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How Service Animals Are Discussed in Social Media

A study using the hashtag #serviceanimal

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Individual Research Paper

COMM460 Senior Seminar

Introduction:

Service animals (SA) have a greater value than many people will ever come across. People who have never experienced life with or around a service animal will never know the amazing duty that can be bestowed upon an animal through their training for a certain job or task. Service animals sometimes have more responsibility in keeping a person alive than that individual's own family members. According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Titles II and III, service dogs are individually trained to perform work or tasks to assist an individual with a disability. In regards to federal law, service dogs constitute a reasonable accommodation to an individual with a disability in employment settings under Title I of the ADA (2019). A service animal is meant to be with their handler all day, every day and protect, serve, and be loyal to their handler. This is made possible by their training and a strong bond that is difficult to understand without first-hand experience. An SA's whole purpose in life is to devote themselves to serving their handler and essentially keeping them alive. Regardless of what type of working dog it is, in the end their true goal remains: keep their person alive. This study discusses service animals such as medical response, guide dogs, mobility dogs, and other types of assistance animals under the category of service animals. The way SA's are treated in public can greatly affect their ability to focus on their work and their handler. Any distractions could be harmful to the service animals training and their handler's wellbeing. The purpose of this paper is to explore the ways in which service animals and their handlers are discussed through analyzing posts on Instagram made by SA handlers and trainers. By looking at these posts, it can inform us on how people are discussing service animals which can impact how they are perceived and treated. Many handlers and trainers post their experiences, lessons, and tips on how to properly behave around service animals and what they may have experienced previously. These posts can inform

the public on SA's and their handler's experiences which leads to why we study the topic by looking at media through an analytical lens. This study is focused on learning what these people and their SA's have gone through in an attempt to bring awareness to the subject and advocate for our four legged saviors who cannot do so for themselves.

Literature Review:

One of the core functions of disability support is providing appropriate resources to help disabled people live full and independent lives. Assistance dogs (AD) are a form of assistance that is growing in popularity as disabled people choose to use an assistance dog for various reasons. These reasons may include reducing the impact of their impairment on their daily lives, increasing their independence, and accessing the public. Although an AD may be of great practical assistance, accessing the community can be fraught with social challenges because, at times, the dog becomes the primary focus of public attention. This extra attention from the public can distract the dog from its task and causes delays, stress, or embarrassment for the disabled handler as well as distracting the dog from its work and interfering with its training (McManus et al., 2021). Handlers are often the first point of contact for the public to gain information about the dog's role and disability (Harland, 1992). Generally, handlers want more public education related to appropriate etiquette for interacting with disabled people and their assistance dogs. This could enable them to participate in daily activities without unwanted interference and the perceived need to always be polite and well presented. Rocky Mountain ADA lists refraining from distracting the service animal, asking the handler about their personal disabilities, and ignoring the handler as simple etiquette around service animals (Luzanilla, 2022). Furthermore, the public needs to be informed about how to engage with the dog/trainer or dog/handler team. Etiquette is simple—ask first and do not be offended if the answer is no (Spence, 2018). Mills

(2017) suggested a need for a public education campaign to inform people that service animals are no different from any other assistance for disabled people and that they should ask before touching the dog.

When lack of knowledge was combined with a misuse of the gatekeeping role—namely, denial of access—this creates a power imbalance that places disabled handlers in a position of continually needing to be prepared to defend their legal right of access or decide not to pursue the situation. To walk away from a situation means the handler submits to people's discriminatory actions, resulting in them giving up their right to: access the community; use public transport or taxis; or attend social functions, a restaurant, a shop, an event, or an attraction of their choice. If a handler were to depart, leaving an unresolved situation due to the businesses inappropriate actions, then nothing would change (McManus et al., 2021). The business personnel may continue to be ignorant of the fact that their actions were discriminatory, disabling, or potentially in breach of the handler's human rights (Human Rights Act, 2018).

Conversely, a secondary outcome of working with an assistance dog is that the dog may also create new opportunities for social engagement, assist in developing friendships, create a sense of inclusion, and positively change public perception of disabled people (Wiggett-Barnard et al., 2008). Other studies discuss how the presence of a dog promoted social engagement with the public, as the dog created a common talking point, thus encouraging friendly interaction and conversation between the handler and members of the public (Burrows et al., 2008).

For disabled people, a denial of access based on the presence of a service animal is impactful as they are ultimately excluded and face an affront to their dignity and autonomy. The media are natural avenues to broadcast this injustice. In the case of non-human animals,

however, the media does not consider the social justice issues that extend to them and may not even care (Sorenson, 2014).

RQ/Approach/Method:

This study asks how service animal etiquette is discussed in social media? By looking at 20 posts on Instagram following the hashtag #serviceanimal we are able to become better informed on how service animals and their handlers discuss their experience with the public regarding manners and lack thereof. The method for this research included an inductive approach to content analysis using open coding. There is an expectation to find that many service animal handlers and trainers have poor experiences with the public regarding their service animal.

The goal through this research is to become better informed on what service animals and their handlers experience on a daily basis through discrimination and over-exuberant reactions to seeing a service animal in public. This research will be beneficial to a larger audience interested in learning about how to approach and/or behave around service animals. Throughout this research, there is a constant reminder of the struggles many people face through their requirement of having a service animal and the struggle of enduring public perceptions of people with service animals.

Findings:

The findings in this study suggest that service animals are generally discussed positively in social media. The most recurring themes were successful training reports and grateful appreciation for service animals as well as examples of what makes a “real” service animal. Post #1 shows a boy around the age of 5 that was asked to join a dance studio because they had read that he was unwelcome at his school due to him having a service animal. There was obvious joy on the boy’s face as he posed in front of his new dance school with his service dog. In Posts #4 and #5

businesses explicitly welcomed service animals to their property and recognized the importance of being welcoming. Post #5 even captioned their photo of the SA with “best service dog we ever met!”. Posts #2 and #3 talk about how hard an animal works to be a SA and the distractions it must face. Post #2’s caption reads “no fakes [service animals], no kids trying to get her attention. Just compliments!” and post #3 discusses how the SA “earned his vest”. In Post #9 a new college course is being offered called Approaches to Therapy and Service Animals. Posts #10 and #12 show graphics depicting “Anatomy of a medical alert dog” and a graphic of SA and handler defining the types of working service animals. Post #11 explains in a post why a person may need a service animal. Post #16 explains how the need for a service animal is not as special as some people believe stating, “I wish I didn’t need you, but I’m grateful I got you”. Post #13, #14, #17, #19 and #20 all discuss the specific training excursions and exercises the animals go through to become an SA. Posts #13 and #14 discuss outings to public stores in an attempt to train and post #17 discusses the training an epilepsy detection dog goes through. Post #19 discusses a Vietnam veteran with his new service dog who detects his blood sugar levels. In Post #20 a newly paralyzed little girl with her new puppy who will be trained to be her service animal is shown. Posts #6 and #18 were the only two posts who discussed bad experiences related to being denied access or inappropriate behavior. In post #18, people asked to pet the SA, someone pulled its tail, there were several fake SA’s and many people took photos without consent.

Discussion:

Many of the posts included good stories of how well the service animal had done--not other people. The focus of the study was meant to be on the inappropriate manners or lack of manners the public has regarding service animals and their handlers. The hypothesis was that there would be posts in the media of terrible experiences people had over discrimination against SAs and

inappropriate behavior. During the study, it became apparent that most people only wanted to discuss the good things that had happened with their SA. They highlighted the successes and triumphs of life with a service dog and with the never ending training. Only posts #18 and #6 discussed bad experiences in detail and even those weren't too terrible. Major themes noticed were gratitude and appreciation for the service animal, information regarding what a service animal is and why one may need one, and stories of personal experience with service animals. The hypothesis is not supported but still successful in the discovery of new information and types of information. Service animals are much more greatly appreciated in public social media than they are in the physical public. There was an expectation to find hurtful stories and reviews of experiences or public places but this assumption was proven incorrect. There are often incidents of denial of public access, harassment, and inappropriate behavior that can be dangerous or damaging reported. The main themes reported were positive and answered the research question of how service animals are discussed in social media. Moving forward we can closely examine more media about service animals and how they are discussed in any media to further extend the reach of this positive outcome.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I have experienced the privilege of reading about service animals and their experiences. This research has identified that lack of public knowledge about the dogs; the complexity of disability; laws governing the dog's legal right of access; and etiquette on engaging with the participants persists and continues to create disabling barriers for disabled people. This limited level of knowledge demonstrates minimal progress towards accepting disabled people as equal citizens. Until these barriers to inclusion are addressed, handlers will continue to endure discrimination and be responsible for educating the public on appropriate and

respectful ways of engaging with disabled handlers and their assistance dogs (McManus, et al., 2021). Limitations of the study may include the sample number of posts and the scope of the media involved. The study only used Instagram but could use more or different platforms. The research could be further extended into all different types of media including film, documentaries, books, news reports, and other types of media. People can learn from furthering the capacity in which the study takes place and expanding the sample pool. In my own experience of being a service dog handler, I have been told several times how lucky I am to have a dog be able to go with me everywhere. While I understand where most people are coming from, what they don't understand is the reasons why myself and others have service animals. I am eternally grateful for my service dog and the opportunity to have him in my life but I will never be happy with the reasons I needed him in the first place. Many people love to inform me of how lucky I am to have my pet go with me everywhere. This is simply not true. I would be lucky to be healthy. My service dog has changed my life and the way I live for the better but I am very aware of the opportunities I have missed because of him. A large part of why I am passionate about this topic is because I feel the need to inform others of why it is extremely important to be aware that other people struggle unimaginably but are still cared for in extraordinary ways such as acquiring a service animal. Yes, people can be and feel lucky to have their furry best friend by their side at all times but it is important to remember the feeling of great health and freedom as the other side. So how are service animals discussed in social media? They are praised and appreciated. Their stories are told by handlers and trainers that can advocate for them and the hard work they do.

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I pledge.

Gracie Pak