

The State of Animal Welfare Portrayed on Social Media

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abstract

Animal welfare involves the practice of fulfilling an animal's physical and mental needs. In modern times, it holds a significant importance as scientific studies have improved our understanding of an animal's capacity to suffer. Therefore, it is imperative to care for animals in the most humane and respectful ways possible. However, new challenges have arisen from the digital realm of social media. On these platforms, anyone can post animal-related content, raising questions about how animals are treated and portrayed. This paper delves into the issue using a combination of literature reviews and exploratory descriptive methods. New studies related to animal welfare on social media are examined to identify the prevailing themes in how animals are portrayed. The results unfortunately show that social media is generally an unregulated medium where animal-related content is often not in accordance with animal welfare practices. Studies even suggest that incidents of social media animal cruelty are on the rise, despite regulations put in place by various social media platforms. Immediate action is needed to address deviations from animal welfare standards on social media. This responsibility falls on both the social media platform providers, their users, and the government.

Keywords: Animal, wild animal, welfare, ethics, social media

Introduction

Animal welfare is known as the practice of treating animals in a humane way, ensuring that their needs, both physical and mental, are provided for and fulfilled (American Veterinary Medicine Association, 2023). Essentially, whenever an animal is under human care, whether as a companion animal, for food production, for research and education, or for conservation purposes, the animal must be treated with respect and dignity. The treatment of animals must also align with their respective species, biology, and behavior. Different types of animals require different care. For example, the needs of a domestic animal differ from those of a wild animal. However, in general, the basis of animal welfare is the "Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare" (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 1979), which includes:

1. **Freedom from hunger or thirst** by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour
2. **Freedom from discomfort** by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area
3. **Freedom from pain, injury or disease** by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment
4. **Freedom to express normal behaviour** by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
5. **Freedom from fear and distress** by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering

In modern times, with the advancement of scientific knowledge, we understand that even an animal has the ability to suffer. When their needs are not met and fulfilled, animals can indeed experience stress. Moreover, when that stress is left unmanaged, it can worsen severely that leads to an animal's version of a mental illness. This phenomenon is called zoochosis (Grandin and Johnson, 2010). Animals housed in captivity such as cages without the ability to express their natural behaviour, will act abnormally, even to an extent, they can commit self-harm (Balcombe et al., 2011). Therefore, the practices of animal welfare are regarded highly.

The treatment and management of all types of animals must be conducted in accordance with animal welfare principles. This is not only for the sake of ethically treating animals but also in response to societal concerns. For instance, in cases where animals are used for human needs, such as in farming, consumers increasingly demand that the animal products they receive come from ethical practices. This demand has become so significant that animal products must now be properly labelled with clear information based on an internationally agreed-upon system (Alonso et al., 2020). In fact, consumers are now known to be more willing to pay more for animal welfare friendly products, such as free-range chickens (Koknaroglu and Akunal, 2013). Improving animal welfare in farm animals has been proven to be beneficial in increasing productivity and reducing disease risks (Fernandez et al., 2021). Therefore, upholding animal welfare is both necessary and required.

It is worth considering, as I mentioned earlier, that we live in modern times. The treatment of animals occurs not only in the physical realm of the real world but also in the digital realm of social media. In the real world, there are established standards and guidelines governing how society should treat animals, whether it's responsible pet ownership, the care of farm animals, or the preservation of wild animals in conservation institutions. These regulations are created and must be followed to ensure that animals are treated with proper welfare. If we encounter real-world practices that violate animal welfare standards, such violations can lead to corresponding real-world consequences.

However, in the context of social media, we must ask whether the implementation and regulations of animal welfare are the same. Can we uphold animal welfare practices on social media in the same way we do in the real world to ensure that animals on social media are treated and portrayed in accordance with animal welfare practices?

Materials and Methods

The methods employed in this study consisted of a literature review and an exploratory descriptive approach. These methods were used to elucidate the phenomena observed and discussed within the study. The study aims to examine how animal welfare is portrayed on social media. The literature review was conducted to establish consensus on whether or not animal-related content on social media aligns with animal welfare practices. Once the data is collected, it will be analysed to generate results and support further discussions.

Results and Discussion

In recent years, the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition, a coalition of respected animal welfare organizations, has assessed the internet to identify trends and themes in how animals are portrayed on social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook. They have focused on the prevalence of animal cruelty in the content shared on social media. This study aims to highlight animal cruelty as a violation of animal welfare practices. The more frequently animal cruelty is portrayed on social media, the stronger the conclusion that animal welfare practices are not being upheld.

A shocking revelation came from the Social Media Animal Cruelty Coalition's (SMACC) report titled "Making Money from Misery. How social media giants profit from animal abuse" (SMACC, 2021). It has been revealed that social media platforms are actually facilitating the sharing of animal cruelty content. Many videos of abusive and cruel activities towards animals are presented on different social media platforms. Not only are they being presented, they are also monetized through large numbers of user engagements such as "likes" and "views". That means whoever uploads such abusive and cruel contents is actually generating profit from it.

The report stated that in the span of one year between July 2020 and August 2021, there were over 5000 individual links to animal cruelty content across different social media platforms. The contents themselves range from ambiguous and unintentional cruelty to intentional and sadistic cruelty. The animals presented also range from domestic animals to wild animals. The creator of these animal cruelty contents has somehow achieved "celebrity" status, with some creators' accounts boasting millions of followers. Unfortunately, of the many countries documented for producing animal cruelty contents, Indonesia was ranked the number one producer of animal cruelty contents.

Among the themes of cruelty, keeping wild animals as pets is one of the most frequent issues shown in the report. One example is the case of keeping primates as pets. This finding is backed up by the data gathered by International Animal Rescue (2021), which shows that the number of "pet monkey" contents on Indonesian social media platforms has risen significantly since 2020. Furthermore, the Asia for Animals Macaque Coalition (2022) report titled "The Macaque Report: Indonesia's Unprotected Primate" showcased the issue in greater detail. Macaques as wild animals have been hunted from the wild, illegally caught, and sold in wet markets to be bought as "pets". This false trend had risen and was predominantly led by local Indonesian influencers and celebrities (SMACC, 2022). These influencers and celebrities had massive followings and can influence other people in great numbers to do the same animal cruelty practices as they did.

It is worth noting that keeping wild animals as pets itself is an act of animal cruelty (SMACC, 2021), due to the cruel way they are obtained and the many aspects of wild animals' needs and behavior that cannot be fulfilled in captive settings by non-professionals. Therefore, violating point number 4 of the Five Freedoms principle: "freedom to express normal behavior". Furthermore, these infant primates are often subjected to activities such as teasing, scaring, and intentionally withholding food, which are all deemed cruel (SMACC, 2022).

These violate the Five Freedoms principle: point 2 ("freedom from discomfort"), point 3 ("freedom from pain, injury, or disease"), and point 5 ("freedom from fear and distress").

However, the cruelty does not end there. The "pet monkey" contents do not stop simply with civilians keeping primates as household pets and "playing" with them; they have branched to intentional torture. A year-long investigation by the BBC (2023) revealed that Indonesia has gathered international concerns as the source of a global network of "monkey torture" groups. Hundreds of customers worldwide had ordered custom-made torture videos of infant primates from Indonesian creators. Based on these findings, it can be summarized that animal cruelty content on social media, including in Indonesia, is still common and mainstreamed.

The implication of the mainstreaming of animal cruelty content of many species of animals; be it domestic or wild, is that animal welfare principles are not being upheld as they should be on social media. Even more concerning is the fact that social media content often serves as a mere documentation of real-life activities. If animal welfare principles are being violated on social media, it implies that somewhere in the real world, someone is also violating these principles in their treatment of animals. It can also be considered that through social media, people can be influenced to commit activities that violate animal welfare. This is surely something that we do not wish to happen. If anything, we should use social media to inspire people to treat animals in a caring and humane way; thus, upholding animal welfare principles. Immediate actions must be implemented to reverse the condition from the mainstreaming of animal cruelty contents, into the mainstreaming of animal welfare contents.

First, all social media platforms already have an existing regulation against animal cruelty. However, in reality, they are deemed insufficient. Therefore, social media platforms as the provider of services must update their regulation to become more sufficient in detecting animal cruelty contents and banning them from being accessible by the users. Perhaps even implementing new technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) to automatically detect animal cruelty contents, as AI has been known to be useful in enhancing the productivity of analytical processes and insights (Dhoni, 2023). Or, at the very least, the social media platform could provide a note on the content so that audiences are aware and be more mindful. This is a similar practice to Covid-19 related contents, where the platform would insert a cautionary note for the audience to fact check the information displayed in the content to prevent misinformation (Islam et al., 2021). This idea is in line with the notion mentioned in the introduction, that increasing animal welfare practices are a necessity and requirement in modern times.

Second, the users themselves need to be responsible in their social media browsing activities. At the very least, users need to understand the basics of animal welfare and be able to detect cruelty contents. Even as simple as knowing when a domestic animal or a pet is in distress, or knowing that wild animals are not meant to be portrayed as pets. Furthermore, users can follow the SMACC Public Advice (2022) titled "Five Steps to Stop Online Cruelty": be aware, do not watch, do not engage, do not share, report.

Third, if famous influencers and celebrities can influence the promotion of animal cruelty, they can certainly do the opposite. Influential figures who are well-informed about animal welfare practices should be more vocal in raising awareness against animal cruelty and shifting the focus toward animal welfare (Humane Society International, 2023). These knowledgeable famous figures could also set a positive example by mainstreaming ethical contents, animal welfare organizations, conservation efforts, educational websites, and more.

Fourth, the role of government is also important in the mainstreaming of animal welfare. Government bodies that regulate practices related to animal welfare such as the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, the Directorate General of Animal Husbandry and Animal Health, as well as the Directorate of Veterinary Public Health among others, should collaborate and implement information about animal welfare to the corresponding government body that regulates social media such as the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

Conclusion

According to many reports, animal cruelty content is still prevalent on social media. It is an indication that animal welfare principles are not yet upheld the way it should be. There needs to be an immediate action to reverse the mainstreaming of animal cruelty contents, to animal welfare contents. It must be done through collaborative actions by the social media platform provider, its users, public figures, and the government.

Conflict of Interest

We certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial, personal, or other relationships with other people or organizations related to the material discussed in the manuscript.

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