Popularity and Public Perceptions of Companion Animal Content on Instagram

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Introduction

The use of animals in social media as photo props is a concern, as they are often anthropomorphised, by dressing animals in clothing or giving them humanistic lifestyles[1]. Anthropomorphism can contribute to negative welfare by misunderstanding an animal's behaviour & needs, leading to inappropriate handling & care[2]. To date, the limited research on the portrayal of animals on social media has focused on wild animals; this research has found concerning trends that species were viewed as not threatened & individual animals as tame & easily kept as pets as a result of their representation in an anthropomorphic setting[3,4]. To our knowledge, a similar evaluation has not been conducted for companion animal content.

This study investigated the portrayal of companion animal content on Instagram. We aimed to: (1) determine how the type of Instagram content relates to the number of likes & comments attracted, & (2) compare how the type of content is perceived by the public.

Methods

Seventy public companion animal Instagram accounts (10 per dog, cat, rabbit, guinea pig, parrot, chinchilla & reptile accounts) were assessed. Five accounts in each animal category were selected for promoting naturalistic lifestyles with their animals & five for anthropomorphic content. A random selection of ten posts from each account was then assessed for their content (anthropomorphic/natural portrayal), popularity (number of likes/comments), & comments.

Results

Anthropomorphic content of companion animal posts received more likes (Fig. 1) & comments (Fig. 2) than naturalistic content.

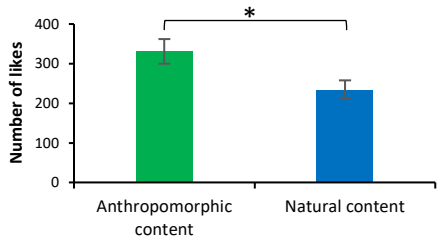

Fig 1. Mean number of likes from anthropomorphic & naturalistic content

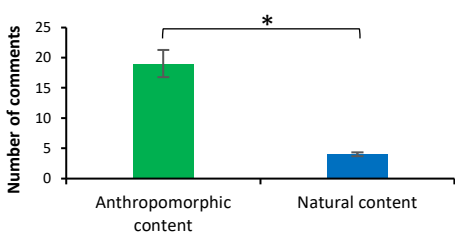

Fig 2. Mean number of comments from anthropomorphic & naturalistic content.

Reptile product promotion followed a similar trend to dog and cat product promotion content (Fig. 3).

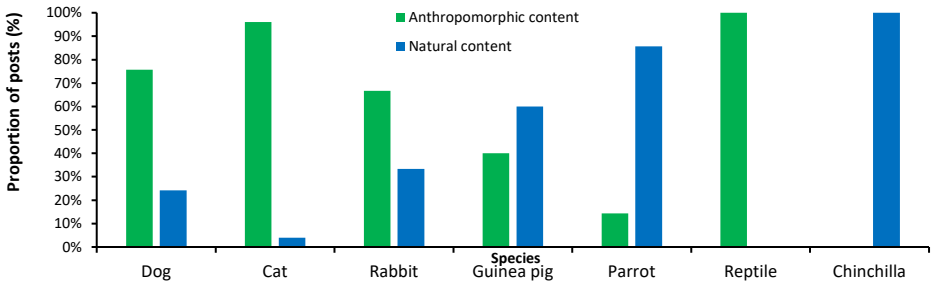

Fig 3. Proportion of posts containing product promotion by anthropomorphic and natural content by species

There were also similar public attitudes towards anthropomorphic and natural content as shown in the comments on the posts, with words such as 'cute', 'love' and 'adorable' frequently used (Fig. 4 & 5).

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Fig 4. Frequency of words commented at least 10 times from anthropomorphic content

Fig 5. Frequency of words commented at least 10 times for naturalistic content

Discussion

Anthropomorphic content was more popular than naturalistic content of companion animal posts on Instagram. Furthermore, the highly encouraging & lack of discouraging comments, particularly towards anthropomorphic content, is similar to previous studies which found that the prevailing frequency of positive comments towards exotic animal YouTube videos reflects the "cute factor" in online content promotion[5]. This can increase desirability of exotic pet ownership & contributes to normalising these animals as pets[6]. This indicates a limited public understanding of the impacts of anthropomorphism & suggests poor understanding of welfare as many animals show signs of stress when dressed up in 'cute' outfits.

Our research demonstrates a need for concern regarding companion animal content on social media. With normal behaviour and husbandry having limited representation, there is a worrying trend that pet owners will not recognise abnormal or stress behaviours. This is particularly so when dressing animals up for use as photo props.