

Why Do Cats Run the Internet? A Scientific Explanation

By [Perry Stein](#)

Cats may not be man's best friend, but they're arguably something even better: man's key to instant Internet pageviews. It's a long-established fact that Internet content—whether it's a cutesy video, a photoshopped inside joke, or a [longform public health article](#) - http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1969/12/how-your-cat-is-making-you-crazy/8873/?single_page=true - —has a better chance of achieving coveted “viral” status if it somehow evokes the sound of purring.

But if we've come to accept that cats play an outsized role on the World Wide Web, our understanding of why that's the case still lags. Most of us would simply plead that we happen to think of cats, and their various digital reproductions, as “cute,” but the sheer magnitude of their popularity suggests that there's something more than a purely subjective phenomenon at work. Fortunately, natural and social scientists have managed to shed some light on the mystery.

The first thing to acknowledge is that there was a deep interest in cats long before there was an Internet. Miles Orvell, a cultural historian at Temple University who specializes in visual culture, said that what the Internet has done is leverage a preexisting fascination. “There's a contagious effect of the Internet where something



that is there as a latent possibility can emerge at large in society,” Orvell said. “It’s not so much creating this interest in cats, it’s more exploiting this interest that was already there.”

Orvell pointed out that Western culture’s interest in cats extends as far back as the ninth century, when an Irish monk wrote a poem about his cat called “Pangur Ban.” It would prove a lasting trope. Nine-hundred years later, Christopher Smart would write the poem “For I Will Consider My Cat Jeoffry”; in the 1930s T.S. Eliot wrote his famed *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*, which later became the basis for the musical *CATS*. Outside of literature, cats became a staple of American popular imagery in the twentieth century, from television advertisements to *Tom and Jerry*. Cat videos on the Internet that garner millions of hits, Orvell says, should be thought of as an animated extension of the cat calendars of yesteryear.

But why have cats specifically been so successful at soliciting our attention? One hypothesis is that there is a fateful link between cats and human babies that explains their Internet stardom. According to Michael Newall, a philosopher of art at the University of Kent, our inordinate interest in cats may derive from their formal resemblance to our offspring—their big eyes, smallish noses, and dome-shaped heads trigger the evolutionary nurturing instincts that we have evolved toward babies. There may even be a multiplying “superstimulus” effect at work: Newall posits that the exaggerated proportions of cats’ baby-like features prompt an exaggeratedly intense, and involuntary, response in people.

But the reason that cats have catapulted to cyber-fame isn’t purely biological: There are social factors at play as well. Steve Dale, a cat behavior consultant and pet journalist, told me that cat aficionados have been particularly drawn to the Internet because they lack other public safety valves where they can express their affection. “In the world of cats, there is no dog park,” Dale says. “For cat owners, the dog park is the Internet.”

Indeed, the Internet isn’t only a high-volume marketplace of cat memes—it’s also home to very intense communities of cat owners, who gather to share stories and seek answer about their pets. Mieshelle Nagelschneider, author of Random House’s forthcoming book *Cat Whisperer*, said that cat owners, have taken to the Internet as a means to actively, and collectively, reverse the stigma attached to them: Cat

owners have long felt that they don't get the respect of their counterparts who have dogs, even though there are more domesticated felines (a total of 86 million, according to the Humane Society) than canines. "I think the web has helped emerge this undiscovered beachfront property, that is cat owners," Nagelschneider says.

There may be more deep-seated psychological responses at play as well. Cats' famously reserved and withholding personalities naturally seduce us into paying closer attention to them. And unlike humans and dogs, cats are not only natural predators—they are also prey, a reason why cats often appear reserved and stealthy. Cats' inherent vulnerability, Orvell says, naturally solicits our sympathy, and even puts us in touch with our own mortality. "There's a complex set of reactions to cats, and the videos bring that into play," Orvell said

The most compelling explanation for our interest in cats, however, may be the most simple: we're in awe of them. Nagelschneider told me that we're inclined to watch cats climbing trees or walking upside down on walls because we wish we could do so ourselves—or, in her words, "When we are watching these videos, they just blow our minds." To whatever extent that's true, it's certainly worth a click.

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