



Pets Aren't Social Media Accessories

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RASHA JAMEEL

The demand for Scottish Fold cats, a breed once popular in the 1970s, saw a resurgence in the breeding market after being extensively photographed in the arms of singers Taylor Swift and Ed Sheeran, as well as actors Kirsten Dunst and Patrick Dempsey.

There is also Maru, the famous Scottish fold cat from Japan, who is in the ranks of "internet's most popular cats" with videos that have raked in more than 300 million views in total. In the words of Gudrun Ravetz, president of the British Veterinary Association, the breed's popularity largely revolves around people finding the cats to be "cute" and thus, "instagrammable".

What people went on to disregard is the price these cats have to pay for that very cuteness.

The Scottish fold cat's most distinguishable physical feature is their tiny ears which appear to be folded over. As adorable as these floppy ears are, they're the result of a painful genetic mutation that causes the cats to possess deformed cartilage. Long-term side effects of having such deformed cartilages include leading a low-quality, painful life and developing incurable variants of arthritis.

Taking into account the severity of the genetic disorder, UK's Governing Council of the Cat Fancy (GCCF) permanently halted the registrations of Scottish folds in the 1970s. Despite the ban, the Scottish fold breed eventually found its way to the US, where it gained enough popularity to prompt breeders to open up shop once more.

The cruel usage of Scottish fold cats as props on social media isn't the only case of



animal cruelty that has been swept under the rug for the sake of internet fame. In the name of entertaining viral videos, irresponsible pet owners have often resorted to putting their pets in harm's way so as to boost their online presence.

In 2019, #puttinabun became a trending TikTok challenge which required pet owners to tie their pets' ears together with

tight hair bands. The shameless depiction of animal cruelty in this challenge posed major health risks to the helpless animals in question, all of whom were being abused to the point of their blood vessels getting ruptured.

In the most recently-documented case of animal abuse being sidelined on social media, TikTok user @mafishguy posted a video of himself tickling a stingray that'd been lifted from its aquatic habitat. The video went viral for the wrong reasons as the viewers mistook the stingray's state of distress for one of joy.

According to the programs director of World Animal Protection USA, Ben Williamson, the stingray in the video was "suffocating to death" as a result of being exposed to a non-aquatic environment where there's no water to draw oxygen from.

Internet personalities here in Dhaka too have often contributed to normalising the toxic practice of exporting exotic pets from abroad, namely Alaskan Malamutes, Huskies, and Maine Coons. The animal export business is highly unethical to say the least, as it's sole focus is centered on the maximisation of profits at the expense of the animals' safety and well-being.

When it comes to the aforementioned breeds, their physical attributes are strictly adapted to cold temperatures in coastal areas -- a stark contrast to the heat and humidity in Dhaka. Animal breeders tend to offer half-baked explanations to justify their inhumane trade. Excuses provided for unethical breeding often involve the prolonged usage of air-conditioning as a "substitute" for cold climates, and selective breeding to reduce prevalence of hereditary disorders, neither of which are

feasible measures.

In July 2021, several local news portals brought to light the alleged wrongdoings of Tapashi Das, the woman behind Puchi Family on YouTube and Facebook. The CEO of Bangladesh Cat Fanciers Society, Sarah Binte Zaman, and Dipanwita Ridi of ALB Animal Shelter, accused Das of mistreating her pet cats for the sake of keeping her followers entertained on social media, while milking her cats' online presence for money.

The allegations against Das are evident in her many posts and videos where she can be seen forcefully pulling her cats' tails, bathing her cats with detergent soap and cold water, and holding her cats inappropriately enough to cause them distress. The only thing more atrocious than Das' actions is the positive audience reception to her problematic videos.

Facebook page Bambi- the mango operates as an online-based animal rescue service, primarily focused on various species of birds. When putting up adoption posts for injured birds, founder Neha Zaman often asks if the adopter in question is willing to care for the rescued birds according to their special needs. This is a question which just about every potential pet adopter should ask themselves, but often don't.

People lean towards overestimating their animal adoption capabilities just so that they can have a pet as a prop for trendy Instagram photos or viral TikTok videos. Is that all an animal's life is worth to you? A handful of likes and shares?

Rasha Jameel is your neighbourhood feminist- apu-who-writes-big-essays. Remind her to also finish writing her bioinformatics research paper at rasha.jameel@outlook.com

The consequences of comparison

TAZREEN JAHAN BARI

A rare good day came to an abrupt halt when I checked social media and saw a bunch of my peers achieving impossible feats while I lounged around in my room binge watching mediocre Netflix shows.

No matter how skilled you are, how perfect your grade sheets are or how attractive you are — there is always going to be someone better than you and seemingly living a better life than you. But how do we measure who is greater? And even if someone is better than you in any given field, why does that put a damper on your happiness?

Social comparison theory, proposed by psychologist Leon Festinger in 1954, suggests that human beings in social situations will compare themselves with others for self-evaluation. This comparison can be an upward comparison — when we compare ourselves with someone doing better than us; downward comparison — where we compare ourselves to someone doing worse than us; and lateral comparison — where both subjects are at a similar level.

Comparison can have both positive effects such as motivation and progress, as well as negative effects such as unhealthy competition or feelings of inadequacy. But it's worth pondering whether the possibility of positive changes social comparison can bring in a young individual's life is a risk worth taking when pitted against the myriad negative effects it may cause.

Comparison can serve as a source of motivation as it pushes a person to do better and improve. When this happens collectively, it can result in a group of people pushing each other to do better, resulting in collective progress. On the other end of the spectrum is an obsession with achievement which pushes everyone to perform at a certain level that might not be feasible depending on context. This inability to keep up with a world glorifying overachievers can again create a negative self-image, injecting feelings of inadequacy and guilt.

To the typical Bangladeshi parent, nothing is quite as important as doing well in exams. It will be difficult to find a Bangladeshi student who has not been asked the infamous "Ora kon chaal er bhaat khay?" (What kind of rice do they eat?) that no one knows the answer to. Regardless of what the letters on a report card say, the inevitable question thrown in their direction is, "What did x/y/z get?"

Jarah Mahzabeen Fatima, a final-year English Language and Literature student at Bangladesh University of Professionals, says, "I was never directly compared but the subtle comparisons in questions like how much so or so got every time we got our results followed me around throughout my school life. Now that I am in university and my parents have stopped doing it, I keep comparing myself to my peers on my own accord."

When we are brought up with a mindset where evaluation refers to comparison with peers rather than ourselves, it's only natural that even when our parents stop comparing us, we unconsciously do the same.

It's not surprising that we grow up as young adults who perceive peers as competitors, and not collaborators. The metaphorical "snakes" replacing our classmates as we grow up do not come out of the blue but are manufactured by this ideology of comparison where, to be anything but an utter failure, you must beat everyone around you.

Sheikh Aquib Mahmood, working as a relationship officer at Core Devs Ltd. says, "I remember when I was in Class 2, my mom got really mad at me for coming second because if you're not number one, does your accomplishment even count? So, of course, I grew up to be someone who feels inadequate when someone does better than me."

The upward comparison that is supposed to motivate us to do better often ends up making us feel inadequate and crush whatever self-confidence we had. Perpetually feeling inferior to peers can lead to more negative feelings like envy and even contempt towards those doing better than us.

Additionally, downward comparison which is supposed to make us feel better about our situation by comparing ourselves with someone worse off can lead to guilt. As Aquib mentions, "What's worse than feeling

inferior is the good feeling that comes with seeing someone doing worse than you because, beyond the insecurity and envy, there is the guilt of having such negative thoughts."

Feelings of inadequacy, a tendency to invalidate other people's achievements out of inferiority complex, and unhealthy competition in any given context results from the system of measuring anything and everything by comparison that is instilled in us from an early age. Instead of putting the focus on their child, parents tend to put it on others in hopes of motivating them or creating an ideal standard for them which they expect their children to match.

Lubna Jahan, senior teacher at Viharunnisa Noon School and College and a mother of two, comments, "I used to indirectly compare my children with others in terms of academic achievements or manners because I thought it would motivate them to do better. Being a middle child and compared to two overachieving siblings all my life, I should have known better. As my children grew up, they helped me understand that comparison is

it generates in the long run far outweighs the positive ones."

Research done in 2006 on the destructive emotions developed through social comparison concludes that frequent social comparison can lead to a dependency on external standards for self-evaluation and "for young people, in particular, those standards are increasingly made salient by media, and promoted by advertisers." Contentment and happiness are thus sacrificed in the pursuit of elusive perfection.

Mormita Jahan Mormi is a first-year undergraduate student of Economics at the University of Dhaka. She does not think any positive change can come from comparison as it inherently creates an inferiority complex. "When I cannot meet the highest standards set by society in any given field, my self-esteem depletes and nothing I achieve feels good enough," she says.

In a never-ending competition, contentment is a myth. And so, despite some positive impact that comparison



on an individual level can generate, self-evaluation should not depend on comparison.

Professor Islam suggests "limitation and management of social comparison for better mental health" as we must accept the particular context of every person before considering someone our competitor.

Rather than chasing unattainable standards, it is more practical to focus on acknowledging the progress we made in comparison to our past selves. Not everyone makes developments the same way and not everyone's reality is the same. So, the basis of measuring self-worth should primarily focus on self and not others.

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Tazreen's entire existence can be summed up in burgers, books, bad music taste and binge-watching k-dramas. To complain about her overuse of alliteration, reach her at tazreenzahan@gmail.com

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