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Social Media and the Shifting Dynamics of Human-Animal Relationships in Dhaka

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Abstract: This study delves into how social media is revolutionizing animal welfare efforts in Dhaka, Bangladesh, focusing on both community-driven initiatives and legal advocacy. Using qualitative methods such as digital ethnography and semi-structured interviews, the study examines how online platforms are transforming individual acts of animal rescue into broader, organized movements. Theoretical insights from Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" and Erving Goffman's Framing Theory shed light on how digital spaces create collective identities and influence public attitudes. By 2024, local animal welfare groups had evolved from merely rescuing and adopting animals to actively engaging in legal battles and policy advocacy. The study highlights how social media not only builds strong support networks and raises awareness but also empowers new activists by keeping them engaged in awareness related activities, bringing justice to animals, and staying connected among themselves for a common cause. The study also enhances the understanding of how digital platforms can drive meaningful social change and offers a framework for applying similar strategies to other advocacy efforts.

Key Words: animal welfare, social media activism, digital ethnography, collective action

Introduction: The relationship between humans and animals is historically deep and complex, shaped by environmental factors, cultural values, and religious beliefs. In Bangladesh, particularly in Dhaka, this relationship is further shaped by socio-economic and cultural realities. However, animal welfare in Dhaka often falls short of acceptable standards. Amid these challenges, social media has emerged as a powerful tool

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for raising awareness and advocating for animal rights.

This study explores how social media platforms are being used to promote animal welfare in Dhaka, especially concerning stray animals like dogs and cats. It examines how individuals and groups use promotes such as Facebook to share stories, highlight cruelty, mobilize support, and call for policy change. For instance, viral campaigns by the Animal Welfare Team of Dhaka University (AWTDU) have successfully raised funds for injured stray dogs, while PAW Foundation's posts on sterilization drives have sparked widespread engagement and volunteer participation. Social media has also become a vital channel for encouraging the adoption of stray animals. Activists and rescuers use live videos, photos, and detailed posts to connect potential adopters with rescued animals. These efforts not only raise awareness but also lead to real-world outcomes such as adoptions, rescues, and in some cases, legal action—like in the 2023 Banasree dog-killing case, the 2024 Banani dog culling, and the Japan Garden City incident in Mohammadpur.

The study also highlights the work of key activists like Ms. Zarin Akhter and Mr. Md Abdul Kaium, who consistently use Facebook to document rescues and advocate for animal rights. It examines the role of prominent Facebook groups such as Animal Rescuers Bangladesh, Cat Society of Bangladesh, 50 For Paws, PAW Foundation, and AWTDU. These groups, each with thousands of followers, serve as digital hubs for rescue coordination, adoption campaigns, public education, and grassroots activism.

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative research design combined with a case study approach to investigate how social media functions as a vital platform for promoting animal welfare awareness in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It focuses on key individual activists— Ms. Zarin Akhter and Mr. Md Abdul Kaium—and prominent groups such as Animal Rescuers Bangladesh (ARB) and Animal Welfare Team of Dhaka University (AWTDU). Through purposive sampling, these participants were selected for their active engagement in animal welfare advocacy via social media.

Digital ethnography forms the core of data collection, involving immersive observation of social media activities on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. For instance, Ms. Zarin Akhter frequently posts live rescue videos, while Mr. Md Abdul Kaium shares emotionally compelling recovery narratives. ARB's Facebook page highlights profiles of adoptable animals, and PAW Foundation's campaigns on sterilization and vaccination generate substantial community engagement through shares and comments. These observations enable an analysis of narrative and visual framing strategies alongside public interaction metrics such as likes and comments. Complementing this, semi-structured interviews with individual activists and organizational representatives provide deeper insights into their motivations, advocacy strategies, challenges, and perceptions of impact. The study has received ethical approval from the Anthropological Research Ethics Approval Board (AREAB) of University of Dhaka, and adheres strictly to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent, ensuring participant anonymity, and responsibly citing publicly available online content.

Literature Review: Anthropology has traditionally centred human experiences, often sidelining animals as passive symbols or tools within human narratives[1]. This anthropocentric lens ignores animal agency, sentience, and sociability, thereby limiting the discipline's ability to grasp the mutual entanglements of human and nonhuman lives. Recent scholarship, however, has pushed back against this bias. Authors such as Haraway urge a rethinking of human-animal relations amidst ecological crises, while multispecies ethnography offers an ethical, inclusive framework for understanding interspecies worlds[2]. Authors like Kopnina further advocate for integrating animal welfare into anthropological inquiry[3], and Karlekar illustrates this by documenting violence against stray dogs in India and the activism resisting it[4]. These efforts mark a shift toward

an ecologically grounded and ethically expansive anthropology.

Urban human-animal relations reflect these evolving paradigms. In Shanghai, Xuanyu and Xiaoyu reveal cultural biases in the treatment of stray cats and wild raccoon dogs[5], which reflects a broader trend of challenging the nature/culture divide[6]. In Bangladesh, Kabir exposes the stark contrast between pampered pets and abused street dogs, raising concerns about public health, inadequate neutering programs, and the need for humane, informed intervention[7]. Wundram's concept of urban ethology helps contextualize how cultural and ecological factors shape such relations[8]. Similar dynamics are evident in Malaysia, where feeding stray cats—though socially encouraged—is linked to ecological harm[9].

Digital platforms further transform human-animal relations by utilizing inclusive activism and recognizing nonhuman agency[10]. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram lower participation barriers, strengthen collective identity, and enable cost-efficient coordination, thus amplifying the impact of social movements[11]. In Indonesia, groups like Pro-Fauna and the Jakarta Animal Aid Network effectively use these tools for outreach and mobilization. The Dog Meat Free Indonesia (DMFI) campaign exemplifies how localized activism can scale up into global solidarity networks[12], with framing strategies aligning supporters around shared values[13]. Lupton broadens this discussion, examining how digital technologies shape human-animal interactions by both spotlighting animal mistreatment and contributing to their commodification[14].

Theoretical Framework: This study is anchored in a theoretical orientation that views social media not merely as a communication tool but as a medium through which ethical subjectivities and collective moral imaginaries are constituted. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's (1983) notion of *Imagined Communities*, the study explores how digitally connected individuals in Dhaka come to perceive themselves as part of a shared moral project—one oriented toward the care and protection of nonhuman lives. In the digital

age, these communities are no longer bound by physical proximity but are brought into being through mediated narratives of suffering, empathy, and action[15]. Within Facebook groups, the rescuers, volunteers, and concerned citizens forge a sense of belonging through shared stories of rescue, outrage, and hope, a dispersed public coalesces into a unified moral community, imagining itself as a collective agent of interspecies justice.

Framing Theory offers a further conceptual tool for unpacking the symbolic and affective labour involved in these digital practices. As developed by Goffman and refined by Entman, framing is not simply a matter of representation[16]—it is a mode of ethical persuasion, a way of shaping reality so that certain lives are seen as sentient beings, and certain actions as necessary[17]. In the digital activism surrounding stray animals in Dhaka, the choice of words, images, and narratives is never neutral. Strays are framed as innocent, as beloved companions, or as beings wronged by institutional neglect. These frames mobilize affect and responsibility, seeking to reorient the moral gaze of the public. As Chong and Druckman argue, framing has the power to influence not only perception but action—turning emotion into political will, and spectators into participants in a collective ethical struggle[18].

To deepen this philosophical inquiry, the study engages with a broader constellation of thinkers who challenge anthropocentric moral boundaries. Papacharissi's concept of *affective publics* reveals how emotional expressions in digital space function as catalysts for collective identification and resistance[19]. The ethical core of this research is informed by Singer's argument that moral worth hinges on the capacity to suffer[20], and by Nussbaum's insistence that animals, like humans, are entitled to flourish through access to dignity-enabling capabilities[21]. Haraway's theory of *companion species* dismantles the human/animal binary, proposing a world of entangled lives and shared responsibilities, while Latour's demand for the political inclusion of nonhumans points toward a reimagined civic order[22]. Taken together, these frameworks offer more than analytical tools—they propose an ethic of interspecies solidarity,

where social media becomes a site not just of action, but of moral world-making.

Non-Human Stray Animals in Bangladesh: Organizations such as Animal Rescuers Bangladesh (ARB), the Cat Society of Bangladesh (CSB), and the PAW Foundation have played a pivotal role in raising awareness and mobilizing action against animal cruelty through social media. When incidents—like the one at Japan Garden City in Mohammadpur—are posted online, they rapidly circulate across Facebook through shares, videos, and images, reaching thousands of users. As public pressure intensifies, animal rights activists frequently collaborate with lawyers to pursue legal action against perpetrators. This cyclical interaction between online advocacy and legal efforts illustrates how these groups are using digital platforms to create tangible change for stray animals[23].

The animal welfare movement in Dhaka continues to gain visibility and momentum, largely due to the efforts of groups like ARB, CSB, and AWTDU. These groups have effectively leveraged social media to raise awareness and coordinate collective action. Although lasting solutions to animal welfare issues are typically pursued beyond digital platforms, the online space serves as a critical entry point for mobilizing public concern.

Despite increased awareness, the broader state of animal welfare in Bangladesh reveals systemic shortcomings[24]. Limited access to veterinary services due to a shortage of facilities, trained professionals, equipment—poses challenges even for adopted animals. Instances of severe cruelty are frequent and alarming, including the confinement of animals in cramped conditions in pet shops.

While the enactment of the Animal Welfare Act in 2019 marked a legislative improvement over the outdated 1920 law, its implementation has remained weak due to limited enforcement. Moreover, legal limitations—such as the law's non-cognizable status, which requires court approval to initiate investigations—undermine its efficacy[25].

In this context, grassroots activism and individual initiatives are vital for raising awareness and demanding reform. The animal welfare landscape in Dhaka is shaped by a complex interplay of cultural perceptions, legal barriers, and civic activism. In this environment, social media remains an indispensable tool—amplifying voices, mobilizing action, and demanding accountability for the rights and dignity of non-human urban residents.

Results: In recent years, social media platforms have become powerful tools for animal welfare advocacy in Bangladesh. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram function not only as information hubs but also as affective communities where care, compassion, and commitment are exchanged, often in real time.

Many rescuers recount that their entry into animal welfare work was mediated through Facebook groups. For instance, one independent female rescuer named Ms. Fahima Chowdhury, explained that her journey began when she started browsing various online groups, where she discovered a wealth of advice and emotional solidarity. "People shared ideas to look after injured pets… [and] solve animal-related problems in minutes," she noted (in-person conversation with Ms. Fahima Chowdhury, August 2023). The presence of experienced caretakers and even veterinary professionals within these groups helps fill critical gaps in medical knowledge and animal care.

A striking example is the work of Ms. Zarin Akhter, a well-known independent animal rescuer based in Dhaka who built a strong presence through social media. Her followers regularly alert her to new cases via Facebook posts and private messages. She takes immediate action to rescue severely injured animals and after rescue, she provides medical treatment with the help of local veterinary clinics and raises funds via posts on her personal Facebook page. These posts, accompanied by detailed updates, mobilize public empathy and financial support. Her credibility within the online community has

grown due to her transparency, consistency, and emotional engagement with followers.

Similar stories emerge from organized student groups such as the Animal Welfare Team of Dhaka University (AWTDU). Members of the group feed, vaccinate, and sterilize over a hundred dogs and cats within university premises. All these activities are coordinated through Facebook and Instagram, where they post updates, organize fundraisers, and document the healing journeys of rescued animals. What makes AWTDU especially notable is their volunteer-driven model, sustained entirely through social media visibility and public donations.

The significance of social media was particularly evident during a crisis in October 2024, when a sudden plan by local authorities to cull or relocate dogs in Banani, Dhaka, provoked a wave of public outrage. Activists and citizens flooded Facebook with protest messages, condemning the proposed action and urging others to speak up. These protests expanded across broader platforms and were amplified by celebrities and influencers. This digital resistance eventually led to an organized street protest and legal action that forced the authorities to withdraw their decision[26].

At the heart of this growing animal welfare movement is a digital ecosystem composed of numerous Facebook groups and pages. Some of the most active groups include Catwaala – *Bilaiwala* (Cat Lovers of BD), which boasts over 454,000 members; Animal Rights Koalition Bangladesh, with 130,800 members; and Dog Lovers of Bangladesh, with 142,900 members. These groups act as both crisis response networks and knowledge-sharing spaces where members exchange advice, post adoption requests, and circulate alerts about injured animals.

Alongside these groups, several Facebook pages play a pivotal role in shaping public perception and fostering accountability. 50 For Paws, The Animal Welfare Team of Dhaka University (AWTDU) and PAW Foundation also maintain pages that combine advocacy with fieldwork, reaching tens of thousands of followers. Individual rescuers like Mr. Md

Abdul Kaium (Ro Ck), who has over 925,000 followers, and Ms. Zarin Akhter, with more than 9,400 followers, offer more personalized narratives, often posting detailed accounts of each rescue, the challenges faced, and appeals for help.

Together, these virtual communities function not only as sites of coordination and funding but also as emotional commons where empathy, grief, hope, and solidarity circulate. As one long-time rescuer and founder of AWTDU, Ms. Sabrina Sabbir remarked, "We are building a more compassionate society for animals—one post, one share, one rescue at a time" (in-person conversation with Ms. Sabrina Sabbir, July 2023). These digital platforms have ultimately become the primary arena for resistance and everyday activism.

Social Media and Rise of Digital Animal Welfare Networks in Bangladesh: In Bangladesh, animal rescue efforts often emerge not from institutions but from digital communities. One independent rescuer, Ms. Fahima Chowdhury recalled how, in 2017, she stumbled upon such groups while searching for ways to treat a wounded dog. "The groups are very helpful for information, from basic first aid tips to detailed long-term care," she explained (in-person conversation with Ms. Fahima Chowdhury, August 2023). Organizations like PAW Foundation and Obhoyaronno use social media to advocate sterilization and promote rabies awareness—broadening their reach beyond physical boundaries.

Veterinary support for strays in Bangladesh is often limited or inaccessible, making social media groups essential. These groups frequently include veterinarians who provide immediate advice on treatment. "People shared ideas to look after injured pets, and even had numerous veterinarians added in the groups where they could help solve severe problems in minutes," an individual rescuer, Ms. Niporna De shared (in-person conversation with Ms. Niporna De, July 2023). Combined with crowdfunding tools like Facebook donations through Bkash and Nagad apps, community members raise funds for surgeries, vaccinations, and post-operative

care. Medical support, in these instances, becomes a shared achievement.

The rise of these platforms has also structured the previously informal processes of animal rescue and adoption. Facebook pages dedicated to pet adoption are filled with images, medical notes, and behavioural descriptions aimed at finding safe homes. Ms. Niporna De reflected, "It got much easier for me to rescue animals and get them adopted after I joined these animal welfare groups" (in-person conversation with Ms. Niporna De, July 2023). A single post can now mobilize immediate rescue responses—especially vital when animals are displaced or injured.

Legal Activism for Animal Welfare: By 2024, animal welfare activism in Bangladesh had shifted from isolated grassroots efforts to organize legal advocacy, largely facilitated by the growing influence of social media groups. These online communities, composed of rescuers, lawyers, and concerned citizens, became powerful engines of justice. A pivotal moment came when a security guard in Banasree killed 14 dogs, prompting swift, coordinated legal action[27]. Legal petitions and social media campaigns also played a vital role in halting the government's plan to forcibly relocate city dogs to unfamiliar and hostile environments, asserting their right to live in their home territories[28].

These digital spaces have become incubators for a new generation of activists. "Numerous animal rights activists have emerged from these groups, including me," animal rights activist Ms. Tayeaba Hossain Mila shared (in-person conversation with Ms. Tayeaba Hossain Mila, September, 2023). Through social media, a decentralized yet deeply connected network of care now reshapes how Bangladesh understands and practices animal welfare.

What began as a means to share rescue tips evolved into a nationwide movement capable of influencing public policy and enforcing justice. Social media enabled not just visibility but turned outrage into action. The legal successes of cases such as the Banani dog culling case of 2024 demonstrated how digital solidarity could translate into real-world impact,

laying the groundwork for a more just and humane future for animals in Bangladesh.

Discussion: Social media has fundamentally transformed animal welfare activism in Dhaka by expanding the scale, reach, and impact of advocacy efforts compared to earlier, more fragmented approaches. Previously, animal welfare relied heavily on isolated individual rescuers who worked alone with limited resources, often unable to influence broader legal or policy changes. However, social media platforms such as Facebook have radically changed this dynamic by creating interconnected communities where knowledge, resources, and emotional support are shared, empowering individuals to evolve into activists within a larger movement.

Through digital platforms, activists and legal advocates have been able to raise far broader awareness, mobilize public outrage, and secure legal victories that were previously unattainable. For example, the collective demand for justice in the Banasree case, where a security guard was prosecuted for killing 14 dogs, was largely driven by coordinated social media campaigns that turned what might have been dismissed as an isolated incident into a landmark legal success. This demonstrates how framing animal cruelty as a systemic injustice on social media can galvanize public pressure and legal action far more effectively than past isolated efforts.

Similarly, the successful opposition to the forced relocation of stray dogs from Dhaka's urban areas highlights the strategic use of online petitions, public education, and dialogue with authorities enabled by social media advocacy. Unlike earlier top-down approaches that neglected animal welfare concerns, these digitally coordinated campaigns influenced municipal policies and prevented widespread harm, showcasing the tangible policy impact of collective online activism.

Moreover, social media's capacity to create "imagined communities" has been vital in sustaining activism by connecting individuals who may never meet physically but share a strong sense of identity and commitment to animal rights. These virtual networks transform

personal compassion into organized, large-scale advocacy, supported by legal professionals who provide expertise and guidance through these platforms. The presence of lawyers within these groups, actively participating in legal cases and public discussions, marks a significant advancement over previous approaches, ensuring animal cruelty cases receive due attention and legal redress.

In sum, social media has revolutionized animal welfare advocacy in Dhaka by transforming isolated individual efforts into a cohesive, resourceful, and influential movement. It has enabled activists to raise broader awareness, mobilize public opinion, and effect legal and policy changes that were previously difficult to achieve. This digital shift has made animal welfare advocacy more visible, organized, and sustainable, marking a clear improvement over earlier, limited approaches that lacked coordination, legal backing, and mass engagement.

Social media has radically redefined the landscape of animal welfare activism in Dhaka by transforming fragmented, individual acts of care into collective moral engagements that challenge structural violence against nonhuman life. Through Facebook groups and activist pages, rescuers no longer operate in isolation but form dynamic ethical communities that assert animals as beings worthy of justice, not merely sympathy. This shift aligns with the moral imperative in Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, where he insists that the capacity for suffering is the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration[29]. The work of rescuers in Dhaka, who consistently challenge cruelty through grassroots digital coordination, resonates with Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach, which argues that animals are entitled to life conditions enabling them to flourish, owing them justice along with kindness[30]. These online practices represent more than welfare—they become political acts grounded in ethical urgency.

The effective and mobilizing power of these platforms is equally critical. Emotional storytelling, visual documentation of suffering, and public calls for legal action form what Zizi Papacharissi calls "affective publics"—digitally networked collectives driven by shared emotions and political intent. According to Papacharissi, such publics do not organize around issues as much as they organize around affective statements of opinion[31]. This is evident in how Dhaka-based activists frame their work. Viral outrage following events like the Japan Garden City dog killings in 2024 led to not only widespread condemnation but also legal intervention. These publics generate rapid responses, merging the affective and the political into tangible civic action. In this process, digital platforms become ethical infrastructures—sites of care, outrage, and collective moral reasoning—that redefine human responsibility toward nonhuman others.

This movement also marks a deeper philosophical shift. As Donna Haraway suggests, the relationship between humans and animals in the Anthropocene is best understood through the lens of "companion species," where humans and animals shape each other's histories and futures. In Dhaka, the online presence of animal welfare communities exemplifies this entanglement, where rescuers and animals are co-actors in a shared ethical narrative. Bruno Latour also argues that politics must extend beyond the human, requiring humans to learn to be affected by what they are able to articulate[32]. The inclusion of lawyers, policy activists, and veterinarians in Facebook discussions and campaigns demonstrates this expansion of the political, where justice is no longer confined to human concerns.

Conclusion: The relationship between humans and animals has evolved over centuries—from domestication and labour to companionship, welfare, and now activism. This historical context shapes the current animal rights movement, which social media has profoundly revolutionized in Bangladesh. By turning isolated rescue efforts into a united, digital community, social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have enabled rapid awareness-raising, coordinated action, and legal advocacy at a scale previously unimaginable.

Social media's impact is evident in several key improvements: activists share resources and knowledge across virtual networks, using emotional storytelling and real-time updates to mobilize support and influence policy. This has led to significant victories, including legal justice for abused animals and the prevention of inhumane stray dog relocations. The formation of an "Imagined Community" through these online groups has strengthened solidarity and sustained commitment among activists who may never meet in person but work together toward a common goal.

Looking ahead, sustaining this momentum requires addressing challenges such as misinformation and digital burnout. Future strategies should focus on improving digital literacy, enhancing community moderation, and linking online campaigns with offline efforts to ensure lasting impact. Ultimately, social media has not only amplified voices but has reshaped animal welfare advocacy in Bangladesh—transforming compassion into organized, effective activism with the potential for meaningful, enduring change.

Recommendations: Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen animal welfare advocacy in the city of Dhaka through both digital and institutional channels.

Government bodies should formally recognize and collaborate with the digital animal welfare groups and communities to integrate activists into policy formations and discussions. The formation of multi-stakeholder committees involving rescuers, veterinarians, and animal-loving citizens can also serve the purpose. To help digital activists avoid false information and enhance their fact-checking capabilities, the government should introduce capacity-building initiatives free of charge.

The Animal Welfare Act (2019) should set strict penalties for violation of animal rights. A national hotline number or an online portal can also make the reporting of complaints easier for the local people. Another way to make the reporting easier for the public is to give police stations the authority to receive and handle complaints.

The constitutional commission of Bangladesh which was established after July, 2024 should incorporate animal welfare into more comprehensive constitutional protections and suggest institutional changes that guarantee law enforcement agencies' accountability in accordance with its purpose. Law enforcement organizations should also be trained on animal rights laws.

On a larger scale, animal welfare should be taught in schools, and mass awareness campaigns on Facebook and Instagram should encourage compassion for stray animals. Additionally, local governments should also provide funding for mobile veterinary clinics, easily accessible veterinary treatment, and emergency strays' rescue services. Working together with existing online social media communities can improve reaction and publicity.

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