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Senior 2019

Criminal Justice and Psychology

Exploratory Research on Social Media Exposure and Support for Animal Rights

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The goal of the current 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. Previous research presented social media's ability to gain support to a variety of topics, including passing new legislature and aiding police efforts. 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. Research done by Kende, Zomeren, Ujhelyi, & Lantos (2016) supports the potential of social media to motivate individuals to act, through two sequential studies. In 2010, there was a video posted online of a young woman throwing six puppies into a river. The video "provoked worldwide outrage", and gained so much attention that the police were able to identify and locate the perpetrator in Bosnia. Another case included a woman, just days earlier, who dumped a cat into a trash can. The internet rallied from seeing the video, and created a campaign against the woman that later led to legal action (Our Foreign Staff, 2010). These are just two of the many situations where social media influenced the way animal abuse and animal treatment is handled. Questions that were anticipated being answered 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? 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? and others. The study was done using a 53-question survey that included basic demographics and many specific questions about animals, animal abuse, social media use, and online petitions. The survey was distributed nationally in the U.S. through Amazon Mechanical Turk and among the University of New Haven population via email. An ordinal logistic regression analysis was used to predict the odds of respondents' likelihood of signing a petition for animal rights.

Age and geographical location seemed 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 was shown to decrease with age. A little more than half of all 18- to 24-year-olds reported that they were either likely or very likely to sign a petition, and 25- to 30-year-olds had the highest percentage reported, at 73.8%. As the age groups increased though, percentage for support decreased while percentage who said they were either unlikely or very unlikely to sign increased; 61+ years old only had 16.7% say they

would sign, and 66.6% said they would not. Any priming exposure to information or posts regarding animal abuse was shown to increase the odds of that individual participating in petitions in support for animal rights. A significant correlation was found, showing that being a pet owner directly predicts signing the petition, as well as frequent social media users. The plan is to write up a paper and submit the study for publication. The current study focused heavily on what influenced someone to sign and share an online petition for animal rights, so future research would need to focus on uncovering why someone would not sign and/or not share such petitions.

Citations

- Kende, A., van Zomeren, M., Ujhelyi, A., & Lantos, N. A. (2016). The social affirmation use of social media as a motivator of collective action. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 46, 453-469.
- Our Foreign Staff. (2010). Bosnian police find woman who threw puppies into river. *The Telegraph*
- Suran, E. (2014). Title IX and Social Media: Going Beyond the Law. *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law*, 21(273), 273-209.