

Exploratory Research on Social Media Exposure and Support for Animal Rights

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Introduction and Background

Research on social media and its impact on individuals is scarce since social media itself is very new. Some research has been done to show the potential for social media to aid in police work and arrests/prosecutions. Research done by Kende, Zomeren, Ujhelyi, & Lantos (2016) supports the potential of social media to motivate individuals to take action, through two sequential studies. A video posted in 2010 of animal abuse “provoked worldwide outrage”, and gained so much attention that the police were able to identify and locate the perpetrator. The internet rallied after another video of animal cruelty surfaced, and a campaign against the perpetrator was created that led to legal action. An article by Emily Suran (2014) explains how public support can create laws, by discussing the case of the new Title IX laws. Suran acknowledges that values of a society usually arise from the laws that are enforced, but the Title IX laws are an example where, only after the work and effort of activists, did a society’s value help create a law. With all the information previously mentioned, social media has a strong influence on individuals, on law enforcement, and on the legal system, so it is important to examine the specific sector of crime- animal abuse- and social media, and how the two factors interact.

Objectives

The goal of this study was to provide preliminary information on how the typical American interacts with social media and how this may affect support for online petitions in general and petitions for animal abuse in particular. Questions included:

- What percentage of social media users get exposed to information about, or incidents, of animal abuse?
- Which factors are most closely associated with exposure to animal abuse cases and information?
- Does exposure depend on which social media platform is used?
- Does it depend on the amount of time a person spends on social media?
- What percentage of social media users ever sign a petition regarding animal abuse?
- What personal factors are associated with a person’s likelihood to sign a petition, or share information on a case about animal abuse, on social media?
- Does previous exposure to animal abuse information on social media cause a person to be more likely to sign a petition or share information on the case to help further the investigation?
- How does the person’s personal history with pets and other animals influence their likelihood to take the previously mentioned actions?

Method

A 53-question survey was created, that included questions to cover basic demographics, history and present situation with pets; possible vegetarianism/veganism; personality questions; personal opinions towards animal rights; frequency of social media use and social media platform/s; personal opinion towards social media; past exposure to online petitions, petitions for animal rights, and cases of animal abuse; and if the individual would take action if they come across a petition for animal rights.

The survey was distributed nationally in the U.S. through Amazon Mechanical Turk and the University of New Haven population via email.

Table 1. Crosstabulation of Age and Likelihood of Signing Online Petition, in Percent.

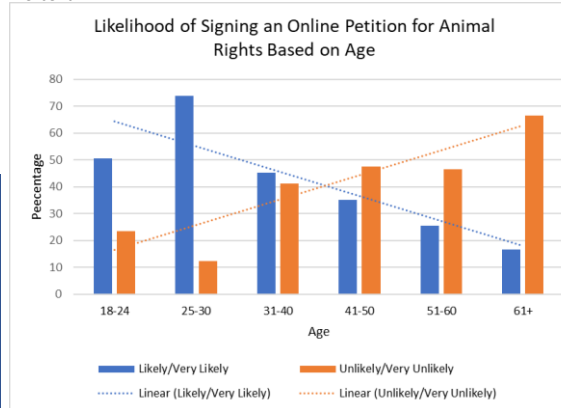


Table 2. Ordered Logistic Regressions of Likelihood of Signing An Online Animal Rights Petition on Frequency of Social Media Use, Pet Ownership, and Previous Exposure to Cases of Animal Cruelty Online: Odds Ratios with z-scores in parentheses

Measure	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
High Frequency Use	3.10(6.60)***	2.85(6.02)***	2.28(4.59)***
Pet Ownership	-	2.69(6.30)***	2.04(4.33)***
Previous Exp.	-	-	-
-Few	-	-	1.66(2.61)**
-A Lot	-	-	4.63(6.92)***
PseudoR ²	0.03	0.06	0.09

Note: * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001.

Sample Demographics

There were 746 total respondents from both samples.

- 59.2% were male
- 83.2% were younger than 40 years old
- 41-60 years old: 15%
- 61+ years old: 1.2%

The two ethnicities with the greatest representation was White/Caucasian (66.5%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (15%). 44.9% have completed college, and another 10.9% have gone on to complete graduate school.

The largest representation came from the Northeast (35.3%), followed by the South (31%).

The Liberal political affiliation had the greatest representation with 47.8%, followed by those who were neutral, at 30.4%.

Study Findings

Age and geographical location seem to play a role in a respondent’s likelihood of supporting animal rights by signing a petition online. Geographically, those who spent most of their childhood in the South reported the highest percentage of support, with 70.4% saying that they were either likely or very likely to sign a petition. The Northeast had the lowest percentage, at 40.3%.

Support for signing a petition for animal rights has shown to decrease with age (Table 1)..

At least once in the last month:

- 68% of respondents reported seeing a petition online for animal rights, but only 53.3% reported that they would sign.
- 81.3% of respondents reported reading about a case of animal abuse
- 83% reported hearing about a case of animal abuse
- 72% reported encountering a warning about animal abuse online

An ordinal logistic regression analysis was used to predict the odds of respondents’ likelihood of signing the petition. (Table 2):

- Someone who browses social media at a higher frequency are 210% more likely to sign the petition relative to those who have low social media involvement.
- People who have, or have had, pets are 169% more likely to sign the petition than those who never had pets.
- Those who have reported seeing a warning about animal cruelty online a few times are 66% more likely to sign than those who never did.
 - Those who have reported seeing warnings a lot, relative to those who have never, are 363% more likely to sign the petition.

Conclusion

Factors that increase a person’s likelihood of signing and providing support towards a petition for animal rights include:

- Frequent social media usage
- Pet owners
- Previous exposure to animal abuse

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