

Pet Influencer in Influencer Marketing: Examining How Pet Influencer Attributes Could Influence Audience Purchase Intention

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Abstract : The development of digital marketing has introduced social media influencers (SMIs) as key players in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors. Although human influencers remain more familiar, pet influencers, a specific type of SMI, also hold strong potential to influence customer responses. However, research on pet influencers remains limited. Although the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) has been widely applied to explain persuasion in human influencer marketing, its applicability to non-human influencers remains largely unexplored. Using ELM, this study examines the effectiveness of pet influencers in shaping audiences' purchase intention and perceived sincerity through three proposed attributes: authenticity, attractiveness, and anthropomorphism. Data were collected from 157 audiences who had viewed pet influencer content at least three times within the past year and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that anthropomorphism is the only attribute related to both purchase intention and perceived sincerity. Authenticity is directly related to perceived sincerity but not purchase intention, while attractiveness shows no relation to either outcome. Perceived sincerity itself does not translate into purchase intention. These results suggest that persuasion in the pet influencer context is driven more by the ELM peripheral route, centered on emotional and symbolic cues such as anthropomorphism, than by the central route typically associated with authenticity in human influencer marketing. As most measurement items were adapted from human influencer research, they may not fully capture pet influencer traits, and future studies are encouraged to develop and validate measures specific to the pet influencer context.

Keywords: *anthropomorphism, attractiveness, authenticity, perceived sincerity, petfluencer*

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has introduced powerful players in marketing communication, capable of influencing people's perceptions and behaviors (Duralia, 2024). Social media influencers have become increasingly well-known through digital platforms, surpassing traditional celebrities who typically appear on television (J. Kim & Kim, 2022). These influencers can shape audience perceptions and influence purchase intention by disseminating brand information through their content (Chu, 2023). Audiences respond positively to influencer content, with approximately 68% of



consumers in Indonesia purchasing products endorsed by influencers (Statista, 2025). Through their content, influencers can enhance a brand's image, fostering a closer emotional connection between the audience and the brand (Hermanda et al., 2019). In Indonesia, brands have begun to recognize the potential of influencers in bridging the gap between customer engagement and interaction, as evidenced by the fact that around 26% of Indonesian brands utilize influencer marketing at least once a month (Prasetyo et al., 2025; Statista, 2025). The growing trend of influencer marketing has also given rise to new types of influencers, one of which is the petfluencer.

Although the petfluencer trend is on the rise (Chitrakorn, 2022), the term still sounds unfamiliar to some. Petfluencers are pets that maintain social media profiles similar to human influencers, have followers, and can endorse brands. While petfluencers are primarily known for their visual presence in content, these accounts are indeed managed by their human owners (Lavertu et al., 2025). Petfluencers are becoming increasingly effective in promoting brands (Ngai, 2023), as they can enhance emotional connections with humans (Lass-Hennemann et al., 2022). They express happiness that fosters interpersonal closeness and increases customer engagement (Maddox, 2021). However, high levels of distrust toward social media influencers have become a challenge for influencer marketing effectiveness (Katadata, 2025). Influencers are often perceived as over-endorsing brands, which triggers audience skepticism (Ki et al., 2023). In contrast, petfluencers are perceived as more credible than human influencers (Cioccio et al., 2024). A survey by MarkPlus found that a cheerful personality is the most trusted influencer trait, with a share of 31% (Validnews, 2022). This aligns with the cheerful and joyful characteristics commonly attributed to petfluencers, highlighting the marketing potential they possess (Lavertu et al., 2025). In Indonesia, the growth of petfluencers is also significant. According to The Jakarta Post (2021), several petfluencer accounts such as Pororo (@pororoofficial96), Kaori (@fluffykaori), and Duffy (@duffythepoodle) have gained millions of views and followers, earning incomes similar to those of human influencers.

Nevertheless, the success of petfluencer content in influencing audiences is not solely dependent on the number of followers or viewers, but also on several other factors such as social presence (Jacobson et al., 2022), attractiveness and perceived sincerity (Lavertu et al., 2025; Wei et al., 2025), and audience engagement (Myers et al., 2024). Compared to human influencers who are often perceived as less credible (Cioccio et al., 2024), petfluencers are viewed as more sincere in their content delivery (Lavertu et al., 2025). AlFarraj et al. (2021) found that attractiveness has a positive effect on purchase intention. In the case of petfluencers, their appealing and adorable appearance creates a joyful atmosphere that drives audience intention (Wei et al., 2025). These findings suggest that authenticity, attractiveness, and anthropomorphism are essential factors in determining petfluencer effectiveness. However, research on petfluencers remains limited, and existing studies are predominantly centered on human influencers (Cioccio et al., 2024; Hariningsih et al., 2024; Hossain et al., 2025; Jacobson et al., 2022; Lavertu et al., 2025; Myers et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2023; Shoenberger & Kim, 2023; Wei et al., 2025). More specifically, although the Elaboration Likelihood Model has been widely applied to explain persuasion processes in human influencer marketing, its applicability to non-human influencers such as petfluencers remains largely unexplored. It is therefore unclear whether the central and peripheral routes of persuasion identified in human influencer contexts operate in the same way when the source of the message is a pet

rather than a person. This gap causes the marketing potential of petfluencers to be overlooked and underexplored.

To address this gap, this study draws on the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as its theoretical framework. The ELM explains that there are two primary routes in the persuasion process: the central route, which focuses on rational evaluation, and the peripheral route, which emphasizes emotional responses (Bitner & Obermiller, 1985). Individuals tend to process information more carefully when they are highly involved, such as when they are actively in need of the endorsed product. Conversely, when involvement is low, individuals are more likely to rely on external cues like appearance rather than the content of the message itself (Teng et al., 2014). In marketing contexts, the ELM has been widely used as a theory of persuasion in previous studies (Chang et al., 2015; Liao & Huang, 2021; Markowitz, 2020; Teng et al., 2014) to identify behavioral changes driven by message reception (Akgun et al., 2017). When a petfluencer is perceived as attractive by the audience, it tends to increase emotional engagement. This aligns with Wei et al. (2025), who noted that, according to the ELM, attractiveness influences message reception through the peripheral route. The attractiveness displayed by petfluencers functions as an external factor that elicits audience responses without requiring deep cognitive processing of the message content (Hariningsih et al., 2024). Similarly, anthropomorphism can trigger emotional responses in the audience.

In contrast, authenticity operates through the central route of persuasion. When consumers are in urgent need of a product, they are more likely to pay rational attention to the quality and relevance of the message (Hossain et al., 2025). Authenticity becomes a critical issue as it is often scrutinized by the audience when viewing promotional content (Amini, 2025). The ELM offers a framework for understanding how message processing influences audience behavior (Hossain et al., 2025). In the context of petfluencers promoting brands through content, both the central and peripheral routes of persuasion, as outlined in the ELM, play a significant role in shaping perceived sincerity and purchase intention.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present study examines three key petfluencer attributes: authenticity, attractiveness, and anthropomorphism. Authenticity refers to the perceptions that something is genuine, valid, and reliable in the eyes of followers. In the digital context, it is often understood as presenting oneself authentically to netizens, encompassing both the sender's identity and how that identity is reflected in communication and behavior (Abdullah et al., 2024; Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Eigenraam et al., 2021). Prior studies emphasize that authenticity is not an objective trait but a perception shaped by audience beliefs within a specific social context, and that it tends to emerge more strongly when senders engage in explicit self-presentation, such as through story features and posts (Kreling et al., 2022; Morhart et al., 2015). Authentic messages are generally more persuasive because they allow audiences to identify with the sender and the meaning of the message, particularly when the content aligns naturally with the influencer's everyday life rather than appearing as overt promotion (Pöyry et al., 2019; Ren et al., 2023). In the context of pet influencers specifically, the presence of animal characters in promotional content has been shown to strengthen emotional bonds between consumers and the promoted product, and higher perceived authenticity has been linked to a greater likelihood of purchase intention (Hänninen, 2021; Ren et al., 2023). Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: Authenticity has a significant positive influence on purchase intention

H2: Authenticity has a significant positive influence on perceived sincerity

Attractiveness refers to the extent to which consumers perceive an individual or object as able to attract attention and build emotional connections and affection (E. H. Kim, 2022). An influencer's attractiveness is one of the main aspects consumers pay attention to (Davis & Berlianto, 2025). According to AlFarraj et al. (2021), attractiveness is a key factor in delivering valuable messages, and influencers with a high level of attractiveness are more likely to shape their followers' purchase intentions. This aligns with research by Bai et al. (2024), which reveals that a seller's attractiveness can influence consumer perceptions by capturing attention and encouraging behavioral responses that lead to increased purchase intention. Furthermore, halo-effect theory suggests that individuals with attractive appearances are generally evaluated more positively overall; thus, attractiveness can influence perceptions of an influencer's quality (Kaplan, 1978). Social psychologists argue that attractiveness often triggers stereotypes, leading to a halo effect in which attractive individuals are perceived more positively overall (Shang & Zhang, 2025), which may subsequently be interpreted as an indicator of perceived sincerity. When applied to influencers, attractiveness can help shape positive evaluations that extend to the opinions and brand affiliations they convey (Hariningsih et al., 2024). In the context of pet influencers, they tend to perceive positive responses from audiences because they are perceived as more appealing and capable of telling stories through the role of humans as the narrator behind the context (Khalisa et al., 2025). For example, pet influencer Instagram accounts are often seen as promoting happiness rather than toxicity, thereby both shaping and being shaped by broader social and economic dynamics (Maddox, 2021). In terms of content, attractiveness positively influences purchase intention. This is supported by the findings of Weismueller et al. (2020), which demonstrate that an influencer's attractiveness positively affects consumers' purchase intentions. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3: Attractiveness has a significant positive influence on purchase intention**H4: Attractiveness has a significant positive influence on perceived sincerity**

Anthropomorphism is the tendency to assign human-like emotions and actions to animals or objects. For some individuals, it represents a way to express empathy, connect more deeply with animals, and show attentiveness to their well-being (Mota-Rojas et al., 2021). Humans have a psychological inclination to treat non-human entities like animals, machines, plants, or even supernatural and natural phenomena as if they were human beings (Festerling & Siraj, 2022). It involves attributing human-like features, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors to non-human objects (Ali et al., 2021). Research by Seeger et al. (2021) shows that increased human likeness in objects enhances perceived liability, which reflects a sense of connection to anthropomorphism. Studies have explored consumer responses to various strategies employed in pet social media accounts, including the use of anthropomorphism (Yoo et al., 2024). Audiences who anthropomorphize petfluencers perceive them as more sincere (Lavertu et al., 2025). Lu (2022) states that advertising appeals involving elements of anthropomorphism can positively enhance purchase intentions. However, in the study conducted by Wang & Park (2023), anthropomorphism did not have an indirect effect on the audience's purchase intention. Based on this reasoning, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H5: Anthropomorphism has a significant positive influence on purchase intention**H6: Anthropomorphism has a significant positive influence on perceived sincerity**

Perceived sincerity refers to the audience's judgment of an influencer's honesty, sincerity, and non-manipulative intentions (M. Lee & Park, 2023). Sincerity plays a crucial role in building closeness between an influencer and their audience, and it can serve as a distinctive advantage that sets the influencer apart from others (J. A. Lee & Eastin, 2020). People who are perceived as sincere are generally believed to possess good moral character, making sincerity a vital aspect of creating a positive first impression (Lavertu et al., 2025). According to Page and Clementson (2023), perceived sincerity can influence how the audience interprets messages. Supporting this, Zhafira et al. (2022) found that products promoted by sincere influencers are more likely to generate positive attitudes toward the brand than those promoted by influencers perceived as less sincere. A previous study stated that perceived sincerity has a positive and significant effect on customer purchase intention (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016). Contrary to the prior findings, J. A. Lee & Eastin (2020) showed that perceived sincerity has no significant relationship with purchase intention.

Based on these considerations, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: Perceived sincerity has a significant positive influence on purchase intention

H8: Perceived sincerity mediates the relationship between authenticity and purchase intention

H9: Perceived sincerity mediates the relationship between attractiveness and purchase intention

H10: Perceived sincerity mediates the relationship between anthropomorphism and purchase intention

Purchase intention refers to the extent to which consumers express a desire or tendency to purchase a product (Peña-García et al., 2020). Santiago and Serralha (2022) define purchase intention as a consumer's tendency or initial intention to purchase in the near future, regardless of whether they have already been exposed to the product or criticism related to it. Before making a purchase decision, consumers generally seek information first to ensure that the product aligns with their needs and preferences (Moslehpour et al., 2021). Reviews or recommendations from influencers, friends, and family members are considered one of the strongest factors in influencing consumers' purchase intentions (Meliawati et al., 2023). Social media influencers have proven effective in influencing consumer purchase intentions, as shown by reports indicating that 50% of companies choose to use their services in promotional activities (Kurdi et al., 2022). Interestingly, not all social media influencers are human; some are pets whose social media accounts are managed by their owners (Myers et al., 2024). This phenomenon has attracted well-known brands such as Budweiser, Google, Subaru, and The Body Shop to include pet influencers as part of their marketing strategy. This indicates that pet influencers are not limited to promoting pet care products but are also effective in a broader marketing context (Myers et al., 2024). When audiences view content posted by pet influencers, they tend to experience curiosity as a natural reaction, which in turn can shape attitudes and encourage their purchase intention (Hänninen, 2021). Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of petfluencers by investigating authenticity, anthropomorphism, and attractiveness as independent variables that influence purchase intention through perceived sincerity as a mediating variable, using the Elaboration Likelihood Model as the theoretical framework.

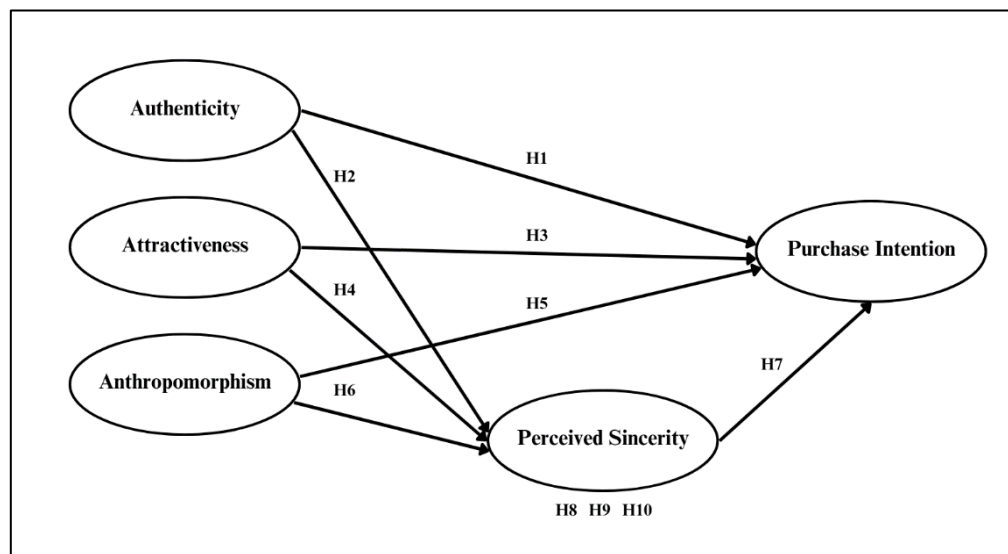


Figure 1. Research model

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the influence of petfluencer attributes on purchase intention and perceived sincerity. The research examines both direct and indirect effects through statistical modeling. Indonesia's internet penetration rate increased to 79.5% in 2024, with Java Island holding the highest rate at 83.64% based on region (Katadata, 2024). According to the Indonesian Pet Food Association (AMHKI), the pet food sector grew by 60% in the Java Island market (Aldianto & Noviani, 2023). The high number of internet users and the pet food market in Java Island create opportunities for an increase in the number of followers of petfluencer accounts. Given the penetration rate and the level of the pet food market, Java Island serves as a relevant sample for our study. Data were collected through an online survey targeting respondents in Java Island, Indonesia, who met our three purposive sampling criteria: (1) aged 18 or older, (2) residing in Java Island, and (3) having been exposed to petfluencer content at least three times within the past year. The minimum sample size was calculated using the minimum five observations per indicator rule (Hair et al., 2010). The minimum sample size is 135, and we collected 157 samples for this research. The profiles of respondents are shown in Table 1.

Measures

Petfluencers, as one type of social media influencer, can influence audiences' behavioral intentions (Wei et al., 2025). In this study, the variables tested include authenticity, attractiveness, anthropomorphism, perceived sincerity, and purchase intention. The items for these variables, adapted from previous studies, were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (5).

Data analysis method

The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4 software. PLS-SEM was chosen for its suitability in estimating complex models with latent variables and its stability with small to medium sample sizes.

This study includes a mediating variable in the research model and a medium sample size of 157.

Table 1. Respondents profile

Categories	Count	Percentage
Gender		
Male	38	24.20%
Female	119	75.80%
Age		
18-22	87	55.41%
23-28	46	29.30%
29-37	7	4.46%
38-44	9	5.73%
45-55	7	4.46%
>55	1	0.64%
Education level		
High school or lower	49	31.21%
Diploma 1, 2, 3	9	5.73%
Diploma 4 or Bachelor	87	55.41%
Master or PhD	12	7.64%
Monthly Income		
Less than IDR 2,500,000	65	41.40%
IDR 2,500,000 - 4,999,999	60	38.22%
IDR 5,000,000 - 7,499,999	21	13.38%
IDR 7,500,000 - 9,999,999	2	1.27%
IDR 10,000,000 - 14,999,999	4	2.55%
IDR 15,000,000 or more	5	3.18%

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings with clear descriptions. Figures and tables may accompany results.

Results

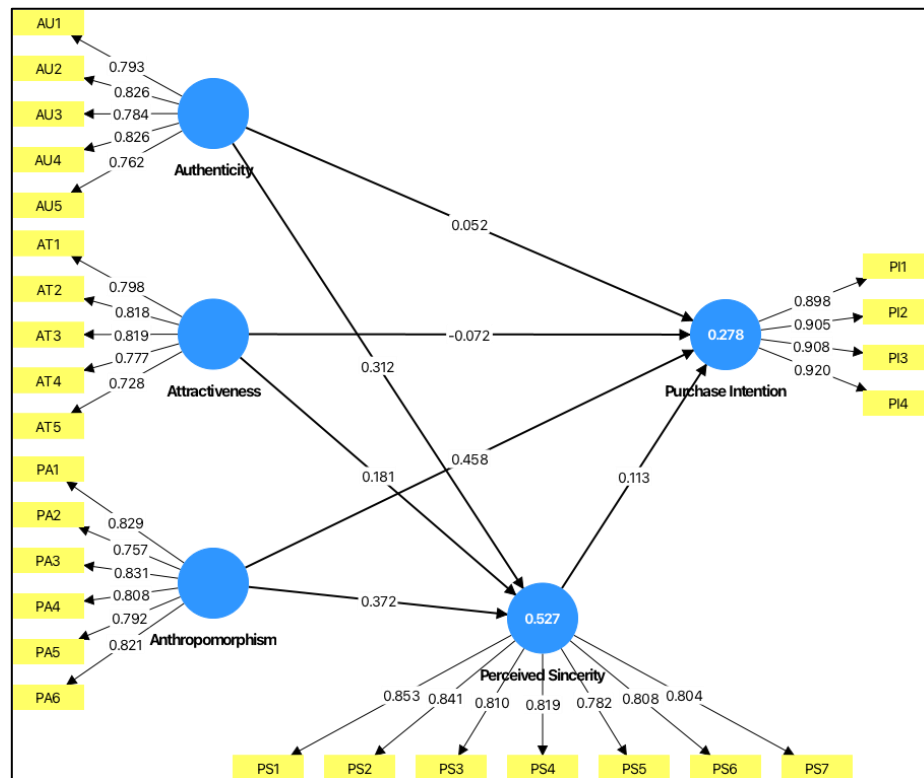


Figure 2. SmartPLS result

Construct Reliability and Validity

Table 2. Outer Loadings, Cronbach's Alpha, Composite Reliability, AVE

Constructs	Item	Loadings	Cronbach's α	ρA	CR (ρ_c)	AVE
Authenticity	AU1	0.730	0.858	0.864	0.898	0.638
	AU2	0.823				
	AU3	0.755				
	AU4	0.749				
	AU5	0.694				
Attractiveness	AT1	0.798	0.849	0.860	0.892	0.622
	AT2	0.818				
	AT3	0.819				
	AT4	0.777				
	AT5	0.728				
Anthropomorphism	PA1	0.793	0.893	0.895	0.918	0.651
	PA2	0.826				
	PA3	0.784				
	PA4	0.826				
	PA5	0.792				
	PA6	0.821				
Perceived Sincerity	PS1	0.853	0.917	0.919	0.934	0.667
	PS2	0.841				
	PS3	0.810				
	PS4	0.819				
	PS5	0.782				
	PS6	0.808				
	PS7	0.804				

Constructs	Item	Loadings	Cronbach's α	ρ_A	CR (ρ_c)	AVE
Purchase Intention	PI1	0.898	0.929	0.931	0.949	0.824
	PI2	0.905				
	PI3	0.908				
	PI4	0.920				

To ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs, we evaluate the internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. We evaluated the outer loadings of each indicator. As shown in Table 2, all indicator loadings (ranging from 0.728 to 0.920) exceed the recommended minimum threshold of 0.708, indicating that all items strongly represent their constructs (Hair et al., 2021). All constructs demonstrate satisfactory internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha (ranging from 0.849 to 0.929), Dijkstra-Henseler's ρ_A (ranging from 0.860 to 0.931), and composite reliability (ρ_c) (ranging from 0.892 to 0.949), which exceed the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70 (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015; Hair et al., 2021). All constructs' AVEs (ranging from 0.622 to 0.824) exceed 0.50, supporting convergent validity (Hair et al., 2021). Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT). As shown in Table 3, all HTMT values (ranging from 0.288 to 0.686) were lower than 0.90, verifying that each construct was empirically distinct (Hair et al., 2021).

Table 3. Discriminant validity (HTMT) and R2

	AU	AT	PA	PS	PI	R ²
Authenticity	1					
Attractiveness	0.686	1				
Anthropomorphism	0.588	0.605	1			
Perceived Sincerity	0.682	0.630	0.691	1		0.527
Purchase Intention	0.349	0.288	0.567	0.423	1	0.278

Model's Goodness of Fit and Explanatory Power

We evaluated the model fit using the standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR). We obtained an SRMR value of 0.065, which was lower than the maximum threshold of 0.08. Thus, indicating a good fit between the model and the observed data (Henseler et al., 2016). In terms of explanatory power, the coefficient of determination (R2) values shown in Table 3 indicate that the model has moderate explanatory power for Perceived Sincerity (R2 = 0.527) and weak explanatory power for Purchase Intention (R2 = 0.278).

Path Analysis and Hypotheses Testing

The structural model was assessed through path analysis to evaluate both direct and indirect effects among constructs. Path analysis was executed using a bootstrapping approach (5,000 subsamples) in SmartPLS 4. The results revealed several significant direct effects ($t > 1.96$, $p\text{-value} < 0.05$). Authenticity had a positive and significant effect on Perceived Sincerity ($\beta = 0.312$, $t = 2.862$, $p\text{-value} = 0.004$). In contrast, anthropomorphism had a positive and significant effect on both Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.458$, $t = 3.441$, $p\text{-value} = 0.001$) and Perceived Sincerity ($\beta = 0.372$, $t = 3.513$, $p\text{-value} = 0.000$). Thus, hypotheses 2, 5, and 6 were supported.

However, none of the other hypothesized paths reached statistical significance. Hypothesis 1, which suggests that authenticity significantly affects Purchase Intention, was not supported ($\beta = 0.052$, $t = 0.549$, $p\text{-value} = 0.583$). Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4, which suggest attractiveness significantly affects Purchase Intention ($\beta = -0.072$, $t = 0.853$, $p\text{-value} = 0.394$) and Perceived Sincerity ($\beta = 0.181$, $t = 1.845$, $p\text{-value} = 0.065$), were not

supported. Hypothesis 7, which suggests Perceived Sincerity significantly affects Purchase Intention, was also not supported ($\beta = 0.113$, $t = 0.803$, $p\text{-value} = 0.422$).

In line with Perceived Sincerity not having a significant direct effect on Purchase Intention, all the indirect effects through Perceived Sincerity were also found to be insignificant. Perceived sincerity did not mediate the relationship between Authenticity and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.035$, $t = 0.659$, $p\text{-value} = 0.510$); thus, Hypothesis 8 was not supported. Perceived sincerity did not mediate the relationship between Attractiveness and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.020$, $t = 0.596$, $p\text{-value} = 0.551$); thus, Hypothesis 9 was not supported. Perceived sincerity did not mediate the relationship between Attractiveness and Purchase Intention ($\beta = 0.042$, $t = 0.711$, $p\text{-value} = 0.510$); thus, Hypothesis 10 was not supported.

Hypothesis results

Table 4. Hypothesis results

Hypothesis	β	T value	P values	Result
H1: Authenticity → Purchase Intention	0.052	0.549	0.583	Not Supported
H2: Authenticity → Perceived Sincerity	0.312	2.862	0.004	Supported
H3: Attractiveness → Purchase Intention	-0.072	0.853	0.394	Not Supported
H4: Attractiveness → Perceived Sincerity	0.181	1.845	0.065	Not Supported
H5: Anthropomorphism → Purchase Intention	0.458	3.441	0.001	Supported
H6: Anthropomorphism → Perceived Sincerity	0.372	3.513	0.000	Supported
H7: Perceived Sincerity → Purchase Intention	0.113	0.803	0.422	Not Supported
H8: Authenticity → Perceived Sincerity → Purchase Intention	0.035	0.659	0.510	Not Supported
H9: Attractiveness → Perceived Sincerity → Purchase Intention	0.020	0.596	0.551	Not Supported
H10: Anthropomorphism → Perceived Sincerity → Purchase Intention	0.042	0.711	0.510	Not Supported

Discussion

This study examined how petfluencer attributes, namely authenticity, attractiveness, and anthropomorphism, influence audiences' purchase intention and perceived sincerity using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) as the underlying theoretical framework. Overall, anthropomorphism emerged as the most influential attribute, significantly shaping both outcomes, whereas authenticity affected only perceived sincerity, attractiveness showed no significant effect on either outcome, and perceived sincerity itself did not translate into purchase intention, leaving all indirect effects insignificant. These findings provide important insights into how persuasion mechanisms may operate differently in the context of non-human influencers.

One of the most notable findings of this study is the strong influence of anthropomorphism on audiences' purchase intention. Anthropomorphism refers to the attribution of human-like characteristics, emotions, and behaviors to non-human entities, including animals. In the context of petfluencers, anthropomorphism is often manifested through captions written from the pet's perspective, emotional storytelling, facial expressions interpreted as human emotions, and visual representations that portray pets as having personalities similar to humans. The results indicate that audiences responded positively to these human-like portrayals, leading to stronger emotional attachment and higher purchase intention.

This finding supports previous studies suggesting that anthropomorphism can strengthen emotional closeness and consumer engagement (Ali et al., 2021; Lu, 2022;

Wang & Park, 2023). The result also aligns with ELM theory, particularly the peripheral route of persuasion. In peripheral processing, audiences rely on emotional and symbolic cues rather than deep cognitive evaluation of message quality. Anthropomorphic petfluencer content appears to function as a powerful emotional cue that stimulates affection, entertainment, and relatability, thereby encouraging positive behavioral responses. Unlike human influencers, whose persuasive effectiveness often depends on expertise or credibility, petfluencers may derive their persuasive power primarily from emotional resonance and perceived companionship.

The significance of anthropomorphism also indicates that audiences tend to perceive anthropomorphized pets as socially meaningful actors rather than merely animals appearing in promotional content. This pattern can be explained more precisely through the concepts of perceived social presence and symbolic companionship. When a petfluencer is portrayed with human-like emotions, intentions, and personality traits, audiences may experience a stronger sense that the pet is psychologically present as a social actor rather than a passive object, reflecting perceived social presence. At the same time, this human-like portrayal allows audiences to relate to the petfluencer as a companion figure rather than merely a promotional character, reflecting a form of symbolic companionship that mirrors the growing emotional integration of pets into human social life, where pets are increasingly viewed as family members. Consequently, when audiences perceive petfluencers as possessing emotions, intentions, and personalities, they become more psychologically connected to them, and this emotional proximity, grounded in perceived social presence and symbolic companionship, may explain why anthropomorphism significantly influenced both purchase intention and perceived sincerity.

Interestingly, anthropomorphism also significantly influenced perceived sincerity. This suggests that human-like portrayals of pets may increase the perception that petfluencer content is more genuine, honest, and emotionally sincere. This finding extends previous research by Lavertu et al. (2025), who argued that audiences tend to perceive petfluencers as more trustworthy and sincere compared to human influencers. One possible explanation is that audiences generally assume pets do not possess manipulative intentions in the same way humans do. As a result, promotional content delivered through petfluencers may be perceived as less commercially motivated and more emotionally authentic.

Turning to authenticity, its effect was more limited than that of anthropomorphism, remaining significant only for perceived sincerity. This finding partially supports previous influencer marketing studies that emphasize authenticity as a critical driver of audience trust and engagement (Hasan et al., 2024; Liu & Zheng, 2024). In this study, audiences indeed perceived authentic petfluencer content as more sincere, suggesting that authenticity remains important for shaping positive audience perceptions. However, authenticity alone was insufficient to directly stimulate purchase intention.

From the perspective of ELM, authenticity is conventionally assumed to operate through the central route of persuasion, in which audiences cognitively evaluate whether the petfluencer content appears genuine, consistent, and believable. However, the fact that authenticity only influenced perceived sincerity and not purchase intention raises the question of whether central route processing is actually activated when audiences encounter petfluencer content. Because petfluencers are fundamentally non-human entities, audiences may not rely heavily on rational, message-based evaluation when

forming purchase decisions. It is therefore possible that authenticity in the petfluencer context is processed more peripherally, functioning as a general cue that shapes impressions of sincerity rather than triggering the kind of deliberate cognitive scrutiny the central route typically implies. Instead, emotional and entertaining elements may dominate audience responses. Consequently, although authenticity contributes to the perception of sincerity, it may not substantially influence actual purchase intention in the petfluencer context.

This finding also suggests that authenticity may function differently between human influencers and pet influencers. In human influencer marketing, authenticity is often associated with personal experience, expertise, transparency, and self-disclosure. Human influencers can share personal struggles, opinions, or experiences that strengthen audiences' trust and identification. Petfluencers, however, cannot communicate directly with audiences and are entirely mediated through their owners or content creators. Therefore, audiences may perceive authenticity in petfluencer content differently, focusing more on emotional consistency and entertainment value rather than informational credibility or expertise. A concise summary of these differences, together with related distinctions observed elsewhere in this study, is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Conceptual Comparison between Human Influencer and Pet Influencer Persuasion Mechanisms

Aspect	Human Influencer	Pet Influencer
Basis of perceived authenticity	Personal experience, expertise, transparency, and self-disclosure conveyed directly by the source.	Emotional consistency and entertainment value of the content, since the message is entirely mediated through the pet's owner or content creator
Dominant ELM processing route	Tends to be processed through the central route, involving cognitive evaluation of the source's credibility and expertise	Tends to be processed through the peripheral route, relying on emotional and symbolic cues such as anthropomorphic portrayals rather than deep cognitive evaluation
Role of attractiveness	Functions as a strong differentiating cue through the halo effect, shaping overall positive evaluations of the source	Functions more as a baseline expectation of the content, subject to a ceiling effect and cuteness saturation that reduce its persuasive value as a distinguishing attribute
Most influential persuasive attribute	Typically source credibility, expertise, or physical attractiveness	Anthropomorphism, through human-like emotions, personality, and storytelling attributed to the pet
Basis of perceived sincerity	Derived from the source's credibility, consistency, and track record of honesty	Derived partly from audiences' assumption that animals lack manipulative intent, making the content appear less commercially motivated
Mechanism of audience attachment	Personal identification and parasocial relationships formed with a human figure	Symbolic companionship and perceived social presence formed with the pet as a relatable social actor.
Relationship between perceived sincerity and purchase intention	Sincerity is generally reported to influence purchase intention positively	Sincerity does not significantly translate into purchase intention, suggesting audiences engage with the content more for emotional gratification and parasocial enjoyment than for commercial decision-making

Aspect	Human Influencer	Pet Influencer
Primary motive for content consumption	Often connected to product-relevant information seeking and purchase-related decision making.	Often connected to entertainment, emotional relief, and companionship, with purchase-related outcomes remaining secondary.

Another unexpected finding concerns attractiveness, which showed no significant effect on either outcome. Previous studies have consistently argued that attractiveness positively influences persuasive effectiveness through the halo effect mechanism, where attractive endorsers are evaluated more positively overall (AlFarraj et al., 2021; Kaplan, 1978). In the context of human influencers, physical attractiveness often functions as a strong peripheral cue that increases attention, admiration, and behavioral intention.

However, the present study suggests that attractiveness may not function similarly in the petfluencer context. This pattern can be interpreted through the lens of a ceiling effect, in which most pets featured as petfluencers are already perceived as inherently cute or visually appealing, leaving little variation for attractiveness to explain. Related to this, cuteness saturation may also be at play, where repeated exposure to visually appealing pet content across social media reduces its novelty and persuasive impact over time. Together, these mechanisms point toward a broader process of aesthetic normalization, in which visual appeal has become a default expectation for petfluencer content rather than a distinguishing feature. In other words, attractiveness may have become a baseline expectation rather than a distinctive attribute capable of driving persuasion. Audiences may instead prioritize emotional storytelling, humor, personality, or anthropomorphic characteristics over physical appearance alone.

This finding also indicates that the persuasive effectiveness of petfluencers may depend less on aesthetic presentation and more on emotional connection and symbolic interaction. While attractive visual appearances may attract initial attention, they may not necessarily translate into deeper perceptions of sincerity or stronger purchase intentions. Consequently, marketers relying solely on visually appealing pet content without meaningful emotional engagement may fail to generate persuasive marketing outcomes.

Perhaps the most theoretically intriguing finding of this study is the insignificant influence of perceived sincerity on purchase intention. This result contradicts many previous influencer marketing studies suggesting that sincerity and trustworthiness positively affect consumer purchasing behavior (Demirel & Erdogmus, 2016; Song & Shin, 2024). Although audiences perceived certain petfluencers as sincere, this perception did not significantly influence their intention to purchase endorsed products.

Several explanations may account for this phenomenon. First, audiences may engage with petfluencer content primarily for entertainment, emotional gratification, or parasocial enjoyment rather than for commercial decision-making purposes. Rather than approaching petfluencer content as a source of purchase-relevant information, audiences may consume it more as a parasocial relationship, in which the primary reward is the emotional connection and enjoyment of following the pet's activities, rather than an intention to act on any promotional message it carries. Petfluencer accounts are often associated with humor, cuteness, relaxation, and emotional comfort. Consequently, audiences may emotionally appreciate and trust the content without necessarily developing purchasing intentions.

Second, perceived sincerity may not be sufficient to generate purchase intention in low-involvement product contexts. According to ELM, behavioral outcomes are influenced not only by positive perceptions of the message source but also by personal

relevance, product involvement, and motivational factors. Even if audiences perceive petfluencers as sincere, they may still require additional factors, such as product usefulness, price attractiveness, social proof, or personal need, to develop actual purchase intention.

Third, this finding may suggest that the persuasive mechanisms underlying human influencer marketing cannot be fully generalized to non-human influencers. In human influencer contexts, sincerity often strengthens parasocial relationships, identification, and trust, which subsequently affect purchase behavior. In petfluencer contexts, however, sincerity may remain limited to emotional appreciation without transitioning into commercial persuasion. This indicates that non-human influencer marketing may involve unique psychological processes that differ from traditional influencer consumer relationships.

The insignificant mediating effects of perceived sincerity further reinforce this interpretation. Because sincerity itself did not significantly influence purchase intention, it failed to mediate the relationships between authenticity, attractiveness, anthropomorphism, and purchase intention. This finding suggests that the proposed mediating mechanism may not adequately explain how petfluencer attributes influence consumer behavior. Instead, emotional engagement, entertainment value, companionship perception, or emotional attachment may function as more relevant mediating variables in future petfluencer studies.

It is also worth noting that the proposed model explained only 27.8 percent of the variance in purchase intention ($R^2 = 0.278$), indicating that a substantial proportion of audience purchase intention remains unaccounted for by authenticity, attractiveness, anthropomorphism, and perceived sincerity combined. This relatively low explanatory power suggests that other determinants not captured in the present model may play a more decisive role in shaping purchase intention toward petfluencer-promoted products, such as parasocial interaction, emotional attachment to the pet, trust toward the endorsed brand, and the entertainment value of the content itself. Incorporating these variables in future petfluencer studies may help to account for the unexplained variance and provide a more complete picture of how petfluencer marketing translates into actual purchase behavior.

Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the growing literature on influencer marketing by demonstrating that persuasion mechanisms in petfluencer contexts differ from those observed in human influencer contexts. The study highlights the importance of anthropomorphism as the dominant persuasive attribute in petfluencer marketing. It challenges the assumption that traditional influencer attributes, such as attractiveness and authenticity, operate identically across human and non-human influencer categories.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends the application of ELM into non-human influencer contexts by illustrating how emotional and symbolic cues may outweigh rational evaluation in shaping audience responses toward petfluencer content. The findings suggest that the peripheral route of persuasion may be more dominant in petfluencer marketing, particularly through anthropomorphic and emotionally engaging content. At the same time, the results also indicate limitations in applying traditional influencer marketing constructs directly to petfluencer contexts without contextual adaptation.

From a broader marketing perspective, this study reflects the evolving nature of digital persuasion in social media environments. As audiences increasingly interact with

non-human digital personas, including pets, virtual influencers, and AI-generated characters, traditional assumptions regarding credibility, authenticity, and sincerity may require reconsideration. Petfluencer marketing demonstrates that emotional relatability and symbolic companionship can become more influential than conventional source credibility dimensions. Therefore, understanding how audiences emotionally interpret and interact with non-human influencers represents an increasingly important area for future marketing and communication research.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the influence of petfluencer attributes, namely authenticity, attractiveness, and anthropomorphism, on audiences' purchase intention and perceived sincerity using the Elaboration Likelihood Model as the theoretical foundation. The findings demonstrate that anthropomorphism is the most influential attribute in petfluencer marketing, significantly affecting both purchase intention and perceived sincerity. Authenticity positively influenced perceived sincerity but did not directly affect purchase intention. Meanwhile, attractiveness did not significantly affect either perceived sincerity or purchase intention. In addition, perceived sincerity itself did not significantly influence purchase intention, resulting in insignificant mediating effects across all indirect relationships. These findings indicate that emotional and symbolic characteristics play a more important role than conventional influencer attributes in shaping audience responses toward petfluencer content.

The study contributes theoretically by extending influencer marketing research into the context of non-human influencers and demonstrating that persuasion mechanisms in petfluencer marketing differ from those commonly found in human influencer studies. More specifically, the findings extend the application of the Elaboration Likelihood Model by showing that the peripheral route, rather than the central route, appears to dominate persuasion in the petfluencer context. While authenticity, a construct conventionally associated with central route processing, only shaped perceived sincerity without translating into purchase intention, anthropomorphism, an emotionally and symbolically driven cue, significantly influenced both outcomes. This pattern suggests that when the message source is a non-human entity, audiences may rely less on rational, credibility-based evaluation and more on emotional and symbolic cues such as perceived social presence and symbolic companionship, indicating that the relative weight of ELM's two routes can shift depending on the nature of the persuasion source. The findings suggest that audiences are more responsive to emotional engagement and human-like portrayals of pets than to visual attractiveness or authenticity alone. Practically, the results imply that marketers and brands should focus on developing emotionally engaging and anthropomorphic petfluencer content rather than relying solely on aesthetic appeal. Creating narratives that portray pets as relatable social actors may enhance audience connection and improve marketing effectiveness.

This study also presents several recommendations for future research. Future studies are encouraged to explore additional variables that may better explain audiences' purchase intention in petfluencer contexts, such as emotional attachment, trust, entertainment value, parasocial interaction, and content quality. Researchers are also encouraged to develop measurement instruments specifically designed for petfluencer contexts, considering that constructs adapted from human influencer studies may not fully capture audience perceptions toward non-human influencers. In addition, future

research may compare different types of petfluencers, platforms, or cultural settings to provide a broader understanding of how petfluencer marketing influences consumer behavior across various contexts.

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