	Two dogs and a tortoise	Ginny, Saturn, and Jerry	42.2k
Farida	F	30 s	Recruiter	Duck	Raina	6.957k
Greta	F	28	Nurse	Cat	Ray	4.055k
Hannah	F	30	English teacher	Cat	Deedee	23.9k
Jamie	F	27	Lawyer	Cat	Butter and Toast	52.2k
Jill	F	61	Retired	Cat	Cookie, Zoomie, Patrick, and Ronnie	7.142k
Kate	F	30 s	Unemployed	Cat	Jake, Eddie, and Millie	7.631k
Kimberly	F	40 s	Visual merchandiser	Cat	Persephone and Ares	4.742k
Lily	F	49	Financial IT platform	Cat	Theo, Phil, Paul, and Snow	3.975k
Lola	F	50 s	Animal sitter	Cat	Fluffy	14.8k
Lorraine	F	54	Works at a pharmacy	Cat	Willie	9.965k
Nora	F	57	Office Administrator	Cat	Leo and Penny	21.7k
Raya	F	40 s	Librarian	Cat	Enrique	13.1k
Roger	M	31	Democracy-based development	Cat	Simba	3.13k
Sophia	F	32	Nursing student/pharmacy worker	Cat	Tom	51.9k
Tina	F	42	Psychiatric screener	Cat	Chicklet	4.13k

TABLE 2

CONSUMER PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Animals, content curators, and species followed
Amal	F	30 s	University student	@thedeeckenzoo, @animalsdoingthings, @catsdoingthings
Aria	F	50 s	Personal trainer	@keith_the_cat_cow, @thedodo, @pubitypet, @catloversclub, @cats_of_instagram
Barney	M	20 s	University student	@birds_of_india Animal in nature accounts and content
Debbie	F	20 s	Paramedic	Cat, Bernese Mountain Dogs, and otter accounts and content
Fred	M	40 s	Lawyer	Kitten, puppy, and Husky accounts and content
Jodie	F	20 s	University student	@chunkthegroundhog, @petcollective, @thedodo, @ourplanetdaily
Mohan	M	20 s	University student	@Reagandoodle, @weratedogs, @barked
Molly	F	30 s	Professor	@TheGoldenRatio4
Rana	F	50 s	Bio anthropologist	@iamlilbub, @realgrumpycat
Vadim	M	40 s	University student	Wild animal accounts and content
Wilma	F	20 s	University student	@TheGoldenLifeofBodie, @Barked
Zoey	F	30	Marketing analyst	Cat, Pugs, and otter accounts and content

author started their own companion animal account. To ensure that we reflexively maintained boundaries with our personal connections, we did not use any images or text from private accounts that might not have been available to us otherwise and only interviewed public accounts that are new connections.

FINDINGS

Our data show that the creation, consumption, and circulation of companion species content generate a flow of affect that originates from the content creator and their companion species. Affect arises in all interactions with and through content. It starts when an impression is made through a corporeal encounter that moves a content creator to construct a digital manifestation of an encounter. Affect circulates through a digital network of consumers by sharing, modifying, and resharing the content through two types of encounters: corporeal and techno-affective. Both types of encounters generate affect between consumers through the impressions they leave on one another (Ahmed 2004), thus building and strengthening parasocial and interpersonal relationships.

Corporeal affective encounters occur physically through bodily contact with another being or object. In our context, the initial corporeal affective encounter is between the human and their companion animal. Affect arises from corporeal encounters and is indexicalized by the content creator, who imbues the cues representing their interspecies encounter into a post or story. Conversely, techno-affective encounters happen through virtual interactions entailing the consumption and circulation of digital content among consumers and their social contacts. When followers consume the content, they are impressed upon by its indexical cues and affectively moved into a parasocial relationship with the companion species represented in the content. Content is also reshared through the networks by consumers to perpetuate and strengthen their social relationships. As consumers share the content with their social circle, they re-indexicalize the digital object by inserting explicit or implicit cues that personalize and reframe its meanings. Re-indexicalization re-aligns the original context from the companion species content (the interspecies relationship between the content creator and their companion animal) by imbuing the content with cues associated with a new context (such as the relationship between two consumers). Decontextualization happens when content curators modify the content's indexical cues by stripping all context-specific meanings and attaching broader and non-relational meanings, thus, enabling multidirectional affective flows that spread as memetic content through the internet. In figure 1, we show how corporeal and techno-affective encounters are facilitated through indexicalization, re-indexicalization, and decontextualization, thus allowing the generation and circulation of affect across this network.

We start by discussing the corporeal affective encounter between humans and companion species and how these affective encounters inspire humans to create content through indexicalization. Next, we discuss the techno-affective encounters that further infuse or modify the object with indexical cues through individual consumption, relational circulation, public circulation, and audience feedback and engagement.

Corporeal Affective Encounters and Indexicalization

The digital affective network of companion species content starts with the interspecies relationship between the human and the animal companion (Bettany and Daly 2008; Grant et al. 2025; Haraway 2003, 2013). The human establishes intimacy (Ahmed 2004) with their animal companion through daily interactions, such as taking walks, feeding, cuddling, playing, or grooming. These corporeal encounters generate affect between humans and nonhumans, inspiring the former to create content that represents their relationship with their companion animals. To do so, content creators indexicalize—imbue into a digital representation—the affect elicited from the corporeal encounter. Caroline (content creator) expresses how her love and joy for her dog Ginny inspires her content for the dog's account. She further explains that she wants to pass this happiness onto others:

> I think it's easy to forget sometimes that all animals have something to offer. Ginny is kind of my star. She's like my soul mate. I feel like we have this super deep connection that I'm never going to have with anyone or anything ever again. And it's a connection I don't even have with my boyfriend. It's a connection I don't have with my family […] I should just post because she's so cool and adventurous and fun and her smile is amazing, and she makes me happy […] maybe she makes other people happy. Yeah, I kind of just went with that.

Inspired by the affect arising from her interspecies intimacy with Ginny, Caroline indexicalizes their corporeal encounters into content through visual and textual cues. Her connection with Ginny is described as a unique relationship that goes beyond her relationships with her human family and partner. Caroline's profound relationship with Ginny inspires her to share the happiness she feels with her followers, who then experience techno-affective encounters with the content. Caroline depicts her encounters with Ginny via visual cues of the pup riding a skateboard, playing in the snow and on a beach, participating in a Black Lives Matter protest, and wearing brightly colored clothes and accessories. Caroline also represents her joyful encounters and relationship with Ginny through textual cues in her captions, like the recurring hashtag #Ginnyismybuddy. By depicting Ginny as an active, fun, and adventurous dog,

FIGURE 1

THE CIRCULATION OF COMPANION SPECIES CONTENT
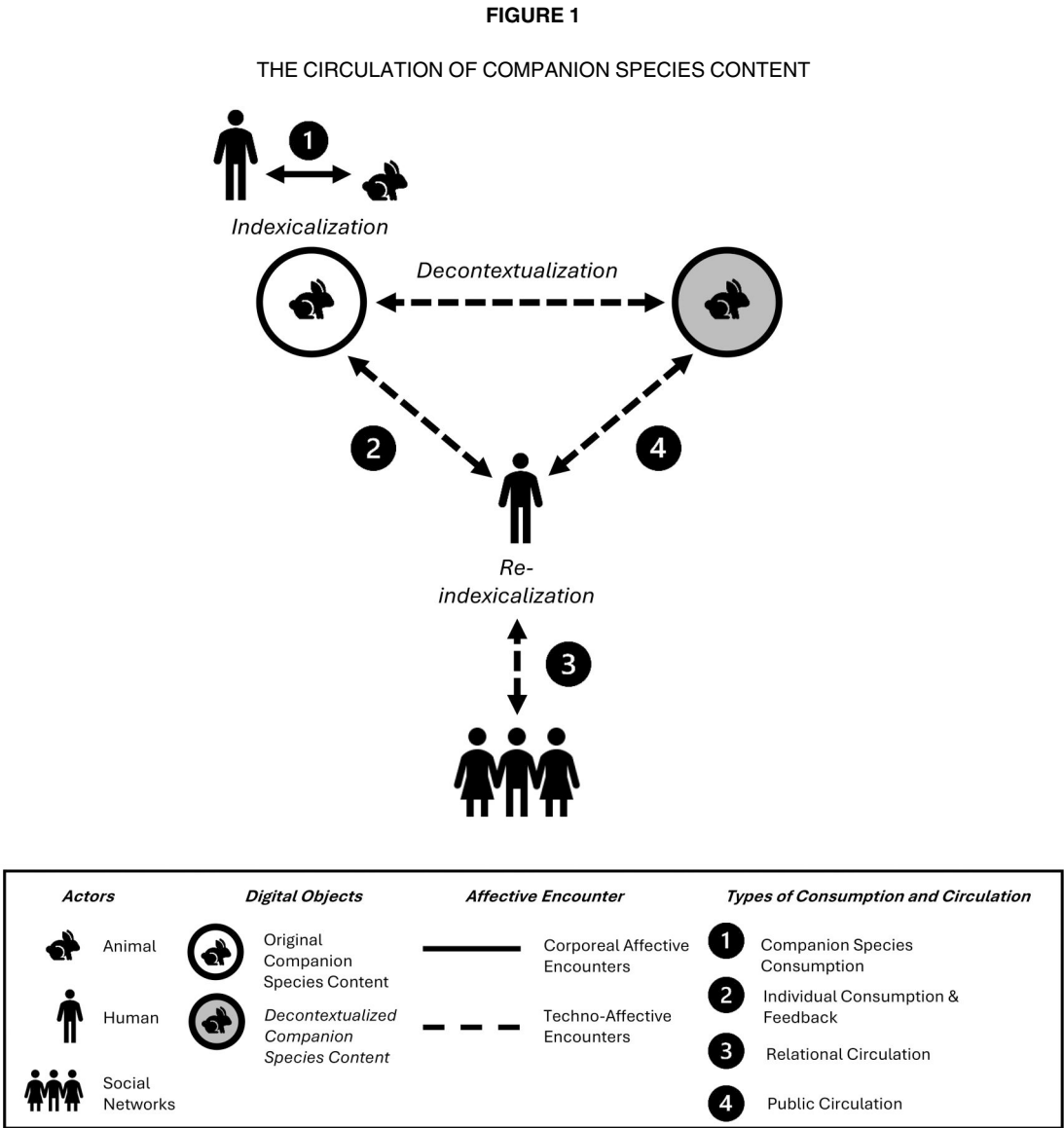
Caroline hopes to elicit the same happiness she feels in her encounters with Ginny to move her audience into a parasocial relationship with the companion animal.

Creators use Petspeak to embed the affect arising from their interspecies relationships into companion species content textually. Petspeak is a linguistic manifestation representing the affection toward and kinship with companion species. The complex and intertextual internet language (McCulloch 2019; Podhovnik 2018) of Petspeak allows creators to represent their relationship with their companion animals through textual cues. Petspeak codifies the nurturing affect humans feel about their companion animals (Belk 1996; Greenebaum 2004; Hill, Gaines, and Wilson 2008; Hirschman 1994; Holbrook et al. 2001) through the use of infantile, juvenile lingo, wordplay, and a patois formed by altering human language with onomatopoeic sounds such as purr or meow (Boddy 2017; Podhovnik 2018). In her interview, Lily describes how she adopted Petspeak to imbue her content with textual cues that impart fun:

> You learn a whole language. Anytime you can substitute "meow" or "paw" into a word and still have it make sense. It's just kind of fun. [For example] purrfect is "purr." It helps make it clear that it's a cat account. It helps make it clear that it's the cat's voice and the cat's perspective.

We further exemplify these textual cues in the photos of a golden retriever, bunny, and pig in figure 2. By using

FIGURE 2

EMBEDDING INDEXICAL CUES TEXTUALLY
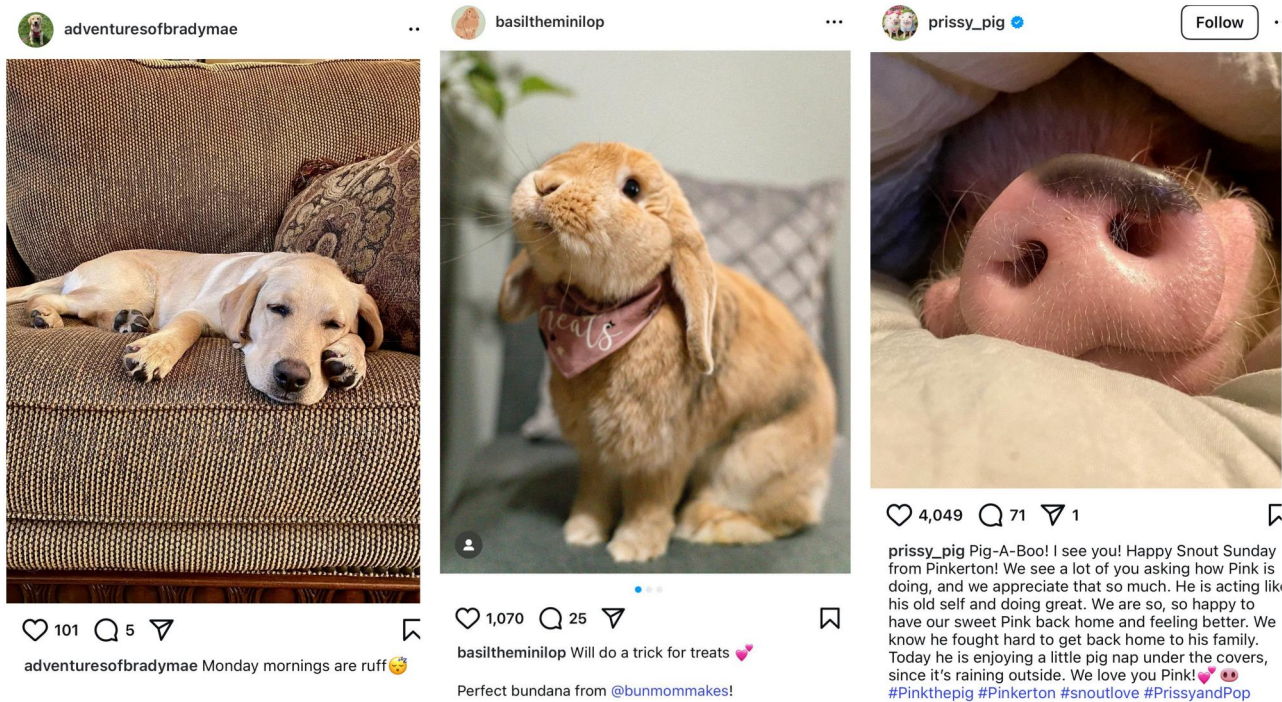
Petspeak like "ruff" for rough, "bundana" for bandana, and "pig-a-boo" for peek-a-boo the animals are depicted as infantile subjects that command care and affect. The encounters which evoke the nurturing affect arising from the parent-child relationship between human and animal are indexicalized in the form of diminutive words such as *blep*, *smol*, *floof*, *pupper*, *doggo*, *teefs*, and *chonk* which also frequently become interspersed with broader cultural memes (Boddy 2017). While we focus on textual and visual cues as these were most prominent during the time which we collected data, we also note that as platforms evolved throughout our project, cues were further enriched by platform or software-specific features, human and machine-generated voiceover, embedded music, stickers, speech balloons, stitches and other functions that generated further affordances to imbue indexical cues into digital objects.

Accordingly, we observe another instance of indexicalization through cues representing the integration of companion species into familial activities that generate joy and warmth. In terms of visual cues, they range from pictures of animals interacting with human artifacts to animals celebrating a human holiday or dressed as characters from well-known movies or popular culture.

In figure 3, the corporeal encounters eliciting familial affect and kinship (Haraway 2013) with companion species are indexicalized through visual cues of animals donning or interacting with human artifacts. The content captures animals engaging with human objects, such as hats, bow-ties, glasses, other clothing and accessories, musical instruments, tools, and other props, such as dumbbells or a suitcase (figure 3). By using these human-centric visual cues, content creators represent a sense of familial ties and belongingness arising between them and their animals. Fashion brands have picked up on humans' connections with their companion species as members of the family and have consequently started to market lines of animal clothing and accessories. In her quest to celebrate her companion species as a member of the family (Apaolaza et al. 2022), our participant Tina could not find appropriate cat-wear for Chicklet, so she reverted to buying dog clothes: "I don't ever find cat clothes. I know what size dog clothes fit her; they make so many different options for dogs anyway. So, you know, I like the dresses. The frilly things." Tina searches for gendered clothing through which she can visually depict Chicklet as her "daughter." In the content she creates, Tina uses "frilly" dresses as a visual cue to represent the sense of warmth and femininity attached to

EMBEDDING INDEXICAL CUES VISUALLY
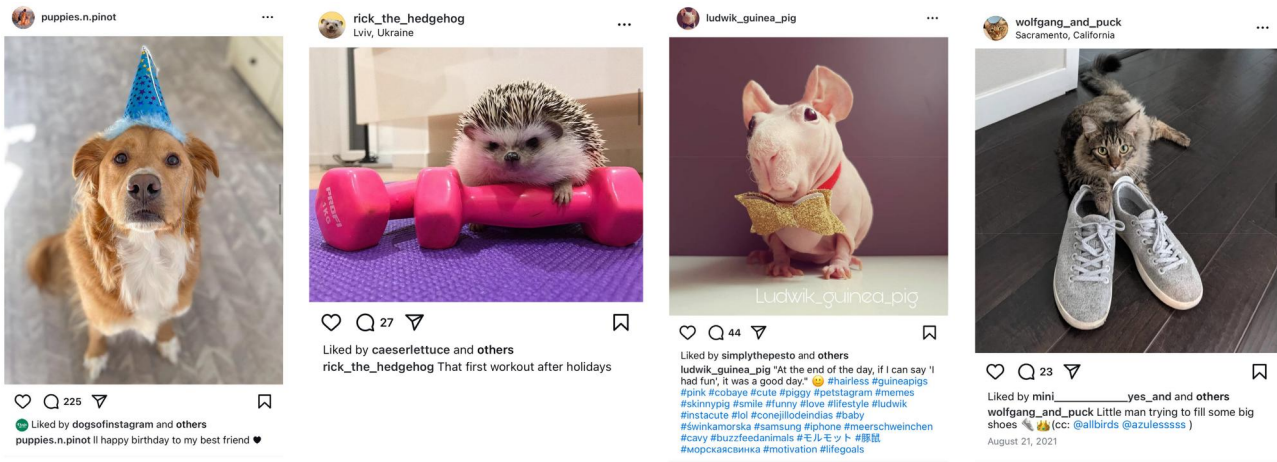
Chicklet as her young daughter. This visually and textually represented kinship was directly confirmed by Tina when I asked why she uses the word "mommy" in captions that were in Chicklet's voice, "Because I'm her mom, you know? [. . .] I feel like it's like a little kid calling their mommy." Others, like the account manager of @smolthetiger, see their companion animal not as their offspring but as an interspecies member of the family.

Props and digital editing allow creators to visually index-icalize their integration of animals into human activities such as family meals, holidays, celebrations, vacations, and birthdays. Blair describes themed accessories and props she puts on or places near her companion cow, Clint:

> On holidays like the 4th of July [. . .] I'll place a flag next to him or a drape. I drape something over him. On birthdays, I get a balloon. He'll push at it to pop it, or I can put food that looks like a birthday box, a box that's wrapped up, and get into that.

Being a proud American, Blair celebrates the 4th of July. She indexicalizes Clint's inclusion in the patriotic celebra-tion through visual cues, such as an American flag. In her effort to consistently depict Clint as a member of the fam-ily, Blair creates companion species content for his birth-day using visual cues inspired by human birthday traditions, such as decorations, balloons, and food in the shape of gift boxes. Christmas is another example of a human holiday during which corporeal human–animal encounters evoke warmth and togetherness that creators indexicalize in their companion species content. In the top row of figure 4, the images showcase animals celebrating Christmas through various human practices. Visual and

textual cues work synergistically to depict the affect of joy and cheer attributed to Christmas celebrations. The holiday-themed posts include visual elements such as props, costumes, and characters: a tiny Christmas tree, an elf on the shelf, and a man dressed as Santa. The latter fol-lows the tradition of children having photos taken with Santa. The textual cues reference the kinship (Haraway 2013) between humans and animals celebrating the holi-days together as a family, such as wishing followers a Merry Christmas and prompting engagement through ques-tions on how they celebrate. In another post, the word "Paws" replaces (Santa) Claus as an example of internet language (McCulloch 2019) to indexicalize playfulness arising throughout the corporeal encounter of the fur babies meeting Santa.

Humans may also engage their companion animals in popular culture themes and memes. Much like consumers socialize their children into the franchises and popular cul-ture they care about, content creators do the same with their companion species. For instance, the second row of figure 4 exemplifies the cues that indexicalize the fan-themed encounters with animals dressed as characters from their humans' favorite movie, Star Wars. This generates affect not just because the animal cosplaying a Star Wars charac-ter is amusing but also because it impresses upon the audi-ence through connecting to a fan subculture with which they have an affective relationship (Kozinets 2001). In fig-ure 4, a Darth Vader toy, a Yoda costume, and a Princess Leia costume visually indexicalize an affective encounter in which the human props their companion animal as a character from the franchise with the textually indexicaliz-ing caption "May the fourth be with you" (a play on a well-

FIGURE 4

EMBEDDING INDEXICAL CUES VISUALLY AND TEXTUALLY

known phrase from the franchise: "May the force with you"). This phrase is a common pun used on May 4 (also known as Star Wars Day) when fans bond with each other.

In this section, we explained how content creators use visual and textual cues in digital objects to indexicalize corporeal affective encounters, such as engaging their companion species in human traditions to facilitate their integration into the family. After companion species content is created and shared online, it can be consumed, circulated, repurposed, and interacted with. Given that these practices are affectively engaging and occur solely online, we classify them as techno-affective encounters.

Techno-Affective Encounters: Re-Indexicalization, and Decontextualization

Companion species content enters the digital sphere with indexical cues that represent corporeal relationships and encounters. The next step is techno-affective encounters, which further imbue cues into content. Techno-affective encounters are digital encounters that occur when companion species content is consumed, circulated, repurposed, or interacted with. Cues are embedded by (1) re-indexicalizing content explicitly or implicitly, rendering it exclusively understood by social contacts, or (2)

TABLE 3

TECHNO-AFFECTIVE ENCOUNTERS

Type of consumption/circulation	Techno-affective encounter between	How content is imbued with cues
Individual	Consumer and companion species	Indexicalized by the content creator
Relational	Consumer and their social circle	Re-indexicalized when shared with a social network: • *Explicitly.* Textual cues are added in the form of private messages accompanying the content. OR • *Implicitly.* No added textual or visual cues but rather implied relying on histories of contact
Public	Consumer and content	Decontextualized by content curator: Textual and/or visual cues are modified.

decontextualizing to make it more relatable to a broader audience. We identify three types of techno-affective encounters: individual consumption, relational circulation, and public circulation. This is summarized in table 3.

Individual Consumption. When a consumer views companion species content and is impressed upon by their perception of what is factually depicted—the animal itself and its personal narrative—then the cues that have made this impression are indexical. Through engaging with indexical cues, the consumer participates in a techno-affective encounter that strengthens parasocial (Horton and Wohl 1956) intimacy with the interspecies other (Ahmed 2004). By consuming the content, people form a parasocial relationship with the animal, wherein the content creator and their companion animal have little to no intimate knowledge about their audience. The audience does not physically interact with the animal but only with its mediated representation through companion species content. In her interview, Molly explains that she feels a deep connection to the dogs depicted in @TheGoldenRatio4 (101k followers):

> They're my favorite dogs. It's this account called The Golden Ratio 4. There are six golden retrievers, and their so-called 'mom' is Jen [. . .] Oh, my God, I love her dogs so much. They give me life. Venk is my favorite. She is like the baby of the group, even though she's not a baby anymore. She's eight years old [. . .] And there's Hopper, who is, I think, a year older than Venk. They're sisters. And poor Hopper recently had one of her limbs amputated [. . .] But thankfully, he's still able to do that even though he's a tripod now. That is the cutest thing. These two are her original dogs, and the rest of the squad keeps changing because she gets a bunch of rescues.

Molly keeps herself updated by consistently consuming the content from the pack's accounts on various platforms, including a podcast hosted by the human behind the dogs, Jen. This one-sided connection is founded on and perpetuated by the affect arising when the participant is impressed upon by the visual and textual cues in The Golden Ratio 4 content. The content generates affect for Molly as it moves her through her love for the dogs, concern for their health scares, and relief for their recovery from illnesses. Through these histories of contact (Ahmed 2004) with Venk, Hopper, and the other dogs depicted in the account, Molly forms a parasocial intimacy with these animals.

Jodie also forms parasocial intimacy with the groundhogs of the Instagram account @chunkthegroundhog (746k followers). The content depicts a family of groundhogs who live near a farmer's home and munch on his vegetable crops. In our interview, Jodie describes how the visual and textual cues impress upon her and make her laugh. Examples of these cues are the faces of the groundhogs while eating carrots, the groundhog-sized picnic table built by the farmer, the groundhogs' nonchalant attitude, and the captions that the farmer chooses to narrate the story. By following Chunk's account and engaging with the indexical cues of the content, consumers continuously experience affect and are moved into intimacies with these animals.

Our findings show that animals' capacity as social lubricants (Messent 1983; Veevers 1985) is amplified online. When consumers come across companion species content, they can interact with it through direct and public feedback via likes or comments or by sharing it with a friend. We discuss the latter, relational circulation, in the next section. We define the former as a techno-affective encounter between the consumer and the depicted animal. Our data show that techno-affective encounters generate feedback that further shapes future content. The likes and comments the content creators receive impress upon and influence them to choose which interspecies encounters they further depict in their posts. Some engagement, a like or a positive comment, generates positive affective flows. Content creators then strive to indexicalize similar interspecies encounters to perpetuate this positive affect.

I have gotten [sic] told multiple times that they love seeing pictures of her yelling, and they think it's hilarious that she's yelling and always, always meowing. And they're always like, how do you get it? I'm like, it's not hard because she always is. The fact that she hasn't made a noise right now and the time we've been talking is rare.

This positive public engagement by content consumers guides Hannah's decisions about what she shares on Deedee's account. Hannah has figured out what generates the strongest techno-affective encounters and creates content accordingly. Similarly, in her interview, Caroline highlights that the content depicting only one of her three companion animals, a tortoise named Jerry, is more likely to impress upon consumers compared to the others, such as Ginny the dog:

I don't even know where they came from. People started wanting to see more of Jerry. I was like, I'm a little offended, but OK. I started giving Jerry a lot more. And I almost would say he would get a bigger reaction than Ginny, which was kind of heartbreaking. But at the same time, it's really cool that now people are thinking that reptiles are interesting pets. [...] And then you get little hints within it. People in the comments are like, where's Jerry? OK, I get the hint. So, when you post a different animal, it's just a completely different reaction in the sense that the comments come in quicker, the likes grow faster. [...] And I think with Jerry, a lot of people just get so excited to see something different. I mean, tiny sunglasses on a tortoise, people are going to go wild for that.

Caroline is impressed upon by the engagement of consumers commenting on and liking her content; she says, "I get the hint." The audience's stronger reaction to Jerry compared to Ginny is, in fact, a disappointment for Caroline because of her stronger connection and richer corporeal affective encounters with Ginny. She says: "She just gives me so much, and I feel like I am who I am because of Ginny." Ultimately, Caroline attributes consumers' interest in Jerry's content to the novelty of having a reptile as a companion. Thus, she frequently caters to content consumers' preferences for techno-affective encounters with Jerry by sharing more content featuring him.

However, consumer feedback is not always a positive techno-affective encounter for content creators. For example, in the case of another novel or non-traditional animal companion, Raina the duck, the engagement brings negative affect. A specific example is when Farida was bombarded with negative comments about visual cues that depict Raina the duck in a jacket and shoes when they go out for walks:

I have this lady who's like "Answer me, you think it's funny to put clothes on the duck?" A lot of commentary saying basically that I'm a dumb person. So, I decided to explain to her that the shoes are to protect her from bubble feet and also cold injury because when her skin is actually in contact

with the cold that can actually burn her feet the same way that her coat is actually to protect her from the cold. So, I sent her that, and then she understood and apologized. It's basically the reaction people think that I dress her just for fun.

In this case, the outrage results from consumers misconstruing the indexical visual cues of the content and consequently believing that Farida is exploiting her companion by putting her in uncomfortable clothing for attention—a common and frequently fair criticism about animal content depicting companion species in uncomfortable situations or outfits just to generate engagement (Pierce 2023). However, in Farida's case, the human-like clothing is for the duck's well-being, as the content creator explains in a response to commenters. Consequently, Farida transforms the initially negative techno-affective encounter between consumer and companion species content into a positive one. By reassuring that the visual cues representing the encounter between herself and Raina are benign, Farida reestablishes a positive affective flow toward and through her content.

In this section, we discussed the techno-affective encounters between consumers and the companion species, the content, and the content creator. When moved by indexical cues of companion species content, consumers forge parasocial relationships with the companion species and consequently engage with the content. We find that feedback engagement in the form of likes or comments can influence the choices about future companion species content to be shared and future corporeal interactions between content creators and their animal companions. Next, we discuss how content circulation impacts interpersonal relationships.

Relational Circulation. The content moves beyond creation, individual consumption, and individual engagement when circulated interpersonally. Friends share animal content on social media to foster and strengthen relationships. This results in intimacy with a human other through techno-affective encounters. When a consumer shares content with a friend because it relates to their histories of contact (Ahmed 2004), an act of re-indexicalization occurs. Shared experiences and intimate knowledge between sender and receiver inform the re-indexicalization of companion species content. Through re-indexicalization, the consumer tailors the content to an audience that is not necessarily familiar with the companion species. The sender embeds the companion species content—originally representing the corporeal affective encounters between the content creator and their companion species—with an interpersonally relevant cue. For example, someone may send their friend content depicting two baby pandas struggling to stand up along with some text accompanying the content: "You and me at our first yoga class" (author notes). In this case, the accompanying text serves to re-

indexicalize the content depicting the cute panda by transforming its cues to represent a shared experience of the two friends having challenges in yoga class.

Sharing animal content has a phatic function (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Malinowski 1920; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Miller 2008), which signals presence and maintains connection. This occurs when the affective cues of content impress upon a consumer by reminding them of their interpersonal relationships, thereby inciting the sharing of this content to affirm their bonds. Aria's techno-affective encounters with her children serve as a bonding activity. She explains, "I wouldn't share it with certain friends because it might only be cute to [her] kids." Similarly, Wilma communicates daily with some friends, but sparingly with others with whom she keeps in touch through techno-affective encounters. For example, she maintains her relationship with school friends by sending posts once or twice a month. Wilma's shared posts are carefully chosen and re-indexicalized to refer to shared moments or dreams such as a mutual desire to "go to a dog cafe and a cat cafe in Mumbai." Similarly, Zoey shares posts that remind her of interpersonal connections, inspiring her to re-indexicalize the content's cues to embed relational meanings:

> I've had cats and pugs before and I've lived with both. Sometimes if a pug looks like one of the pugs that I used to live with, I'll send it and say, "this looks like Annie [her pug]" or "this looks like us and is acting like us," I also really like penguins, but sometimes when I see a penguin [in online content] and it'll behave like the dog that I used to live with, I'll send it to someone and say, "look, he's acting like my dog!"

Upon individual consumption, Zoey is moved by companion species content, whether it depicts pugs, the species of her companion animal, or penguins, a wild animal that she finds cute. Consequently, Zoey sends this content to friends with whom she has had shared experiences that resemble what is referenced through the indexical cues. To re-indexicalize the content, Zoey adds explicit textual cues that relate to a shared experience (e.g., "This looks like Annie") or a known detail about her own life (e.g., "look, he is acting like my dog"), thus maintaining and reinforcing an interpersonal connection.

Depending on the nature and strength of the relationship between sender and receiver, consumers may not need to explicitly re-indexicalize cues. If there is a long history of contact and shared encounters between two friends, such cues can be implied simply through sharing the content. Our participants also strengthen their relationships by sharing content that reflects intimate knowledge of friends and family. Mohan shares content with his friends when he knows it will move them without having to add explicit cues from their histories of contact:

> I have some friends from school, some friends from my work, all different places. I know they all enjoy different animal content. One of my friends has a cat, and she really likes watching cat videos. So, when I find some interesting videos, I send them to her. Another friend of mine has a dog. His name is Linus, and he specifically likes small dogs, not the big ones. So, when I see some small dog videos, of course, I usually share them with her.

Relational circulation allows our participants to perform care and gifting (Giesler 2006). Therefore, they are mindful when deciding which content to send to whom. Debbie explains that not only does she choose the content she shares with friends by reflecting on her intimate knowledge of their likes, but she also accounts for their dislikes. By considering her knowledge of friends' likes and dislikes, Debbie refrains from sharing content that would fail to generate affect when consumed by her friends, or, in the case of a friend with a negative history with cats, provoke negative affect.

> My friend has a puppy. She got a baby Bernese Mountain dog. And so, I often go visit her. And I'm obsessed with her puppy. And she's the cutest thing. And I'll send her more dog videos or puppy videos similar to her puppy because I know that she can relate to those things, and she finds them adorable. My other friend used to have a dog, so I know that she's more of a dog person. But she grew up in a house where her mom had a lot of cats, and she had a bad experience with cats. So, I don't send her a lot of those cat videos. I send her more dog videos or otters and duckies and stuff like that. I know that she prefers those animals.

By re-indexicalizing content that moves them personally, our participants perform relational maintenance, care, bonding, and gifting. When companion species content is relationally circulated, consumers re-indexicalize its cues, either explicitly or implicitly. Consumers tailor re-indexicalization to impress upon individuals with whom they have an established social relationship. Unlike consumers who re-indexicalize the content's cues to reflect and appeal to a specific relationship, content curators decontextualize content by modifying its cues to make it more broadly consumable, thus engaging in public circulation.

Public Circulation. As public accounts, content curators cater to a broad audience by sharing curated online content with decontextualized cues. The content posted by curators is not their own. They rarely share the content they find as is, as they adopt existing memes or online trends to add cues to the content. Since the indexical cues of companion species content are based on the corporeal affective encounter between a content creator and the animal, content curators must disengage from this personal narrative in order to establish broader appeal for the depicted animal from a wide range of audiences. Curators alter content through decontextualization: modifying indexical cues that

represent the original content creator's corporeal affective encounter with their animal companion by replacing them with cues that represent popular culture or broader appeal to interspecies relationships beyond the original human–animal dyad. Some examples of this are removing or adding textual cues with wider appeal or even changing animal names to more populist ones. This process renders animal content more appreciable by an audience who may not have a parasocial relationship with the account from which the content originates. Figure 5 shows an example of a curator decontextualizing the textual cues of content to repost it via their account.

In the original post, Benny is introduced via DoggoLingo (Boddy 2017), a form of internet language, as the "goodest boi" in a caption that reflects the corporeal affective encounter between the content creator and Benny. The textual cue is indexicalized to represent a corporeal encounter between Benny and his human through a short,

sweet tale composed by the content creator. The tone is heartwarming as the textual cue highlights the creator's affection toward the pup. To broaden the appreciation of this content, the dog content curator @barked decontextualizes the cue by taking it out and adding new text that no longer mentions Benny by name or refers to him directly. Instead, the new cue appropriates the popular phrase "Woke up like this," frequently used as a caption accompanying a selfie upon waking up. To make the content more animal-themed and comical, @barked uses Petspeak, replacing "up" with "pup." By taking the extra step to decontextualize the indexical cue, the affect is distanced from the corporeal encounter between Benny and his human. The content now evokes an affective response to an adorable unnamed golden retriever puppy and a textual cue representing a well-known social media expression. Through these changes, companion species content appeals to a broader audience not interested in parasocial

FIGURE 5

PUBLIC CIRCULATION VIA DECONTEXTUALIZATION

interaction or establishing intimacy with the companion species depicted in the content.

Upon asking our participants about their consumption of companion species content, several mentioned their interest in curated content, such as that of @barked, @weratedogs, @animalsdoingthings, @catsdoingthings, or @petcollective. For instance, Mohan explains that he individually consumes @barked content from his feed.

> It's curated really well; they post content quite regularly. So, every time I scroll through my feed, I'll most probably see one posted from them. That's one thing. And they try to cover different breeds of dogs. It's not just one specific breed. There are small dogs. There are big dogs all different times. Yeah. And it's also pretty timely, I'd say, because now it's fall, and there are a lot of posts that have a fall theme and stuff.

Mohan appreciates the variety and timeliness of cues in @barked's decontextualized content. When highlighting the former, he references the various breeds of dogs that the account depicts in their curated content. Instead of seeking a parasocial relationship with a specific animal, Mohan enjoys affective encounters with a variety of animals. Mohan also touches upon the content curators' ability to keep up with popular trends or contexts; for example, he mentions that the content reflects the current season, fall. Mohan refers to fall's mood and feelings represented through decontextualized visual cues, fallen autumn leaves, pumpkins, autumn-themed colors and decorations, as well as textual cues referring to the season itself.

Recirculated companion species content no longer fosters a parasocial relationship between consumers and the original animal whose image was shared by the content creator, but a decontextualized representation of it appropriated by a content curator. Jodie describes that she individually consumes content from @PetCollective. She likes that this account creates short videos or clips that are "not narrative at all," depicting jokes that are no longer about particular humans or animals but anonymous, decontextualized animals that evoke positive affect. Given its decontextualized nature, content posted by curators can be re-indexicalized when shared through relational circulation. For instance, informed by her histories of contact with her social network, Jodie explicitly or implicitly re-indexicalizes curated content by sharing it with a friend. As a result, Jodie engages in techno-affective encounters through decontextualized companion species content as an act of relational maintenance.

In this section, we discussed how curators engage in public circulation by decontextualizing the indexical cues of companion species content. Curators modify content by removing and adding cues related to more broadly appreciated themes and trends. As we study a network of circulated content, we argue that decontextualized content can be re-indexicalized by consumers who share it with their social network for relational maintenance and reinforcement. With this section, we conclude our findings on the digital affective network of companion species content. We have showed how various actors within this digital network participate in affective encounters and how both corporeal and techno-affective encounters shape affective flows when a digital object is created and circulated. We now discuss the implications of these findings.

DISCUSSION

In our findings, we show how the creation, consumption, and circulation of a digital object generates affective flows that help perpetuate different types of relationships. By tracing the affective journey of digital objects—from their moment of inception through indexicalization, their adoption as relational tokens through re-indexicalization, to their transformation for mass appeal through decontextualization—we illuminate how affect circulates in digital platforms and is perpetually transformed. These processes shape not only consumer relationships but also the broader cultural dynamics of digital consumption. In so doing, we contribute to consumer research on digital object circulation (Figueiredo and Scaraboto 2016; Giesler 2006) and affective consumer networks (Kozinets et al. 2017; Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015).

Contributions

For centuries, humans have developed technologies to sustain relationships across distances, from early communication tools like the telegraph to contemporary digital platforms designed for bi- and multidirectional interaction. Our findings demonstrate that digital objects, like physical ones such as the cassette tape (Kuruoğlu and Ger 2015), can be imbued with cues that carry affect across consumer networks. By mapping the digital landscape of affective encounters, we show how content transforms as it travels through affective networks, shaped by the encounters it mediates. As content is recirculated, cues are actively modified, consequently steering multidirectional affective flows. We show the significant role of affect as a mobilizing force in content sharing and the intersection of this practice with social relationships.

Our findings show that in digital networks, affect can arise in encounters even when physical presence is absent and interactions are non-reciprocal. For example, in the initial encounter with a digital object, the consumer is moved into a parasocial relationship with the animal depicted through the unidirectional affective flow from the content. This mirrors how online accounts establish personae with whom consumers may form an attachment (Horton and Wohl 1956; Mardon et al. 2023a). Nevertheless, the novelty of our findings lies in uncovering how such an attachment is generated and maintained through influencers'

indexicalization of affect via content cues that resonate with and captivate the audience. While existing research has demonstrated the work that influencers do to maintain their audience (Abidin 2016; Mardon, Cocker, and Daunt 2023b; Mardon et al. 2023a), we show that affect is the fodder behind the forging and perpetuation of parasocial intimacies. In our transferability section, we further elaborate on how our findings apply to influencer practices and relationships.

The affective flow also moves bidirectionally as circulating content serves a phatic function (Jerslev and Mortensen 2016; Malinowski 1920; Marwick and Boyd 2011; Miller 2008), allowing people to be present in each other's lives without extraordinary effort. The digital affective networks we demonstrate are a product of careful calculation and curation, drawing on both intimate knowledge of one's social circle and an understanding of the cultural moment. This is exemplified by the media's recognition of sharing online content as a love language (Paoletta 2019). Influenced by histories of contact (Ahmed 2004) that allow them to know what moves the other, consumers identify, re-indexicalize, and send content to their loved ones. These reciprocal techno-affective encounters fuel the affective flow that enables people to maintain relationships not simply with a few swipes and taps on a cell phone but with a careful and thoughtful process of re-indexicalization that makes each share special and personal.

Affective flow is multidirectional when content is transformed to appeal to a broader audience than that of the account from which the object was created. Beyond its function as a relational token, content is curated and circulated to demonstrate knowledge of popular culture and trends. This phenomenon is not an isolated or topical circulation centered around a recreational activity such as geocaching, nor is it a gift system that relies on common interests such as music sharing. Our concept of decontextualization uncovers the processes behind content curation accounts (sometimes referred to derogatorily as "content farming" when content is used without giving credit), which participate in the attention economy (Smith and Fischer 2021) by coopting other content creators' work to render it appealing to a broader audience. Meme creators modify content cues by incorporating one or both of the following: humor and intertextuality (Knobel and Lankshear 2007). We show that through decontextualization, curators and meme creators conduct an intentional and calculated act that requires not only a stripping of cues reflecting the personal narrative of the original account but also a re-imbuing of culturally salient cues that require a certain knowledge of popular culture and zeitgeist. In so doing, we also uncover the role of affect in memeifcation and virality.

While animals have dominated the meme world, our concept of decontextualization extends beyond animal content. Our theorization explains the overarching process of modifying content beyond the corporeal encounter by which it was inspired. Consider some of the internet's most well-known memes in 2024 (Caffrey and Bauza 2024). The memes' original context ranges from an interview with former vice president Kamala Harris, a Muppet, an anthropomorphized dog cartoon, actor Kevin James shrugging, and—of course—Moo Deng. The latter, a pygmy Hippopotamus born at a Thai zoo in 2024 (Specter 2024), exemplifies how decontextualization can lead to memeification. Upon consuming the original content posted on the zoo's social media accounts, which indexicalize the hippo's interaction with the employees, consumers forged parasocial connections with her and re-indexicalized her photos for relational circulation. Given her expressive face and rebellious nature—"Videos of her resisting being washed or moved" (Specter 2024)—the cues of Moo Deng's content proved easy to decontextualize. Curators stripped the original indexical cues of her rebellious corporeal encounters with zookeepers and integrated humorous intertextual themes through new cues. One such example is the textual cue "realizing it's only Tuesday" (Specter 2024), which reframes her defiance as a relatable expression of workweek fatigue and longing for the weekend. More broadly, decontextualization reveals how affect is not only preserved but strategically reshaped as digital content circulates, reinforcing the role of digital objects in sustaining and transforming social relationships.

Transferability

Given animals' capacities as social lubricants (Messent 1983; Veevers 1985), it is no surprise that this role is carried forth in their digital manifestation as companion species content (Baklanov 2020). However, digital content beyond that which is animal-themed is increasingly becoming the fodder that fuels our social connections (Edelman 2024; Kelly 2023; Travers 2024).Our framework applies to content creation, consumption, and circulation pertaining to, and beyond, companion species content. Both ordinary content creators and influencers engage in affect eliciting corporeal encounters—with others or objects—that inspire them to embed indexical cues of the encounters and relationships into a digital object. We posit that corporeal affective encounters can occur between a content creator and a human other, thus moving them into an interpersonal intimacy and inspiring them to indexicalize the affect through embedded cues within a digital object. Content representing interpersonal intimacies is ubiquitous on social media, both in influencer accounts—such as family influencers (Abidin 2017) and child microcelebrities (Abidin 2015, 2020)—and ordinary accounts.

Another example is when influencers interact with the products they promote for brands via their social media accounts. In Mardon et al. (2023a), beauty vloggers initially embed themselves as entrepreneurs in consumer

collectives by creating content demonstrating their application of beauty products. By indexicalizing their encounter with products, content creators generate affect in their audiences and move them into a relationship with the depicted human other (the influencer) and the object (the beauty product). While indexicalized content can facilitate techno-affective encounters with an influencer, the motives behind its creation can influence how consumers perceive the content creator. For instance, when content creators lean into "emergent celebrity and influencer roles" (Mardon et al. 2023a, 630), their self-interest and profit-driven motives are conspicuous in the indexicalized cues, rendering the content unsuccessful at moving consumers into formerly established parasocial intimacy.

After being indexicalized and shared, the digital object may be re-indexicalized to alter its embedded cues in order to appeal to the next audience for which it is targeted. For instance, a consumer who sees the beauty influencer's content can share it with a friend whom they think might look good wearing the product, thus performing relational maintenance. Our findings show that participation in digital networks not only expresses a need to reach out and perpetuate connections (Kozinets et al. 2017) but also fosters affective flows that transform throughout the object's circulation, contributing to the maintenance of different types of relations and audiences.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the novelty of our discussion on the journey of digital objects alongside affective flows across social platforms, we were unable to fully explore how the human–animal bond influences, and is influenced by, this phenomenon. Future scholars could explore how companion species content functions as a form of social facilitation, extending animals' offline capacities (Beckoff 2017; Bulsara et al. 2007; Messent 1983; Veevers 1985, 1985; Wood, Giles-Corti, and Bulsara 2005) to the digital realm. Our findings imply that companion animals' capacities as social lubricants traverse to digital space, thus facilitating interactions and reinforcing relationships as companion species content. By re-indexicalizing and sharing companion species content, consumers engage in relational maintenance, fostering connections with social contacts. Future scholars can investigate how companion species function as social catalysts within decontextualized content, thus amplifying the socialization process between various audiences.

While we focus on the relational dynamics in companion species content circulation, we recognize that there is much left to say about the monetization of this content and its role in the attention economy. While it is undeniable that some animal content creation also involves monetization of companion animals, we bracketed this question to better isolate the affective work. We suggest that the mechanics

of the attention economy will most likely resemble those in analogous contexts, such as child microcelebrities where research is already abundant (Abidin 2015, 2020). Additionally, we acknowledge that there is a rather dark side to this phenomenon, as highlighted in media discourse, including the domestication of feral animals unsuitable for homes, the mistreatment of animals through uncomfortable outfits or dangerous stunts, and the use of sedatives to make them more docile. We acknowledge this and ask researchers and practitioners to develop better ethical frameworks that treat animal companion species with dignity.

Another area for future research is the community dynamics between animal content creators. In our work, we focus on the content creator and audiences' relationships with the animal depicted in the companion species content. Future research can expand our work to study the intracommunity relations between popular animal account managers and their audiences. Further exploration of content creator–audience interactions and relationships could better our understanding of the community management and attention work involved in maintaining these digital ecosystems.

We acknowledge that our focus is on successful rather than failed or blocked affective flow that restricts the circulation of content. We find that tensions may arise if the affective flow is staunched at any interaction across the network and for various reasons. Examples of blocks in affective flow are an ineffective indexicalization of corporeal encounters between humans and animals or a lack of appreciation and feedback for the companion species being individually consumed or relationally circulated. While we discuss this tension briefly in our example of the negative affect generated by Raina the duck wearing winter clothes, we suggest further research investigate more negative encounters and failed circulation attempts.

Finally, our research was conducted within the specific context of Instagram, a platform with unique affordances (Shamayleh and Arsel 2022). As features evolve—and with them the platform affordances—indexicalization, re-indexicalization, and decontextualization processes may continue to adapt. Future research can investigate how different platform affordances shape content creation, circulation, and affective dynamics as new technologies evolve.

Conclusion

In this article, we ask: how are consumer relationships shaped and perpetuated through the creation, consumption, and circulation of a digital object across a digital affective network? We answer this question by studying the creation and circulation of companion species content on social media. Digital networks are fueled by the affect stemming from corporeal encounters that inspire the creation of content, as well as the techno-affective encounters that occur

when the content is consumed and circulated. Our project maps the journey of a digital object as it circulates across the social media landscape. We show how consumers continuously transform the affective cues of digital objects as they circulate them, creating networks of affective flows that make content creating and sharing irresistible. Given our context, our work also alludes to the profound bond between humans and animals as companion species, highlighting the intricate entanglements they form—not only with each other as organic beings but also with technology as a catalyst, extending their social affordances across circuits and networks.

DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first author collected visual and textual data as screen captures of content from companion animal Instagram accounts between 2017 and 2022. In addition, the first author conducted in-depth virtual interviews with 21 pet social media account managers from United States and Canada and 12 pet account followers and pet content consumers. The interviews were conducted in four rounds, the first round taking place throughout the summer of 2018 (7 interviews), the second during January and February 2019 (10 interviews), the third during June and July 2021 (7 interviews), and the fourth during November 2021 (9 Interviews). Both authors also collected secondary data from web pages and online interviews about the phenomenon. They also managed their own pet accounts and followed other pet accounts for introspective engagement with the context. Finally, both authors performed data analysis. The data are stored on a password-protected cloud (Dropbox) accessible to both authors and an external hard drive stored at the first author's residence. All methodological procedures were approved by the Research Ethics Unit at Concordia University, and are subject to Canada Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

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