



Emotion regulation, procrastination, and watching cat videos online: Who watches Internet cats, why, and to what effect?



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ABSTRACT

Anecdotes abound about the frequent use of the Internet to view cat-related media. Yet, research has yet to seriously address this popular culture phenomenon rooted largely in social media platforms. It is possible that viewing of online cat media improves mood, but this activity may also foster negative outcomes linked to using the Internet for procrastination. The present survey of Internet users ($N = 6795$) explored the correlates of viewing “Internet cats,” motivations for consuming this media, and its potential effects on users. It also tested a conceptual model predicting enjoyment as a function of the relationships between procrastination, guilt, and happiness. Results reveal significant relationships between viewing and personality types and demonstrate conceptual nuances related to the emotional benefits of watching Internet cats.

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1. Introduction

Anecdotes and news reports suggest that viewing videos and photos of cats is a common use of the Internet. As of 2014 there were more than 2 million cat videos posted on YouTube.com with nearly 26 billion total views (Marshall, 2014). That is an average of 12,000 views for each cat video—more views-per-video than any other category of YouTube content (Marshall, 2015). There are even annual in-person festivals devoted to “Internet cats,” including the Internet Cat Video Festival in Minneapolis and Chicago (Walker Arts Center, 2015) as well as the Los Angeles Feline Film Festival (LA Feline Film Festival, 2015).

Internet users spend so much time with cat-related media they have turned household tabbies into celebrities. “Perma-kitten” Lil BUB has nearly 1.5 million Facebook fans and the constantly-frowning Grumpy Cat makes more money than many prominent human celebrities (Millward, 2014). Beyond famous cats, Internet users frequently post images of their own felines on social media platforms (Marshall, 2014), further increasing the amount of online cat-related visual content available to Internet users. In fact, industry research indicates that Internet users are more than twice as likely to post pictures or videos of cats than they are to post a “selfie” (i.e., a picture taken of oneself) online (Williams, 2014).

The Internet cat phenomenon has spurred news articles with titles such as “Why do cats dominate the Internet?” (Thornton,

2013) and “The million dollar question: Why does the Web love cats?” (Elliot, 2010). Yet, very little empirical evidence exists to help answer these questions or others like them, such as what motivates people to view online cat content and what type of people are more likely to enjoy cat-related Internet content. Considering the large viewership of online cat media, this topic is understudied. Consumption of online cat-related media deserves empirical attention because, as the news accounts suggest, Internet users spend a significant amount of time consuming cat-related media, some of that while they are supposed to be doing other tasks like working or studying. If this genre is as popular as the online analytics suggest, then there are likely important effects of such media on users, particularly on their emotional states.

Moreover, research on pet therapy indicates that time spent with real pets can improve mood and wellbeing across a variety of populations (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Research on “the media equation” argues that media users typically react to mediated content as if it were occurring in real life (Reeves & Nass, 1996). Therefore, mediated exposure to cats could possibly result in similar outcomes found in pet therapy studies, although perhaps to a lesser degree given no physical interaction with Internet cats. If viewing online cats does improve mood, such media could potentially serve as a low-cost and easily distributed intervention to (at least temporarily or at times of stress) improve emotional wellbeing. However, there are also potential negative impacts of watching Internet cats. For instance, if Internet users are watching online cat videos to procrastinate, they may instead experience guilt after

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looking at online cat content. Research is needed to test what exactly are the emotional benefits and drawbacks.

Mood management theory and previous studies of the emotional impact of entertainment media consumption provide a conceptual basis for analyzing the potential motivations for and effects of consuming online cat content, particularly as it relates to emotional states. The present work is an exploratory study of characteristics of Internet cat media consumers, their motivations for such media use, and potential effects of use related to emotional states of the users. Furthermore, this study advances the literature related to the interrelationship between feelings of guilt and enjoyment of Internet media (i.e., the guilty pleasure) by proposing and testing a conceptual model linking procrastination, guilt, happiness, and enjoyment. This study employs a survey of Internet users to explore the Internet cat as its own media genre and to set the stage for subsequent research and theory building in this area of entertainment research.

1.1. The nature of online cat-related media consumption

While digital marketing analytics and news accounts demonstrate that cat videos and images are very popular, little is known about the nature of the typical online cat-viewing experience. Critical-cultural scholars have discussed the ability of online cat videos to generate pleasure and positive affect and to promote interaction with audiences (O'Meara, 2014; Shafer, 2014). However, empirical analysis that assesses the details surrounding who, why, and how Internet users consume online cat videos and other cat-related images is lacking. That is, how long do Internet users spend with this type of content? What websites do they turn to for it? Do they seek it out purposefully or encounter it in the course of other online activities? Do they engage with so-called celebrity cats or are they more interested in everyday felines? Does interaction with Internet cats overlap with consumption of media related to Internet dogs or other animals? These questions combine to suggest a first research question asking what, exactly, is the nature of online cat-related media consumption (RQ1).

1.2. Motivations for consuming online cat-related media

In the following section, potential motivations for viewing Internet cats are discussed through the lens of mood management theory. Additionally, potential demographic and psychological predictors of enjoyment of Internet cats are outlined.

1.2.1. Mood management

Despite the widespread use of the Internet for posting and consuming cat-related content, little research has addressed the questions of why Internet users seek out this content. Mood management theory (MMT) posits that individuals are motivated to consume media that will dissipate aversive emotional states or maintain positive ones (Oliver, 2003; Zillmann, 1988). Media use can serve as a form of emotion regulation, defined as “the process by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (p. 275, Gross, 1998). MMT also states that media users, often without being cognizant of the reason, select media based on its excitatory potential, absorption potential, semantic affinity, and hedonic valence. These message features, therefore, influence selective exposure to media.

Internet users may seek images and videos of adorable or humorous cats in order to dissipate negative emotional states or to keep up their positive spirits. Anecdotal evidence supports this supposition. The Twitter account “Emergency Kittens” states in its profile description that its Twitter feed is designed “[f]or when you need a kitten (or other type of cat) to cheer you up!”

(Emergency Kittens, 2014). The Apple iTunes Store offers consumers the opportunity to download a free application called “Cute cats – cheer you up!” (iTunes, 2015). There is even an Internet meme called “Cheer Up Cat,” which depicts an orange tabby cat that appears to be winking and smiling at the viewer (Quickmeme, 2015).

Advancements in mood management research have pointed out that not all mood management motivations are hedonic—media consumers may seek affectively-laden content because it promotes connection with other people (Oliver & Raney, 2011), because the content may induce a useful emotional state for pursuing future tasks (Knobloch, 2003), or because the emotional effects of media consumption may help viewers to cope (Nabi, Finnerty, Domschke, & Hull, 2006). Because images of Internet cats are typically cute and funny in nature, hedonic valence is the message feature that may be drawing so many users to view Internet cats. These positively-toned images/videos may be a readily available way to regulate emotional states in the digital era. However, those who are already animal lovers (in particular, cat lovers) may also be drawn to the content due to semantic affinity with their real pets. Moreover, research has shown that depletion can motivate individuals to turn to entertainment media (Reinecke, Hartmann, & Eden, 2014), and because of its jovial nature, Internet cats may have just enough excitatory potential to animate its audiences.

1.2.2. Procrastination

In addition to mood management motivations for viewing online cat-related media, news accounts suggests that many people watch cat videos online to avoid work or unpleasant tasks (FlorCruz, 2013; Garber, 2012). While online cat media is generally humorous or adorable, it may bring with it hedonic pleasures but little educational or utilitarian gains. Research on general motivations for media use also points to procrastination as a reason why individuals watch entertainment media. To procrastinate is to “voluntarily delay an intended course of action despite expecting to be worse off for the delay” (p. 66, Steel, 2007). If viewed during work hours, Internet cats may be thought of as a form of “cyberslacking,” where people use media for personal purposes during work hours (Vitak, Crouse, & LaRose, 2011). Even after work hours, entertainment media may be motivated by a need or desire to procrastinate. Reinecke et al. (2014) found that after a draining day at work or school, individuals in their survey turned to entertainment media as a way to procrastinate. Media use as a form of procrastination, in turn, was related to increased feelings of guilt for having not done more important or meaningful tasks.

The prevalence of procrastination behaviors appears to be increasing (Steel, 2007), alongside an increasing number of digital media options for avoiding work and other responsibilities (Hinsch & Sheldon, 2013). Research has also found a link between Internet use and guilt (Panek, 2014). It is likely that some Internet users may very well interpret Internet cats as a form of procrastination, with emotional implications if prior research holds true within the genre of online cat-related media.

1.2.3. Individual differences

Researchers have connected individual personality traits with greater levels of Internet use and with an affinity for felines. Therefore, certain types of individuals may be more likely to view and enjoy online cat media than others. Traits such as introversion and shyness are associated with greater Internet usage (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007), while introversion has also been tied to a preference for cats over dogs (Guastello, Braun, Gutierrez, Johnston, & Olbinski, 2014). It is possible that introverts who are drawn to the Internet may be likewise drawn to Internet cats, with cats often categorized as solitary, even anti-social pets as compared to dogs (Kleiman & Eisenberg, 1973). However, it is

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