

A chiweenie with an overbite and 1.9m followers: how Tuna and Instagram's other top dogs rake in thousands per post

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- What do you think makes certain animals popular pets?
- How would you define 'cuteness' in animals? What animals do you think are especially cute and why?
- What do you think the word 'dogfluencer' means?

2 Key words

a. Find the words from the wordpool in the article. Then use the words to complete the definitions.

anthropomorphism	inbreeding	malocclusion	social upheaval
compelling	incomprehensively	pampering	symmetrical
credible	incongruence	relentless	trigger
eliciting	jolt	rugged	underpins
heightened	leverage	shrivelled	wiggle

- shrunk, wrinkled, or dried up due to loss of moisture _____
- grabbing people's interest, attention or admiration in a powerful way _____
- causing a particular reaction or process to begin _____
- made up of exactly similar parts facing each other _____
- serves as a foundation or basis for something _____
- a lack of harmony, compatibility or agreement between things _____
- producing young from closely related people or animals, often leading to genetic problems

- describes a strong character, often associated with outdoor activities or physically demanding work _____

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9. able to be believed; convincing or trustworthy _____
10. a sudden shock or surprise, or a quick, sharp movement _____
11. when the teeth don't align when the jaws are closed _____
12. getting a response, answer or feeling from someone _____
13. the act of giving human characteristics to animals or objects _____
14. to move up and down or side to side with small rapid movements _____
15. continuing in a determined way without stopping or becoming less intense

16. the power or ability to influence people or events _____
17. in a way that is impossible or very difficult to understand _____
18. increased or intensified, especially in effect or feeling _____
19. treating someone with excessive care or attention _____
20. significant disturbances or disruptions in society or people's lives _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Butterfly wings are almost always perfectly _____ with two sets on each side of the body.
2. Adele spent the day _____ herself at the spa.
3. Scientific evidence _____ the theory of evolution.
4. Jake used his business connections as _____ in the negotiations.
5. To prevent _____, farmers try and ensure that their livestock are from genetically diverse populations.
6. The documentary presented a(n) _____ argument for conservation.
7. The Civil War caused major _____ across the country.

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8. Lucy gave a(n) _____ explanation for her week-long absence from work.
9. The once juicy grapes had been left in the fruit bowl and were _____ and tasteless.
10. The news gave Eve a(n) _____ of excitement.
11. The dentist diagnosed Keith with a(n) _____ that required braces.
12. Can you _____ your ears? Try to move them.
13. Our sociology teacher is skilled at _____ thoughtful responses from students.
14. Critics accused Rudyard Kipling of _____ in The Jungle Book and for giving wild animals human characteristics.
15. Loud noises often _____ Danny's anxiety.
16. Miguel spoke so fast that what he wanted to say was _____ jumbled.
17. Carl's _____ awareness helped him escape danger.
18. Euan loves the outdoor life and has a rough and _____ appearance.
19. The heat was _____ during the summer drought.
20. There was a(n) _____ between Aiden's kind words and his thoughtless actions.

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Pampered poms and Chappell Roan-loving pugs are taking over social media – but what makes a successful petfluencer and how much can they earn?

Ellie Violet Bramley

30 April, 2025

- 1 Tuna is a chiweenie with a tongue that sticks out aggressively when he sleeps, a neck shrivelled like a raisin – and 1.9m Instagram followers. Fans tune in to watch him pose as Harry Potter, dress as a spicy tuna roll or to savour shots of him in closeup.
- 2 The miniature dachshund and chihuahua cross first came to the internet's attention around 2012 and has been eliciting thousands of comments of admiration ever since. "He looks like someone's grandpa on the couch after a plate of turkey and mashed potatoes", reads a typical one.
- 3 Joshua Paul Dale, author of *Irresistible: How Cuteness Wired our Brains and Conquered the World*, lands upon the phrase "gap kawaii" to account for Tuna's appeal. Kawaii being the Japanese term for cute, this particular form of it is "when you see this incongruence in something that's cute." In Japan, he says, "[the gap] intensifies the feeling of cuteness". So Tuna is especially cute not despite but because of his less-than-symmetrical look.
- 4 Tuna might be the dogfluencer with the most memorable malocclusion but social media is full of others. There's Loki the wolfdog, a handsome beast most at home in the wilderness; Jiff pomeranian who holds world records for speed walking on hind legs and front paws; celebrity favourite Doug the pug, who has been hugged by Dolly Parton; and Maya the Samoyed, who can wiggle his ears along to a tune.
- 5 So what makes each of these dogs so compelling? According to Jen Golbeck, an expert in social media and co-author of *The Purest Bond: Understanding the Human-Canine Connection*, "these dogs all share some traits". They "look different than most dogs we would run into," making them quickly recognisable. But perhaps most importantly, "they are very cute in unusual ways".
- 6 It is the cute response that arguably underpins the entire dogfluencer world. When we scroll past a picture of a cute dog, says Dale, "you get this immediate jolt of something". Then "a whole range of downstream things happen in your brain ... [you get an] upwelling of general wellbeing and increased empathy." Plus, he says, "it lowers our stress levels and can lower anxiety."
- 7 Arguably, these dogs are doing us a service, because fluffiness is, says Dale, one of the things that triggers the cuteness response. Jiffpom is almost incomprehensibly fluffy. Maya the samoyed is also a fluffball, but while Jiffpom seems to lead a babyish life of pure pampering, Maya, according to Oona Hewitt, cultural research and insights director at We Are Social, is sometimes "showcased in relatable, very human, scenarios".
- 8 Many of these accounts rely on costume. Jiffpom is frequently dressed up – as a unicorn, a leprechaun or just in cosy sweats. While others rely more heavily on the face. Maya looks as if she is naturally smiling: "Smiles have also been shown to be highly associated with cuteness," says Dale, see also dolphins.
- 9 Loki couldn't be more different. He is, says social media psychologist Samantha Cameron, "that wild spirit". For Hewitt, he "plays into escapism" and a "rugged, outdoor and rewilded lifestyle – at a time when urbanism is associated with pressure, relentless pace and life lived through screens."
- 10 There are of course ethical implications: the dressing up and anthropomorphism. These dogs bring a lot of joy and are often rescued from shelters themselves. But many of the most "cute" breeds are the result of intensive inbreeding. Somehow, the cuteness still hits, despite rational thinking. "Cute things capture our attention ... sneak in under our radar and then before we know it, activate this cuteness response," says Dale.
- 11 Given the amount these dogfluencers can earn, there is good reason to want to leverage puppy-dog eyes. According to one recent study, "pet influencers lead to higher engagement with the promoted content and willingness to buy the advertised product", because "they are seen as more credible than human influencers". These accounts could, says Cameron, "be earning thousands and thousands of pounds". She says it works out to roughly £200 a month for every 10,000 followers, per platform.
- 12 "We see an uptick in the popularity of dog content during major moments of social upheaval," says Golbeck. For Hewitt: "At a time of heightened social dislocation and loneliness, rising costs and uncertain futures, successful dogfluencers are delivering escapism, absurdity and surrealism."

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3 Comprehension check

a. Decide if the statements are True, False or Not mentioned according to the information in the article. Correct the False statements.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1. Tuna became famous primarily because of his ability to perform tricks on camera. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 2. The term 'gap kawaii' refers to a type of cuteness based on imperfection. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 3. Maya the Samoyed's content is designed to mimic real-life human experiences. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 4. Jen Golbeck argues that dogs with very ordinary appearances tend to become the most successful online. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 5. The article claims that cute dog content can lead to measurable psychological benefits. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 6. Dressing dogs in costumes is widely criticised by the experts in the article. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 7. Pet influencers are now considered more trustworthy than human influencers when it comes to advertising. | True / False / Not mentioned |
| 8. The article states that dogfluencer popularity increases during times of economic stability. | True / False / Not mentioned |

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4 Key language

a. Match the expressions from the text to their definitions.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| 1. to tune in to | a. to earn or receive a large amount of money, often easily or quickly |
| 2. puppy-dog eyes | b. to happen or cause to happen without people being aware of it |
| 3. to sneak in under the radar | c. looking at someone in a pleading or innocent way in order to persuade them |
| 4. to run into | d. to support an idea, trend or stereotype, often without intending to |
| 5. to play into | e. to meet someone or something by chance |
| 6. to rake in | f. to pay attention to or become engaged with something, especially media content |

b. Choose the correct expression from the previous activity to complete the sentences. Use the correct form.

1. People across the country _____ watch the football final.
2. I _____ an old friend at the airport yesterday which was strange.
3. The company _____ at least £200 million last year from its TV advertising campaign.
4. Don't look at me with those _____! You know I can't resist.
5. Bill's latest comments on social media _____ stereotypes about migrants.
6. The new rules regarding social security payments were _____ by the government.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you follow any social media accounts that feature animals or pets? What do you find appealing about them, and how do they make you feel?
- Do you think that consuming this type of social media content is a healthy coping mechanism in today's digital age? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

a. Research online to find information about the ethical treatment of animals and pets. Then write a discursive essay to answer the following question:

- Is it ethical to turn your pet into an online influencer for financial gain? Why or why not?

b. Present your essays to your classmates and explain your opinions.