
The Cativerse

Why do you have a cat account?

(July 2019 Survey Question)

Because cats are so pawesome that they deserve it! And it's fun to imagine what they would be saying about how they see the world.

(Respondent 62)

When we look at the respondent's answer to the question 'Why do you have a cat account?', we notice linguistic features to study in greater detail: the word 'pawesome' and the phrases 'they deserve it' and 'it's fun to imagine'. Like cats pouncing on their prey, we can jump on the word formation, on the attitude, on the meaning, on the spelling, and on many things more. How people communicate about cats online is really a fascinating treasure trove for linguists and cat lovers alike.

With their half-in, half-out attitude, it is in cats' nature to carefully check out new territory. The cat owners among us know that our cats like to take their time before they go out, often standing on the threshold half inside and half outside. When they are satisfied that no danger awaits them, the cats step fully outside and explore their surroundings.

In this chapter, we follow the cats' approach: we first take only a few steps to get an overview of the book's structure and then enter the cativerse, the feline online world, to get to know more about cats' presence in our real and virtual lives. Social media platforms function as a so-called third place for us to hang out with and meet other like-minded people. Cat-related digital spaces are only one type of third places offered to people out there on the Internet. There is a myriad of other places and communities.

The relationship of cats and humans goes back a long time and has had ups and downs throughout history. We touch on the roles cats have been given by humans and their effect on culture. We also take into account biological and psychological explanations of the effect cats have on humans. Cats function like people magnets, which is what we discover when we consider cats in popular culture, in the media, and in advertising.

Concepts Used in The Chapter

- 🐾 cat-related digital spaces
- 🐾 third places
- 🐾 history
- 🐾 ethology
- 🐾 literature
- 🐾 popular culture
- 🐾 popular media

Terms from the Clawssary

- 🐾 ethology 🐾 Hambspeak 🐾 LOLspeak 🐾 meowlogism 🐾 purrieties

1.1 Cats and Their Role in This Book

With this book, the cativerse has now extended its realm to linguistics because our feline friends perfectly illustrate how we communicate online. The cat-related examples show us what we study as linguists and how we can describe the linguistic features we are interested in. The language varieties, which are called ‘purrieties’ here because they occur in the cat-related digital spaces, provide us with everything we need for our encounter with the fascinating world of language.

Each chapter covers a different linguistic angle to take in our description of how we talk about cats online. In line with the cats’ half-in half-out approach, we find out first what is in store for us and then step deeper into the topic, which is why the concepts used and the words from the clawssary are listed at the beginning of each chapter. At the end of each chapter, we list the resources used for the chapter and suggestions for ‘PURRther Reading’.

This chapter – Chapter 1 (‘The Cativerse’) – sets the scene for the linguistic description of the purrieties we encounter on social

media and introduces us to the digital world of cats. We discuss the underlying reasons for feline success, not only on social media but also in the real world. We look at the historical roles of cats in our cultures, at biological and psychological explanations for the effects cats have on us, and at feline presence in popular culture.

In our approach to language and language variation, we look at different linguistic features: pronunciation, vocabulary, word creation, grammar, spelling, and meaning. Chapter 2 ('The Territory Range of Language') shows that we pronounce the word 'cat' in different ways and use a wide range of words for our cats, which is what we can study with dialectology. Chapter 3 ('Meowlogisms') explains what we do when we create new words and goes into the word formation processes we use to give our words a feline spin. We also look at the reasons why we find cat-inspired words funny. Chapter 4 ('Da Kitteh') focusses on meaning and grammar by using the examples of LOLcats and LOLspeak. We analyse the spelling, vocabulary, and grammar of LOLspeak.

Chapter 5 ('Virtual Furever Homes') shows us the background of online community building. We look at how we tell and share our cat stories online. Chapter 6 ('Multimeowdality') describes how we use text, audio, and video on social media. Chapter 7 ('Meow and More') leads us to the relationship of language and society and what the way we use language says about us in terms of our social background. The chapter also illustrates how we use language to construct our identity when we are in the cat-related digital spaces.

Chapter 8 ('Going on Pawtrol') describes how to do linguistic research on the Internet. In particular, it shows us how to select the data and how to work ethically, using cat examples from the social media platforms Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. Chapter 9 ('Linguistic Scratching Posts') looks at how to analyse the data to describe our cat-related language varieties. It presents the variation in vocabulary, word formation, spelling, and meaning we come across in cat-related digital spaces. Chapter 10 ('Stats withCats') gives us some statistical methods to interpret and visualise the differences in how we use cat-inspired words on different platforms and illustrates social networks with big data tools.

Chapter 11 ('Cattitude and Purception') describes how we can analyse, categorise, and interpret the answers of cat account holders when asked for the reasons why they use purrieties and what they think about how we talk about our cats online.

While *Purrieties of Language* is an introductory book to linguistics, it is not a textbook as such. It is like a case study to show us what happens online in terms of language variation. The idea behind the book is to show that linguistics is fun, especially when cats are involved. So, let's go into the cativerse!

1.2 Cats and Their Digital Spaces

Why do you follow cats on social media?

(July 2019 Survey Question)

It makes me happy to see cats from all over the world & the people who love them!

(Respondent 110)

Grumpy Cat, Nyan Cat, and Pusheen – a real cat, a virtual cat, and a toy cat – are among the most famous online stars, whose well-known memes, videos, photos, and GIFs are enjoyed and shared by many of us on social media. Yet, while other cats are not as famous and do not have the merchandise of the big players, many more inhabit the digital world. Today, millions of cats walk the social media platforms of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, and they have transformed parts of the digital human universe into a cativerse. With these cat-related digital spaces, we have created an online cat park we can take our cats to, which is something we cannot really do in the real world. No longer decried as crazy, we can now meet others like us, talk about our cats, and share our love of cats openly.

The cativerse comprises the digital spaces offered by technology and extends across all the social media platforms. In their ubiquity, cats – or rather the people posting as cats – are present on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Pinterest, YouTube, 4chan, LOLcats, Tumblr, WordPress, TikTok, and beyond. Cats feature in personal social media accounts, corporate and official accounts, charities, groups, pages, lists, channels, forums, and more. When we enter the cativerse, we immediately meet cats of all shapes, sizes, colours, and ages. We see cats in people's everyday life, cats looking for homes, cats entertaining people, cats simply being cats. And they are all adorable.

In the cativerse, it is common for people to identify themselves to others as cat lovers more or less straight away, for example, by having a cat-inspired username and profile picture, using cat-inspired

language varieties (the purrieties), using cat-inspired hashtags, posting cat pictures and videos, sharing other people's cat photos, posting cat-inspired GIFs and emoji, or other means. The hashtag #CatsOfTwitter immediately categorises a tweet as cat-related, and #TabbyTroop tells others that the post is connected to a tabby cat.

Not only the very famous feline stars but also our 'everyday' cats connect and attract us. As the quote at the beginning of this section illustrates, cat lovers go online to the cativerse to see other cats, to meet other people, to get to know each other, and to have fun.

Moggies and pedigree cats alike have social media accounts, and there are quite a lot of social media-savvy cats in the cativerse. I was surprised by the sheer numbers of cats on Facebook when I opened a Facebook account for my black cat Murrli back in 2012. Just like today, the algorithms of Facebook suggested similar people to follow, and in Murrli's case that meant other cats. Within days of being on Facebook, Murrli had acquired 200 cat friends, all of whom were black like Murrli as it was then a personal quirk of mine to only have black cats as friends. If I had not decided to send friend requests just to black cats, Murrli would have had many more friends on Facebook. To meet fellow black cats, Murrli soon followed the *For the Love of Black Cats (Black Cat Appreciation Page)*, a Facebook page dedicated to the joy of living with black cats and to dispelling the myths about them.

Our online cats have very active social media lives, it seems. While it is clear to us that it is people who talk and interact with each other, we tend to accept the pretence that it is often the cats themselves who post online, who share their photos, who come up with poems, and more. More or less loose networks are formed online where we regularly check our timelines for our online acquaintances and/or visit each other's profiles to exchange news, entertainment, and help.

The interaction in the digital cat spaces is very lively, and cats quickly and easily attract other people posing as their cats. Cats, or rather their owners, have always been very active in posting photos and videos of themselves, describing their daily lives and their adventures, asking for help in health matters, sharing pleas for adoptions, and, sadly, also grieving when cats have passed away.

Since Murrli's joining social media platforms, I have been following and befriending many cat accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, like Cheddar on Twitter, who is a young 'Catnadian' (Canadian) cat sharing his adventures, writing poetry with the

hashtag #CheddarPoetry and actively promoting other kitties looking for 'fwiends'; or like Henry King Cat, the Siberian cat from Russia with his own accounts on Instagram and Facebook, who communicates in English and Russian and whose photos and videos are taken by 'meowmy'; or Curious Zelda on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, who has just published her first book, *The Adventures of a Curious Cat*, about a cat's life with humans, in which she is

explaining in her unique voice how to handle humans, how to communicate with furniture, and most importantly how to live a life curiously. (Curious Zelda)

One of the original reasons for creating a social media account for Murrli was to find out more about the perceived feline dominance of the Internet and then the linguistic features occurring in the cat-related digital spaces. Cat-related digital spaces can be considered so-called third places on the Internet. After the home, which is the first place, and work, which is the second place, people also visit third places, which are neither home nor work. Third places are a sort of shared space for people to visit, to hang out, and to socialise with others, to communicate about a certain common topic, among other things.

In the real world, coffee shops, playgrounds, and social centres function as a third place where regulars and newcomers meet. Checking a cat's social media feed is equal to checking in to see which other cats are there in the virtual world. Social media is a virtual meeting place enabling, people to interact with each other across geographic and linguistic boundaries regardless of whether they know each other in real life. In the book, I refer to the third places for cat lovers on the Internet as cat-related digital spaces. We come back to third places in Chapter 7, in which we look at affinity spaces, virtual communities, and communities of practice.

After some time in the cativerse, this interest acquired the new note of having fun with the social media postings of other cats. It is, of course, the owners who post in the names of their cats, although, in online cat spaces, the cat as the actor and author of the post has been accepted. In cat-related digital spaces, users tacitly agree on the community practice that the cats and not the humans are speaking and writing. The users, of course, know that humans are interacting with humans, but they like to pretend that the cats themselves have social media accounts and talk with each other.

Based on observation of the social media platforms Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, four types of cats inhabit the cativerse: the for-profit celebrity cats, the for-cause working cats, the individual cats, and cats in collective cat accounts. We do not go into too much detail here because the four types of cats are described in Chapters 5 and 10. To get an idea about what we are dealing with, the list below gives us the basic definitions.

For-profit celebrity cats:

Famous feline stars making money for their owners with their own merchandise

For-cause working cats:

Cats working as community outreach cats for organisations, public institutions and owners who support charitable causes

Individual cats:

Cats sharing their daily lives and adventures on social media platforms

Collective cat accounts:

Social media accounts featuring various cats

The cat-related digital spaces are not restricted to a specific region but extend across geographic and social boundaries. These online spaces differ based on various factors, such as the nature of the social media platform, the way of communicating, the roles given to the cats, the function of the posts, the topics discussed, and the languages used.

A look at the general characteristics gives an introductory insight into the cat connection and into what goes on in the digital spaces. In principle, the appeal of cats is global and goes beyond one language, which explains the multilingual environment of some cat-related digital spaces. Just as real cats are companions for humans all over the world, the social media profiles for cats are a worldwide phenomenon and offer spaces for captions and comments not only in English but in many languages. In Chapter 7, our linguistic exploration of the cativerse takes us to multilingualism.

Users write their posts and comments in English and other languages, use purrieties of English, like catspeak purrieties, meowl-ogisms, LOLspeak, and Hambspeak, communicate with emoji, GIFs, memes, photos, and videos, and interact by liking and sharing.

On her social media timelines, Murli made cat friends all over the world and wrote in English, German, and Russian, depending on the

followers 'she' was communicating with. I shared photos of Murrli on Instagram and liked and commented on other cats' photos, mainly on Instagram.

As already indicated above, the phrase 'crazy cat person' is no longer derogatory, and people openly showing their love of cats are no longer stigmatised as crazy or strange. It does not come as a big surprise, then, that it is not only private individuals who share their cats' photos in their accounts or even open social media accounts for their cats but that non-profit organisations and public institutions are also now using cats on social media platforms.

Cats are literally working the digital scene as community outreach and PR officers. These working cats range from political cats, ambassador cats, police cats, railway station cats, and fire department cats to café cats and library cats. There are also university cats who work on campus.

Campus cats are a worldwide phenomenon and, like Rolf at Warwick University (Figure 1.1), Campus Cat Augsburg in Germany, and VSU Cat in Russia, have gathered a large follower base, and judging from the comments and photos, students and staff are always happy to see them. Rolf at Warwick University was part of the campus cat exhibition of 2019 in the University Museum of Groningen, the Netherlands, and features in the e-book officially published by Rolf's fellow campus cat Professor Doerak. All these university cats are part of the spaces of academics with cats, the digital spaces we are visiting throughout the book.

Murrli, too, was a working cat. She had been designated Spokescat of the Meow Factor, my research blog, and still features in that function on my presentation slides at research conferences and is referred to as 'supurrvisor' and 'purr reviewer' when it comes to posting on Twitter with the hashtag #AcademicWithCats and checking on the updates by the twitter user Cats of Linguists (@linguisticats).

Unlike Murrli, some working cats are well known and attract the interest of the news media. The official Whitehall cats Larry, Gladstone, and Palmerston regularly feature in the British national press as real cats and as political commentators in the virtual world. Felix and Bolt, the Huddersfield Station Cats, with currently two books written about them, are officially the Senior Pest Controller and the Apprentice. Both cats have featured on British national television.



Figure 1.1 Rolf at Warwick University

The news media love cats, and many cat stories are published. When I did an initial research project on cats in the media, I analysed news stories collected in the one-month period of February 2014. Just to give a scale of the sheer numbers of cat-related news stories, I found 108 English-language news articles on www.news.yahoo.com in that month, and 31 Russian-language articles appeared on just one day on www.news.yandex.ru. The story types typically include unbelievable cats, cruelty to cats, cat companions, feral cats, homeless cats, internet cats, cat heroes, show cats, cats and human health, and cats and business. For the news media, the cat is certainly of value and sometimes even takes centre stage in larger events in current affairs or sports. In the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks in



Figure 1.2 Pawfficer Donut of Troy PD

2015, when Brussels was locked down in the hunt for the terrorists, the news media showed the cat pictures posted on Twitter with the hashtag #BrusselsLockDown. Other news includes cats strolling onto football pitches and tennis courts.

In the United States, the police cat Pawfficer Donut made it into the US news after the 2018 public appeal by Troy Police Department (Troy PD) for more followers on Twitter. Pawfficer Donut (Figure 1.2) is now officially employed as a public outreach cat and a guardian for the community. On the official Facebook and Twitter accounts of Troy PD, Pawfficer Donut keeps in contact with the community and posts updates on school visits and charity events. In the meantime, two other US police cats have appeared on the social media platforms, namely Pawfficer Fuzz and Pawperator Cad, both of whom are on Instagram. The UK, too, has a police cat, namely PC Oscar on Twitter.

Interrogation with Pawfficer Donut #PoliceCat

Donut: How long did you wash your hands?

Human: 20 seconds, I swear!

Donut (as she slowly reveals she has CCTV footage of sink area): Do you want to tell me again how long you washed your hands?

#WashYourHands 🐾 #DontLieToThePaw

(Pawfficer Donut of Troy PD)

In the cat-related digital spaces, users typically talk about a wide range of topics. While social media cats are often associated with fun and entertainment, more serious topics are also addressed. Users discuss cat life, cats and wildlife, pet health, owner health, animal shelters, animal rights, animal abuse, pet behaviour, and ownership. Posts range from picture updates and day-specific images, like ‘Tongue Out Tuesday’, when images of cats with their tongues out are posted, to calls for help and pleas for adoption for cats looking for a ‘forever home’. On social media, users share their emotions, positive and negative, when, for example, cats celebrate their birthdays or adoptaversaries, or when cats are ill or ‘have crossed the rainbow bridge’. Users themselves or in the name of their cats offer support, like Grizzly, a black cat on Instagram, who asks his followers for a paw circle:

Please take my paw and let’s hold paws for our furiend Herbie who just found out he’s battling cancer. Thank you Dandelion for starting the paw chain for little Herbie #holdingpawsforherbie.

(Grizzly Cat)

When Murrli passed away in January 2019, more people than usual reacted to show their compassion, commented on the post (Figure 1.3), shared Murrli’s picture, and created Instagram stories for Murrli to express their condolences. Murrli was also featured by the collective cat account @black_cat_crew on Instagram.

1.3 Cats and Their Roles

As we have already seen, cats fulfil various roles in the cativerse and feature in social media updates as entertainers, tricksters, guardians, healers, deities, and heroes in addition to being mousers and companions. As an aside, the portrayals of cats online in the shared images of them take us to semiotics in Chapter 4. Yet these cat roles are not an



Figure 1.3 Instagram post of Murrli

invention of the Internet but can actually be traced back to Ancient Egypt, famous for its cat goddess Bastet and its adoration of cats.

Throughout human history, cats have featured in people's lives as fellow creatures, as companions, as symbols, as metaphors, and as allegories in literature, art, and religion. The image of the cat has varied over time, switching from positive to evil and back again. From having been revered as deities in Ancient Egypt, cats were later vilified in Europe in the Middle Ages. It is only fairly recently – in the last 200 years or so – that cats have regained their positive status. A number of scholarly publications, looked at the cat's place in human culture.

The relationship between cats and religion has not always been favourable for the cat, although in the early beginnings of the human–

cat relationship, the cat was given a god-like status. Almost 4,000 years ago, the cat was a household pet in Egypt and came to be associated with Bastet, the Egyptian goddess of the moon, protector of life, fecundity, maternity, happiness, and pleasure. The connection of the cat to Bastet is well-known among cat lovers.

A perhaps rather unknown fact among cat lovers is that the cat was associated also with Egypt's sun god, Ra. Published in 1949, the *Dictionary of Cat Lovers* describes the Egyptian paintings and papyrus scrolls that refer to the cat as the sun god. The dictionary also features names given to cats by Egyptians: cats' names found on early effigies in Egypt include 'Mau', 'Mai', and 'Maau'. In China too, cats got onomatopoeic names like 'Mao' or 'Miu' at about 300 AD. To show the connection of cats to the gods, which is something some cat accounts can relate to, here are some examples of how cats were seen as Sun God Ra.

This male Cat is Ra himself and he was called Mau

26. Praise be to thee, O Ra, exalted Sekhem, thou art the Great Cat, the avenger of the gods, and the judge of words, and the president of the sovereign chiefs [or, accessors] [sic] and the governor of the holy Circle; thou art indeed the bodies of the Great Cat.

(Aberconway, 1949)

Moving on from Egypt to the long history of cats and people, cats have played positive and negative roles in written cat stories. The cat was positively regarded as a deity and divine creature in the Greek and Norse mythologies. In Greek mythology, the cat was attributed to Artemis as a symbol for life and in Norse mythology came, to accompany the goddess Freya as a symbol for joy and merrymaking. In other religions, like Islam and Buddhism, the cat has always had a positive image as some stories involving Muhammad and Buddha show. In Japan, the cat has always been welcome in temples.

In some cultures, the cat was also given magical and mystical powers, and up to the Middle Ages the cat fulfilled the role of a healer and guardian of the home. Then, the image of the cat, positive up to then, became blurred in the folklores of Europe and the Orient. Black cats, especially, suffered from the image change, since they and their mystical and magical powers were good and evil at the same time. This blur already indicated that dark times for cats lay ahead.

In Christianity, cats slowly became to be seen as evil. From initially being regarded simply as distractions for monks and nuns

in monasteries, cats turned into the incarnation of the devil, an evil creature, and the witches' familiar. Seen as examples for bad moral behaviour and as evil and lewd, the cat was connected to the figures of Satan and Judas. As if religion was not enough, folklore did its part to vilify cats too. Cats appeared as monsters who could shape-shift into witches and back, and it was popularly believed that cats could make people fall asleep with their magical tales and songs. Since the cat was an evil satanic creature, it was prosecuted and killed together with the witches. Some of these superstitions remain today. Black cats, having to combat human superstition, are among the last animals to be adopted in shelters, and there are social media campaigns by black cat advocates who try to improve the image of black cats.

Turning now to the more positive times for cats, we should have a look at the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when cats' reputation – and in turn their lives – improved again. The image changed for the better as cats were becoming popular pets, which was reflected in stories. In fables and fairy tales, cats were portrayed as wise and creative. They were anthropomorphised and given various characteristics ranging from helpful, nocturnal, secretive, mysterious, without respect for the high and mighty, to being half-animal and half-divine, cunning, and wild. Cats could talk and started to appear as characters – even as heroes – in nursery rhymes and in literature. While cats still had the same attributes as they had earlier, these feline skills were now regarded as positive rather than negative. As characters, she-cats were associated with feminine witchcraft, shape-shifting, and mystery, while male cats tended to be tricksters and carnival figures.

Many cat heroes are known today, like Puss in Boots and the Cheshire Cat. One cat deserves a special mention, namely Tomcat Murr created by the German Romantic novelist E. T. A. Hoffmann. Tomcat Murr published his autobiography in the early nineteenth century, using his personal voice after having taught himself to read and write. In addition to Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat and Hoffmann's Murr, other authors have come up with cat heroes in their works. Only a few authors are mentioned here, like T. S. Eliot, Edgar Allan Poe, Doris Lessing, Charles Baudelaire, Mikhail Bulgakov, James Joyce, and very recently J. K. Rowling, with various cats featuring in the *Harry Potter* series.

Popular fiction is abundant with cats and cat heroes, and the Cheshire Cat has also appeared as a character in the *Thursday Next* books by Jasper Fforde. There is the *No. 2 Feline Detective Agency* series by Mandy Morton, the *Warrior Cat* books by Erin Hunter, the books by Sophie Kelly, and *Mog the Cat* by Judith Kerr. And there are the modern real-life book stars, like Streetcat Bob, Homer the Blind Wondercat, Dewey the Library Cat, Felix the Huddersfield Station Cat, and most recently Curious Zelda and Robert the Allotment Cat. We will meet some of these cats again later in the book.

Just like on the papyrus scrolls of ancient Egypt, the cat also has its place in art. It appears on both religious and secular paintings throughout the centuries and has fulfilled various positive and negative roles. In religious art, cats were depicted as biblical, evangelical, and saintly and were shown as warrior cats in the holy wars. Cats in arms and war are depicted also in secular paintings as well, and cats feature as examples for proverbs, emblems, popular wisdom, sorcery, and jest.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards – at the time when cats gained popularity as pets – paintings and portraits of cats alone appeared, and we can now admire cat pictures painted by famous painters, like Manet, Balthus, Gauguin, Picasso, and Renoir. Artists and authors have been fascinated by cats, and many of them had their own.

As the examples from literature, art and the cat-related digital spaces show, cats still play the roles given to them throughout history. Only the methods and technical possibilities have changed. Cats are still the cultural symbols humans associate them with, and they are given characteristics like comfort, healing, wisdom, puns and wordplay, and magical powers. Cats are still able to talk, to travel between the real world and dreamland, to disappear and reappear, and to provide spiritual guidance and help. The tweet by Cheddar (Figure 1.4) shows us how users portray their cats as comforters, helpers, and healers:

I is cuddlin wif mama. She be lots tired lately. And she gots a lil bit of hurty hed too. I not like dat. So I is takin good care of her. I being xtwa snuggly and cute and kwiet. I gibing her lots of purrs too! I gonna twy to not make trubble until mama all better.

(Cheddar)



Figure 1.4 Tweet by Cheddar

1.4 Cats and Their Effect

I put a spell on you, and now your mine.
 (Lilly Cat on Twitter)

Despite cat Lilly's statement in the tweet, it might not be a magic feline spell that makes us fascinated by cats but some more natural psychological and biological reasons. As already mentioned above, cats are working the social media scene as community outreach officers, entertainers, helpers, and guardians. Research on cats in the social sciences and on people's psychology provides us with some clues on the effect of real cats and of cat videos on humans in real life.

Ethology, the study of human and animal behaviour, has shown some mechanisms that form the bond between humans and cats. The cuteness theory and social support theory, developed by ethology, talk

about the effect that infant features or cuteness (or ‘kindchenschema’) have on us humans. The large eyes, bulging craniums, and retreating chins of infants trigger caring responses in adults, and we tend to feel affection not just for human babies but also for animals with these infant features.

In general, as ethological research shows, we tend to care for young, sick, and wild animals, especially when the animals have the cute baby features. Cats are cuteness personified – or catified – as they indeed seem like infants with their size, their big eyes, their softness, and their meows, which are acoustically in the same frequency as human baby cries. It is all of these features combined that make cats so appealing for us humans.

Yet it is not just their infant features that make cats so popular. Ethology also says that cats are affectionate with their owners, are generally clean, and – if seen from a human perspective – are just like humans, and research conducted on human and cat interaction has found that people like these characteristics in cats.

Ethology has found another reason for the success of cats in the therapeutic effect they have on us. Like other pets, cats improve our mood and well-being if the bond is strong between cat and us. As companion animals, cats can be our ‘significant other’ and provide an additional source of emotional support for us.

That said, not only real cats but also cat videos have been found to have a therapeutic effect on people. Cat videos have a positive impact on people’s moods. When we watch videos of funny cats and kittens, our spirits are kept up and negative emotions disappear. Anxiety, annoyance, sadness, and guilt tend to decrease when we watch cat videos. In general, people watch internet videos to enjoy themselves or to avoid work. Despite the perhaps negative connotations of cyberslacking in the workplace when people go online to watch cat videos, people pay more attention to their tasks afterwards as it turns out that internet cat videos actually promote attention and re-energise people. Cat videos, thus, are good for us.

Other research has focussed on the cat videos themselves. What makes people like videos of cats is that, in contrast to dogs, cats do not change their behaviour in front of the camera and seem to be oblivious to the fact that they are being recorded. In 2015, the popularity of cat videos was taken up as a theme in the exhibition *How Cats Took Over the Internet* at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

In an interview with me, Jason Eppink, the curator of the exhibition, pointed to seven reasons for the popularity of cat videos, namely the rise of user-generated content, pluralistic ignorance, the existence of a virtual cat park, the bored at work network, and the global appeal of pictures with no language, path dependence, and the happiness factor. Put differently, we now have the technical capability to create our own content, we tend to be in the echo chambers and filter bubbles provided for us by the algorithms, and the existence of the cativerse enables people everywhere to post and consume cat videos (and pictures) with enjoyment and without shame.

Over the years, different types of cat videos have emerged: there are funny cat videos, videos showing cats in their daily routines, and cat video compilations. In general, cat videos tend to portray the ordinary and the familiar in domestic locations, and they are easily relatable as viewers see the characteristics of their own cats in these videos. Cat videos reveal things about cats in general and show the cat as its own species, which is different from humans or other animals. As indomitable free spirits, cats are cute, funny, independent, sociable, aloof, intelligent, and secretive. The most widely known cat videos are perhaps the funny cat videos on YouTube. The format of the video tends to follow the same plot: the scene is typically calm at first, with the cat having an active part, then the calmness is interrupted suddenly and the cat acts in a certain way, the effect of which is usually surprising and funny for the viewers.

Some cat videos become viral and are watched all over the world. For example, the video of Pawfficer Donut being sworn in officially by a judge was posted on Twitter and Facebook, subsequently made it into the news, and ended up in one of the popular nightly shows on US television. Troy PD use the popularity of their police cat to reach the community and regularly post videos of the cat. A video of 7 August 2018, for example, shows the cat trying to catch a computer mouse a police officer is dangling in front of her. The caption reads:

Pawfficer Donut's latest training involves catching a mouse. Pawfficer and officers are working hard each day to serve the community. #PoliceCat (Troy Police Department – Troy, Michigan, on Facebook)

Cats are relatable for humans in many cultures, and, thus, it is not surprising that we encounter cats all around us in the virtual and real worlds as real cats, as virtual cats, and as images. Cats are present in

the business world too, and not just in the online and offline media spaces. The cat's characteristic as a culturally meaningful symbol and the cat effect are an ideal combination for business, which is a fact exploited by advertising.

Catvertising (advertising with cats) sees cats as effective tools for fundraising, marketing, commerce, and audience engagement. All the positive characteristics associated with cats, like their cuteness, the connotation of the cat and the home, and their warmth, create a positive connection between consumer and brand and apparently raise brand awareness. Apart from the pet food producers, other big companies have run adverts featuring cats, including Ikea, Skittles, Walmart, Samsung, Kia, O₂, Bouygues Telecom, Sainsbury's, Novartis, and Procter & Gamble. An advert that has become viral is Cravendale Milk's *Cats with Thumbs*, which plays on the possibility that cats develop opposable thumbs, gang up on humans, and steal their milk. The advert's black cat sharpening its claws with a nail file has turned into a meme and a GIF often shared on social media.

Images of cats are used on many consumer goods, like calendars, stationery, mugs, key rings, bags, and clothes. Cats have been inspiring designers like Dolce & Gabbana with their Bengal cat collection, Karl Lagerfeld with his Choupette collection, Charlotte Olympia with her Kitty collection, or Kate Spade with her Meow bags. Perhaps the best-known fashion icon is Hello Kitty, who is a merchandise phenomenon with items ranging from clothes, accessories, and toys to credit cards, airplanes, and food. Other examples include Pusheen, Nyan Cat, and Grumpy Cat.

Cats usually equal commercial success, which translates to cats making money for their owners. On social media, there are for-profit celebrity cats who, with their immense social media presence, make quite a lot of profit. The term 'petfluencer' is also used for for-profit celebrity cats. The most widely known example of a successful celebrity cat is probably Grumpy Cat, with product endorsements, movie and book deals, and more. Grumpy Cat sadly passed away in 2019. Other celebrity cats include Smoothie the Cat from the Netherlands, Lil Bub from the USA, and Hosico from Russia. Their images adorn a wide range of consumer goods, and celebrity cats make additional money with product endorsements on the social media platforms.

A famous example of a celebrity cat from the UK is Streetcat Bob, who is usually portrayed in his role as a healer and guardian. The

stray Bob, who was killed by a car in 2020, helped a homeless man to get his life back on track. This real-life story has created quite an industry around the cat, with a book series, Bob's very own movie, an animated series on YouTube, and more. To be fair, Streetcat Bob also did non-profit work for charities.

The fact that cats are still heroes today has turned them into cash-magnets of popular culture. The term 'popular culture' refers to cultural artefacts or media content produced for mass audiences; cats feature in music, popular fiction, and film and have brought commercial success for creators and companies. Feline popular culture includes Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Cats*, Erin Hunter's book series *Warrior Cats*, the animated series *Tom & Jerry*, the cat comics of Garfield, Simon's Cat, and The Oatmeal, Disney's animated movie *Aristocats*, and *Puss in Boots*. DreamWorks' spin-off to the successful *Shrek* series.

In some popular productions, cats contribute to the success of the series and have even become icons. The connection of cats with the *Star Trek* series is well-known, at least for the fans of the series. Yet *Star Trek* is not the only TV series featuring cats. They also show up in *Dr Who*, and outside the science fiction genre, cats have become an essential element in series lore, like in the *James Bond* movie series, which features the arc-hvillain's cat in some of the movies. And when we come back to recent popular TV series, we should not forget cats as recurring song themes, such as 'Smelly Cat' in *Friends* and 'Soft Kitty, Warm Kitty' in *The Big Bang Theory*, which has gone viral on the Internet.

As we have already seen, the cativerse stretches across a wide expanse of the Internet, and while cats seem to rule the Internet, other animals are also very popular on social media. There are dogs, llamas, goats, sheep, cows, hamsters, hedgehogs, and more, and the social media platforms provide places for all animal interests: digital spaces form around these animals too. These animal-related digital spaces are not mutually exclusive as people with animal companions are usually animal lovers. The Dodo exemplifies the animal variety on social media and makes use of the visual impact of animal videos. The Dodo wants to reach as many people as possible with

emotionally and visually compelling, highly shareable animal-related stories and videos ... to make caring about animals a viral cause
(The Dodo)

Cross-species friendships, especially, attract people, and images of cats cuddling with dogs or of cats fostering ducks and such like make for highly shareable social media content. It is not just the big animal players who are successful on the Internet: animal shelters make use of social media channels to raise awareness for animal welfare and to find so-called forever homes for their many cats, dogs, rabbits, horses, and more. Examples in the UK are the RSPCA and Cats Protection doing their animal charity work and animal protection.

As in real life, the biggest rivals for cats on the Internet, in terms of popularity in human eyes, are dogs. In fact, the figures for Instagram show that there are many more postings with the hashtag #dog than with #cat. Like cats, dogs have their own dog-related digital spaces, their own followers, and their own stars. It is not just the ‘crazy cat people’ but also dog owners who like to show their pets to the world and talk about them. Pugs, for example, also have their own pug-related digital spaces on social media, like Doug the Pug, who has become famous for being dressed up like celebrities and for posing in movie scenes, or the not (yet)-so-famous Gilly and Pancake (Figure 1.5), who have their own social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

When we go into pug-related digital spaces, we find that pugs, like cats, have their own variety of language – or ‘furiety’ – with word creations like ‘pugtato chips’ and pug-specific hashtags like #PugsTakeDC, #PugChat, and #PugLife. On a dog-related sidenote, research has been done on pupper talk, a language variety in dog-related digital spaces on Reddit.

While people cannot be simply divided into cat people and dog people, (news) media and social media like to play on the dog vs cat angle, as exemplified by Troy PD. In their posts, Troy PD also use dogs from their unit to reach out to the community, and when they do, messages and comments are likely to include some remarks on Pawfficer Donut too. However, despite the quantitative advantage of dogs on the Internet, it is cats who are more likely to go viral and to attract more attention. The reason for that is simple, according to internet lore:

Cats rule, and dogs drool.
(Anonymous)



Figure 1.5 Gilly and Pancake, pugs on the Internet

Sources Used in This Chapter

- 🐾 Turner (1995, 2000); Turner and Bateson (2014) for the human-cat relationship
- 🐾 Bradshaw (2014) for cat behaviour
- 🐾 Sacquin (2010) for cats in art
- 🐾 Foucart-Walter and Rosenberg (1988) for cats in art
- 🐾 Bobis (2001) for cats in literature and art
- 🐾 Nikolajeva (2014) for cats in literature
- 🐾 Aberconway (1949) for the history of cats
- 🐾 McCulloch (2019) for third places on the Internet
- 🐾 Eppink (2015) for cats and the Internet
- 🐾 Shafer (2012, 2016) for cat videos
- 🐾 O'Meara (2014) for cat videos
- 🐾 Gall Myrick (2015) for cat videos
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- 🐾 Podhovník (2016) for cats in the news media
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- 🐾 Mahler (2020) for language in dog-related digital spaces on Reddit

Examples and Quotes in This Chapter

- 🐾 Aberconway (1949, pp. 460–461)
- 🐾 Curious Zelda and Taghioff (2019)
- 🐾 For the Love of Black Cats (Black Cat Appreciation Page) on Facebook at @BlackCatAppreciationPage
- 🐾 Cheddar on Twitter at @fartycheddarcat
- 🐾 Rolf the Warwick University Cat on Twitter at @RolfatWarwick
- 🐾 Troy Police Department on Twitter at @TroyMI_Police
- 🐾 www.thedodo.com

Suggestions for PURRther Reading

- 🐾 McCulloch (2019)