

DIGITAL VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITY CARE: INSTAGRAM-BASED LOST PET RECOVERY AND COMPANION ANIMAL WELFARE

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Abstract

Companion animal loss is both an emotional crisis for pet guardians and a significant animal welfare concern in urban environments. Although social media platforms are increasingly used to circulate missing pet alerts, limited research has examined how Instagram-based lost pet pages contribute to companion animal welfare and community participation. This qualitative case study investigates lostpetsofchennai, an Instagram page dedicated to missing, spotted, reunited, and animal welfare related communication in Chennai, India. The study combines Instagram page analysis, platform insights, and semi-structured interviews with 22 participants, including pet guardians, spotters, feeders, rescuers, followers, active resharers, and animal welfare page administrators. Thematic analysis identified five key processes, enhancing visibility, providing practical search guidance, encouraging micro participation, connecting online communication with offline recovery efforts, and fostering trust and civic care. The findings demonstrate that Instagram-based lost pet pages function as digital community support networks that strengthen companion animal welfare by linking platform visibility with collaborative local action and emotional support.

Keywords: Companion Animal Welfare; Instagram Communication; Lost Pets; Digital Animal Welfare; Community Participation.

1. Introduction

Social media platforms have moved beyond personal communication and entertainment to become spaces for public information exchange, community support, education and civic participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Carr & Hayes, 2015; Kapoor et al., 2018). Instagram is especially relevant for animal-related communication because it combines visual content, captions, hashtags, stories, reels, direct messages and reposting practices, allowing images and short form messages to circulate rapidly among connected and non connected users (Hu, Manikonda, & Kambhampati, 2014; Rejeb et al., 2022; Muca et al., 2023). These features allow animal related content to move quickly across networks and reach audiences who may not be directly connected to the original poster (Rejeb et al., 2022; Muca et al., 2023).

In the field of animal welfare, visibility is important. Animals cannot report their own distress, explain their location or ask for help. Missing companion animals may become exposed to road accidents, hunger, dehydration, theft, attacks from other animals, fear or disorientation. Previous studies have shown that prompt neighbourhood searches, effective identification methods, and timely information sharing significantly improve the likelihood of recovering missing companion animals (Weiss, Slater, & Lord, 2012; Huang et al., 2018). Digital and location based tools can also support community problem solving by helping people share sightings, locations and alerts connected to lost, found or injured animals (Arathoon, Allen, & Hallatt, 2024; Gough & Hamilton, 2012). Therefore, digital platforms can become useful when they connect urgent animal welfare information with people who are physically present in the right location (Arathoon, Allen, & Hallatt, 2024; Gough & Hamilton, 2012).

Companion animals also occupy an emotionally important place in many households. For many guardians, pets are not seen only as property, but as attachment figures, companions, family members or sources of emotional support (Brooks et al., 2018; Brooks & Greenberg, 2023; Hoy-Gerlach, Rauktis, & Newhill, 2020; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011). When such an animal goes missing, the experience may involve panic, guilt, sleeplessness, anxiety, uncertainty and fear for the animal's survival. Research on missing and stolen companion animals shows that guardians may experience unresolved distress, repeated searching, uncertainty, hope, fear and the need for closure through reunification or

reliable information (Arathoon et al., 2024; Venaktramanan & Roberts, 2024). The emotional seriousness of pet loss helps explain why missing pet posts often carry affective language, urgent calls to action, repeated sharing requests and gratitude after recovery (Arathoon et al., 2024; Venaktramanan & Roberts, 2024).

This study is guided by four complementary concepts: networked publics, participatory culture, online community support and collective intelligence. Together, these concepts provide a framework for understanding how Instagram-based lost pet communication creates visibility, enables public participation, mobilises distributed knowledge and provides informational, practical and emotional support. Networked publics explain how social media platforms make people, content, interactions and shared concerns visible across connected audiences (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2007). Participatory culture explains how ordinary users can become active contributors by sharing, commenting, reposting, tagging others and circulating information (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009). Online community support explains how digital spaces can provide information, emotional reassurance, trust and practical help when users gather around a shared concern (Preece, 2000; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Collective intelligence is also useful for understanding how many small contributions, such as sightings, reposts, feeder contacts and direct messages, can support shared problem solving (Lévy, 1997). These concepts help explain how a lost pet Instagram page can become a digital local support space where visibility, care and community action come together.

India provides a meaningful context for examining Instagram-based animal welfare communication because of its large and expanding digital population. DataReportal's Digital 2025: India report shows that India had 806 million internet users and 491 million active social media user identities in January 2025, indicating that social media platforms have become major spaces for public communication, visibility and community participation in the country (Kemp, 2025). Chennai is also a relevant setting because companion animal ownership and animal welfare concerns are visible within the urban context. A study of dog owners in Chennai found that companionship was an important reason for keeping dogs, showing that companion animals occupy emotional and social roles in urban households (Balan et al., 2016). In India, animal welfare is also supported by public and legal frameworks, including guidance on responsible pet and street-dog care and the legal responsibility to prevent unnecessary animal suffering (Animal Welfare Board of India, 2015; Government of India, 1960). These points make Chennai a suitable context for studying how Instagram-based lost pet communication connects animal welfare, public participation and community care.

Previous research has shown that Instagram can support animal related education, outreach, public engagement and knowledge sharing through posts, stories, hashtags, reels and live videos (Muca et al., 2023). However, less attention has been given to Instagram as a practical animal welfare support system for lost pet recovery. Lost pet recovery is a distinct form of welfare communication because it is urgent, location based, emotionally charged and dependent on both online circulation and offline action (Weiss et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018; Gough & Hamilton, 2012; Arathoon et al., 2024; Venaktramanan & Roberts, 2024). A post may create awareness, but the animal is helped only when someone recognises the animal, contacts the guardian, checks a location, reports a sighting, shelters the animal or physically supports the search.

The present study examines *lostpetsofchennai*, an Instagram page that shares missing, spotted, reunited and animal welfare related posts. The study follows an Instagram account based case study approach, similar to previous work on Instagram use for animal related education and engagement (Muca et al., 2023), but strengthens the analysis through Instagram page analysis, page insights and interview based thematic evidence. The study asks how an Instagram lost pet page supports companion animal welfare, public visibility, community participation and online-to-offline support action.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does *lostpetsofchennai* use Instagram features to communicate lost pet and companion animal welfare information?

2. How do pet guardians, spotters, feeders, rescuers and followers experience the role of the page during lost pet situations?
3. How does the page support visibility, practical guidance, emotional reassurance and community participation?
4. How do participants describe the connection between online alerts and offline support actions?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design

This study used a longitudinal qualitative case study design to examine the development and functioning of *lostpetsofchennai* as an Instagram-based companion animal welfare support network. The longitudinal component comprised retrospective analysis of the page's Instagram archive from its establishment in December 2021 through December 2025. This four year period enabled the study to examine accumulated communication practices, community participation and patterns of lost pet and animal welfare communication rather than relying on a single cross sectional snapshot of the account. The case study combined longitudinal Instagram page analysis with platform insights and semi-structured interviews with 22 participants. A case study approach was appropriate because the research aimed to develop an indepth understanding of how one locally situated Instagram page supports lost-pet communication, audience reach, user experience and companion-animal welfare (Yin, 2018).

The study focused on how the page communicates lost pet information, how users experience its support and how Instagram-based visibility connects with offline help, such as sharing, reporting sightings, contacting guardians, checking locations, speaking to feeders, supporting searches and offering emotional reassurance. The design combined Instagram page analysis, page insights and semi-structured interviews.

2.2. Case Study: *lostpetsofchennai*

Lostpetsofchennai is an Instagram-based companion animal welfare page established in December 2021 in Chennai, India. Since its creation, the page has shared missing pet alerts, spotted animal reports, reunited updates, rescue related information, animal welfare awareness messages and practical search guidance. The page therefore provides a continuous digital archive through which the development of local Instagram based lost pet communication can be examined over time. The page uses Instagram features such as feed posts, stories, highlights, captions, hashtags, direct messages, reposts, tagged posts and visual material to circulate lost pet and companion animal welfare information.

The page's audience includes pet guardians, followers, feeders, rescuers, volunteers, spotters, animal welfare pages and ordinary Instagram users who may encounter missing or spotted animals. In this study, the page is examined not only as a communication channel, but as a digital local support space where information, emotion, trust and practical action come together around missing and vulnerable companion animals.

2.3. Instagram Page Analysis and Page Insights

An Instagram page analysis was conducted to understand how *lostpetsofchennai* presents and circulates lost pet and animal welfare information. The analysis examined the page biography, feed posts, stories, highlights, captions, hashtags, direct message functions, reposts, tagged posts and visual communication patterns. The focus was not on measuring recovery rates or success rates, because lost pet outcomes may not always be reported back to the page. Instead, the page analysis examined how Instagram features were used to create visibility, communicate urgency, provide practical guidance, encourage public participation and support trust building.

Instagram Insights were used to understand the page's audience reach, follower profile and visibility patterns. These analytics were not used to measure recovery success, because lost pet outcomes may not always be reported back to the page. Instead, the metrics were treated as platform generated indicators of how far the page's lost pet and animal welfare communication could circulate among followers and non

followers. Platform analytics were interpreted cautiously because social media metrics are shaped by platform design, visibility rules, user behaviour, account activity and available dashboard tools.

Personal identifiers such as usernames, phone numbers, exact private addresses and direct message identities were removed or anonymised in the reporting. Screenshots were used only after removing or blurring identifiable details.

2.4. Interview Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants connected to lost pet recovery and animal welfare support. Participants included pet guardians, cat owners, spotters, street feeders, rescuers, non-pet owner followers, active resharers and administrators of related animal welfare pages. This mix of participants was selected to understand the page from different user positions: those who lost animals, those who helped identify or recover animals and those who supported circulation through sharing, feeding, rescue networks or page administration.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the page, missing pet communication, sighting reports, rescue coordination, reposting or animal welfare participation. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative studies where participants are selected because they can provide information rich accounts of the phenomenon being studied (Patton, 2015). Participant identities were anonymised using codes. Age and role are reported only with selected quotations to provide context, for example, “(P1, 32, dog owner)” or “(P15, 34, delivery rider/spotter).”

2.5. Interview Guide and Data Collection

The interview guide included questions on the participant’s relationship with the animal, the circumstances of the pet going missing, emotional reactions during the loss, offline search methods, how Instagram became part of the search, how the missing pet information was shared, responses received through Instagram, whether Instagram led to sightings, messages, calls or physical help, the role of lostpetsofchennai, reunion experience and future willingness to share or support similar posts.

For rescuers, feeders, spotters and followers, questions focused on how they came across missing-pet posts, how they recognised animals, why they helped and how they understood the page’s role in animal welfare. Interviews were conducted in Online mode, lasted approximately 20-40 minutes and were conducted in English and Tamil. Interviews were transcribed and anonymised before analysis.

2.6. Thematic Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). The process involved repeated reading of transcripts, initial coding, grouping related codes into categories, reviewing candidate themes, refining theme boundaries and selecting representative quotes. Coding focused on both direct meanings, such as sharing, searching, reporting sightings and contacting guardians, and deeper meanings, such as trust, guilt, care, responsibility, hope and community belonging.

The analysis identified five final themes: pet loss as a care crisis, Instagram as a visibility network, guidance during panic, micro participation in community rescue and trust, gratitude and civic care. These themes were then connected with the page analysis to explain how Instagram communication practices were experienced by users during lost pet situations.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

The study involved human participants and social media material; therefore, ethical care was necessary throughout data collection, analysis and reporting. Interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent before participation. Participant names, usernames, contact numbers, exact private addresses and other identifying details were removed or anonymised.

The Instagram page analysis was conducted with attention to privacy and contextual integrity. Although some Instagram content may be publicly visible, public visibility does not automatically remove ethical responsibility in research. Missing pet posts and direct messages may contain sensitive information,

including emotional distress, phone numbers, locations, photographs and identifiable details. Therefore, screenshots used in the manuscript were anonymised by removing or blurring usernames, contact numbers, private addresses and identifiable personal information. Direct message content was used only in anonymised form and was reported to illustrate communication patterns rather than expose individual users. These steps follow internet mediated research ethics, which emphasise privacy, consent, dignity, contextual sensitivity and careful reporting of online data (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; British Psychological Society, 2021; Nissenbaum, 2010).

3. Results

3.1. Page Purpose and Instagram Account Features

The analysis shows that lostpetsofchennai organised around a clear practical purpose: helping missing companion animals become visible to wider local publics and supporting community response. Similar to other animal focused Instagram outreach accounts, the page uses Instagram's visual and interactive features to create a dynamic communication space (Muca et al., 2023). However, its communication differs from general animal interest content because it is strongly connected to urgent location-based lost-pet communication.

The page's bio, posts, stories, highlights, captions, hashtags, direct messaging, tagged posts and reposts worked together to support lost pet communication. Feed posts provided durable records of missing and spotted animals, while stories helped create immediate visibility for urgent cases. Direct messages allowed pet guardians and spotters to send photographs, location details and updates. Hashtags and captions helped categorise content and increase discoverability.

The page therefore operated as more than a static announcement board. It functioned as an alert system, a contact point, a community connector and a practical guidance channel. This supports the idea that social media pages can operate as networked publics, where users, content, relationships and actions become visible through platform features (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2007).

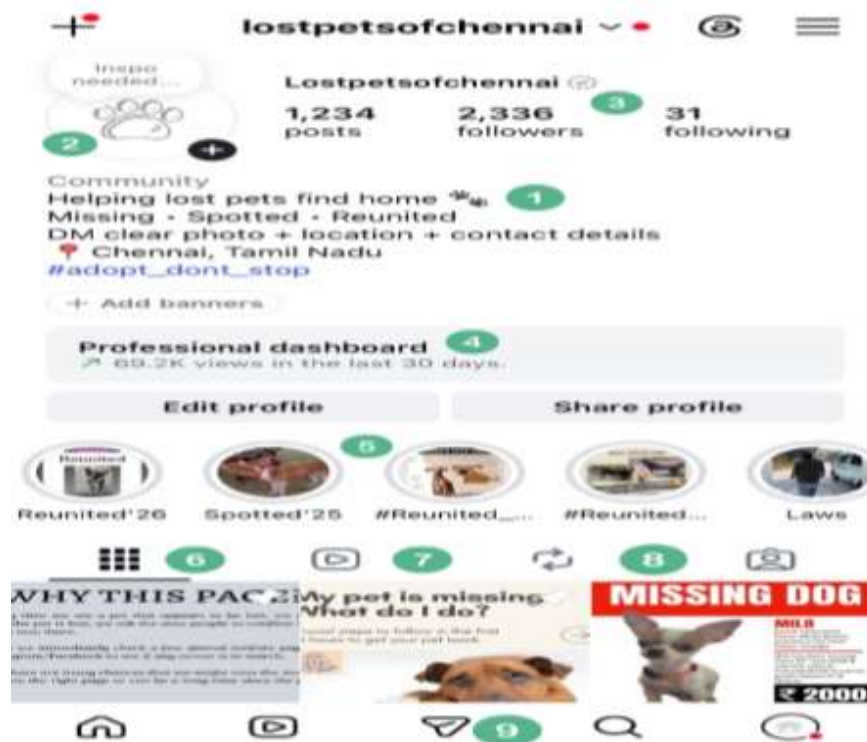


Figure 1. Overview of the Lostpetsofchennai Instagram page. (1) Biography showing page identity and purpose; (2) profile image and story area for urgent updates; (3) account name, post count, followers and

following; (4) professional dashboard showing reach indicators; (5) highlights retaining key updates beyond 24 hours; (6) main post feed with missing, spotted, awareness and reunited posts; (7) reels for short-form awareness and guidance; (8) tagged/reposted content showing community interaction; and (9) contact access for receiving missing-pet details, sightings, photographs, locations and updates.

3.2. Page Communication Practices

Across post types, three communication patterns were especially important. First, visual recognition was central. Clear photographs, collar details, markings, breed or type and body condition helped followers identify animals. Second, location based information was essential because lost pet communication depends on connecting online viewers with offline places. Third, calls to action transformed viewers into participants by asking them to share, repost, call, report sightings, check nearby areas or avoid unsafe behaviour such as chasing frightened animals.

Missing pet posts usually aimed to alert the public quickly. These posts typically included the animal's photograph, name, breed or type, colour, last seen location, date, time, contact number or direct message option and sometimes reward information. Such details were important because users needed enough information to recognise the animal and respond quickly.

Spotted animal posts helped convert public observation into possible recovery support. These posts were especially important when a user saw an animal that appeared lost but did not know the owner. By sharing the animal's image and location, the page helped connect unknown animals with possible guardians. This process reflects the logic of collective intelligence, where different users contribute small pieces of information that may become useful when connected through a shared platform (Lévy, 1997).

Reunited posts and gratitude messages served as emotional and trust-building content. They showed that follower participation could matter and helped maintain confidence in the page. They also acknowledged the role of followers, spotters, feeders and helpers. Rescue, adoption, feeding, treatment and awareness related posts extended the page's role beyond lost-pet alerts by connecting lost-pet communication with broader companion-animal welfare, responsible care and community-based support. These practices are consistent with participatory culture, where ordinary users contribute to public meaning and action through sharing, commenting, reposting and responding (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009).

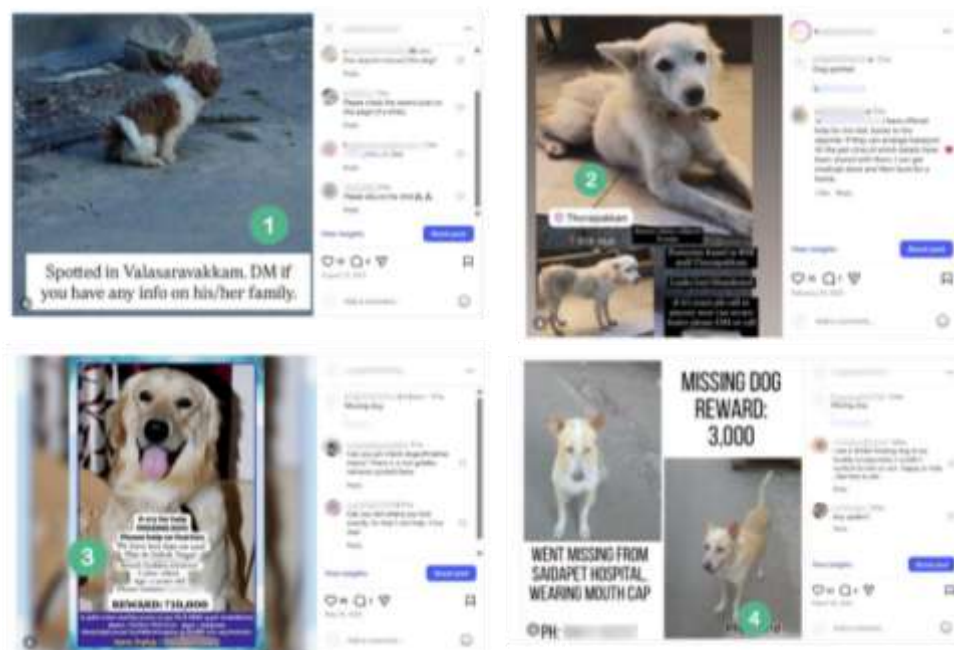


Figure 2. Examples of Instagram posts supporting spotted-animal reporting, missing-pet alerts and

public participation. The figure shows (1) a spotted-pet post seeking public help to identify the animal's family; (2) a spotted-dog alert using location and visual details; (3) a missing-dog post where comments connect sightings with rescue pages; and (4) a missing dog reward post showing location-based public response. Personal identifiers were removed or blurred.

3.3. Instagram Insights and Audience Reach

Instagram Insights were used to understand the visibility and audience profile of *lostpetsofchennai*. The analytics are included as indicators of communication reach, not as measures of recovery success. At the time of observation, the page recorded 67,162 views during the previous 30 days, with 65.6% of views coming from non followers and 34.4% from followers. The account also reached 20,612 accounts during this period. This non follower visibility is important because lost pet communication depends on alerts reaching people beyond the pet guardian's immediate network.

The audience profile showed that the page was strongly connected to Chennai and India, with Chennai accounting for 74.4% of followers and India accounting for 94.0%. The largest follower age group was 25–34 years, followed by 35–44 years and 18–24 years. These patterns suggest that the page reaches a mainly local and digitally active audience that can support lost pet communication through sharing, watching, reporting sightings and connecting alerts to local networks.

Overall, the page insights show that *lostpetsofchennai* has meaningful audience reach beyond its existing follower base. For this study, these metrics support the argument that Instagram can function as a visibility platform for local companion animal welfare communication.

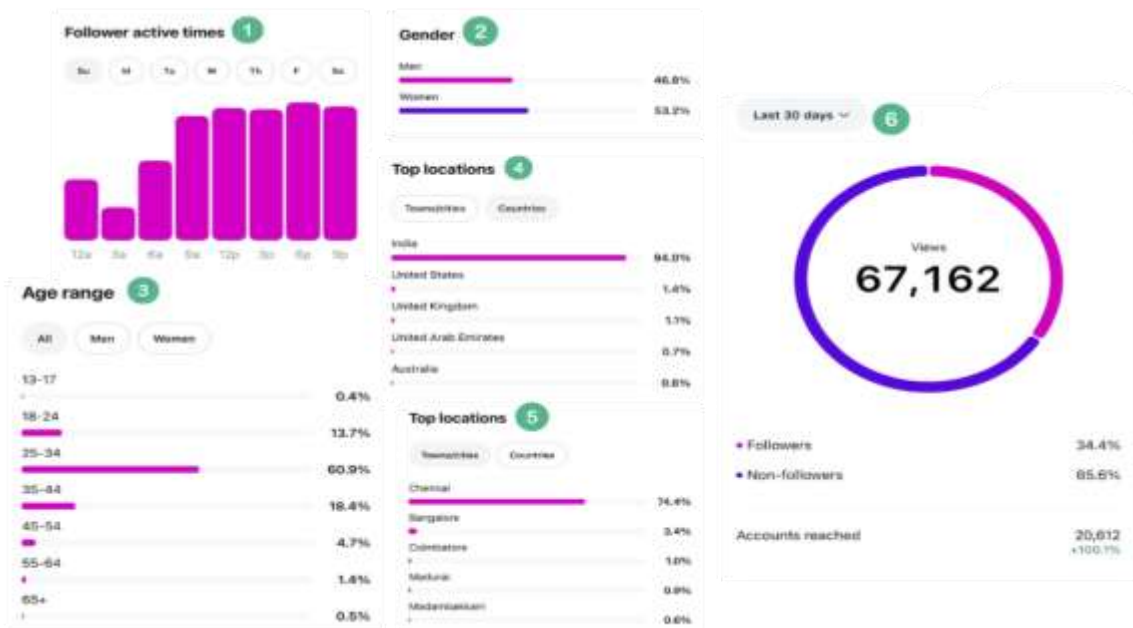


Figure 3. Instagram Insights of the Lost Pets of Chennai page. The figure shows (1) follower active times, with stronger activity from late morning to evening; (2) gender distribution, with women at 53.2% and men at 46.8%; (3) age distribution, with 25–34 years as the largest group at 60.9%; (4) top countries, with India forming 94.0% of followers; (5) top towns and cities, with Chennai as the main audience base; and (6) view analytics showing 67,162 views, 20,612 accounts reached and higher visibility among non-followers than followers.

3.4. Instagram Stories, Direct Messages and User Feedback

Instagram stories played an important role in time-sensitive circulation. While feed posts provided a more permanent archive of missing, spotted and reunited cases, stories were useful for urgent circulation,

reposting, quick updates and repeated visibility. Stories were used to share missing pet alerts, spotted animal reports, reunited updates and practical guidance, including reminders about identification tags and safe search behaviour.

Direct messages supported two-way communication. Pet guardians, spotters, feeders and followers used DMs to send missing-pet details, photographs, location information, sightings, recovery updates and gratitude messages. This allowed the page to function as a contact point and coordination channel rather than only as a public feed. This form of communication reflects online community support, where digital spaces provide information, empathy, trust and practical help around shared concerns (Preece, 2000; Wellman & Wortley, 1990).



Figure 4. Instagram stories used for urgent lost pet alerts, spotted animal updates and reunited cases. The figure shows (1) a missing dog alert with photograph, last seen details, reward information and public help request; (2) a missing cat case later updated as reunited; (3) a spotted dog case where visibility helped owners contact the finder; and (4) a reunited missing dog case with guidance on identification tags and contact numbers.

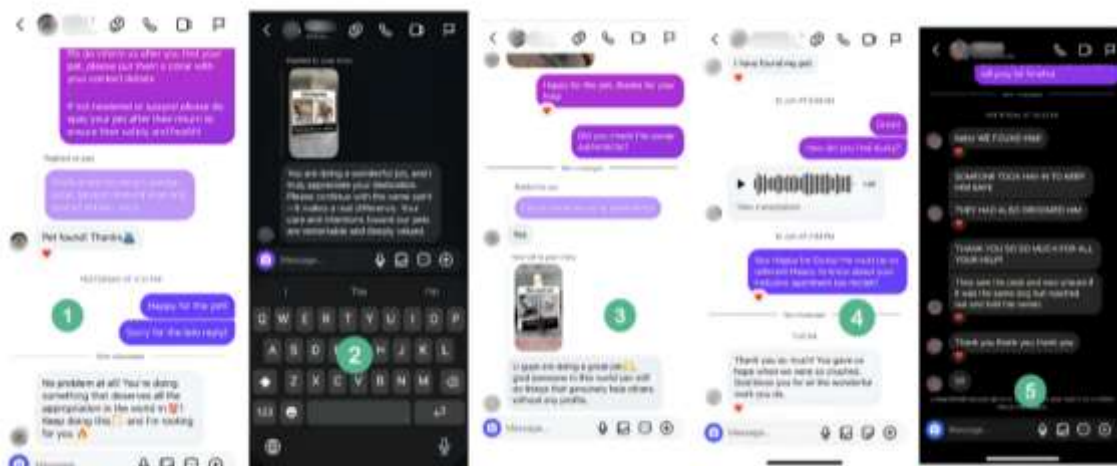


Figure 5. Anonymised direct-message feedback showing user gratitude, emotional support and trust in the page. The figure shows (1) preventive advice after a pet is found; (2) follower appreciation of the page's

animal welfare work; (3) owner verification before confirming reunion; (4) a pet guardian thanking the page for hope during a distressing search; and (5) a finder explaining how the dog was kept safe and reunited after seeing the post.

3.5. Interview Thematic Analysis

The interview findings strengthen the page based analysis by showing how different users experienced lostpetsofchennai during lost pet recovery and animal welfare support. Participants included pet guardians, cat owners, spotters, street feeders, rescuers, non-pet owner followers, active resharers and animal welfare page administrators. This diversity is important because the page was not experienced only by pet owners in distress. It was also used by people who spotted animals, reshared alerts, connected local networks, provided guidance, verified sightings and helped reunite animals with families.

The thematic analysis identified five major themes: pet loss as a care crisis, Instagram as a visibility network, guidance during panic, micro participation in community rescue and trust, gratitude and civic care. These themes show that lostpetsofchennai was experienced as more than a reposting account. Participants described it as a visibility network, a practical guidance source, an emotional support space and a community-based animal welfare platform.

3.5.1. Pet Loss as a Care Crisis

Participants described pet loss as a deeply emotional and care based crisis. Companion animals were repeatedly described as family members, children, siblings and emotionally significant beings. This attachment made the search urgent and deeply personal. One participant said, “Bruno(my dog) is honestly like a family member to us, not just a pet” (P1, 32, dog owner). Another described her dog by saying, “He’s honestly like my baby” (P3, 24, dog owner). These accounts show that pet loss was not understood as the loss of property, but as the disappearance of a dependent family member.

The uncertainty of not knowing the animal’s condition was one of the most distressing parts of the experience. P1 described this clearly: “Not knowing where he was, whether he was hungry, injured, frightened, or trying to come back, that was the hardest part” (P1, 32, dog owner). This words show that distress came from imagining the animal’s possible suffering and being unable to confirm its safety.

The crisis became more intense when the animal was elderly, pregnant, indoor only, scared, rescued or otherwise vulnerable. P2, whose elderly dog went missing, asked, “How will she manage outside alone?” (P2, 55, elderly dog owner). Similarly, P12 described panic because her indoor cat had never been outside and “cannot survive outside” (P12, 26, cat owner). These accounts show that pet loss was experienced as a welfare crisis because the missing animal was seen as vulnerable to hunger, traffic, fear, injury, attacks, theft or disorientation.

This theme is important because it explains why Instagram support mattered. Participants were not simply looking for information. They were seeking help during a moment of fear, guilt, helplessness and responsibility towards an animal they loved.

3.5.2. Instagram as a Visibility Network

Participants repeatedly described Instagram as a tool that expanded the search beyond the family’s immediate physical network. P1 explained, “Instagram made many more people aware of my dog in a short time. It gave us a wider network of eyes” (P1, 32, dog owner). This words capture the main role of the page, it made a missing animal visible to people who would otherwise never have known about the case.

Other pet guardians also described Instagram as increasing urgency and public alertness. P3 said, “It gave visibility very fast, and I think it made more people alert to look out for him” (P3, 24, dog owner). P7, whose dog went missing in a large beach area, explained that Instagram helped gather “more eyes and more people covering more space” (P7, 33, dog owner). These accounts show that Instagram visibility was especially useful when the physical search area was too large for the family alone.

Visibility also mattered for spotters and helpers. P10 said, “Without Instagram, I would have never known this dog was missing” (P10, 36, spotter/helper). P15 similarly explained, “Without the post, I would

never have connected the dog to a missing family” (P15, 34, delivery rider/spotter). These quotes show that the Instagram post gave meaning to an animal seen in public. Without the post, the animal may have been mistaken for a local pet, a street animal or an abandoned animal.

The visibility network also extended through feeders, rescue pages and animal welfare networks. P21, who runs a cat rescue/adoption page, said, “It breaks location barriers. Someone in Velachery can help someone in Tambaram” (P21, 30, cat rescue/adoption page admin). P22 described the same process as “hundreds of eyes on the ground” created by one post (P22, 36, independent rescuer). These accounts show that Instagram visibility was not limited to viewing. It helped create public recognition and local response.

3.5.3. Guidance during Panic

A major finding was that lostpetsofchennai not only post missing pet details. It also gave practical guidance during moments of panic. P4, whose cat went missing after shifting house, said, “They responded with practical advice, not just posting support” (P4, 30, cat owner). These words show that the page was experienced as a guidance source, not only as an alert sharing account.

P4 further explained, “It gave me direction. Before that, I was searching in a very emotional and scattered way” (P4, 30, cat owner). In her case, the page explained that a frightened cat in a new environment was likely to hide close to home. The advice to search quietly, use familiar food, call softly and check nearby hidden spaces changed the family’s search strategy.

The same pattern appeared in another indoor cat case. P12 said the page changed her mindset from “she is gone far away” to “she may be hiding very close” (P12, 26, cat owner). The cat was later found in the same apartment block, hidden in a false ceiling area. This shows that practical advice can be as important as visibility when the animal is hiding nearby rather than moving openly in public.

Guidance also appeared in dog cases. P9 explained that the page told the family what details to include, to check CCTV, to ask people not to chase the dog and to search during early morning and late night. She said, “Their guidance made the search more organised” (P9, 40, rescued dog owner). P3 also reflected that “social media and basic pet safety measures should go together” (P3, 24, dog owner), referring to the importance of collars and contact tags.

This theme shows that the page helped pet guardians move from panic driven search to more informed welfare action. In animal welfare terms, this matters because incorrect search behaviour can increase risk, frightened dogs may run into traffic if chased, and scared cats may remain hidden if the search is noisy or crowded.

3.5.4. Micro Participation in Community Rescue

The interviews show that lost pet support often depended on small actions by many people. These included sharing a post, reposting a story, recognising an animal, calling an owner, checking a street, feeding a frightened dog, stopping traffic, sending a sighting, asking neighbours or physically joining a search.

P7 explained this clearly: “Instagram was what turned the search from just our family’s effort into a community effort” (P7, 33, dog owner). She added, “People we didn’t even know personally messaged us asking where to come, what area to search, and how they could help” (P7, 33, dog owner). These quotes show that the page lowered the barrier to participation. People did not need to be formal rescuers, they could still help through small digital and local actions.

Spotters played an important role in converting posts into offline support. P11, a student who feeds street dogs at night, said, “Without Instagram, I would have never known this dog was missing” (P11, 18, street feeder/spotter). After comparing the dog with the Instagram post, she contacted the owner and helped keep the animal safe. P15 described a similar case and said, “I called the number mentioned in the lostpetsofchennai post” (P15, 34, delivery rider/spotter). These accounts show how a simple post can become offline support when a viewer recognises an animal and acts.

Non-pet owner followers also contributed to community rescue. P16 said, “Animals can’t speak. If I ignore them, who will help them?” (P16, 22, non-pet owner spotter). P17, an active resharer, explained, “I may not physically spot the pet, but maybe someone in my followers list can” (P17, 29, active resharer).

P18 said the page “teaches ordinary people how to help” (P18, 31, alert observer). These accounts show that the page enabled low barrier animal welfare participation even among people who did not own pets.

Feeders and rescuers extended the network further. P20, who runs a street dog feeding page, said, “I also send missing pet details to local feeders because they know where dogs roam” (P20, 27, street dog feeding page admin). P22 explained, “I share location alerts” and “contact local volunteers” (P22, 36, independent rescuer). This shows that the page did not work alone, it connected scattered local knowledge into practical recovery networks.

Overall, this theme shows that lost pet support through Instagram was not purely digital. A share became useful when someone recognised the animal. A direct message became useful when it led to a physical check. A post became useful when someone called the owner. In this way, micro participation connected online visibility with offline care.

3.5.5. Trust, Gratitude and Civic Care

Participants repeatedly described *lostpetsofchennai* as a trusted and caring support system. For pet guardians, trust was built through clear post details, quick sharing, practical guidance, reunited updates and compassionate responses. P1 said, “Seeing strangers share [my dog’s] picture and message me made me feel less alone” (P1, 32, dog owner). P2 similarly said, “It made us feel that we were not struggling alone” (P2, 55, elderly dog owner). These quotes show that the page’s value was emotional as well as practical.

The interviews also show that Instagram support mattered even when the final recovery happened through offline methods. P2’s elderly dog was eventually found through posters, but she still described Instagram as useful because it gave visibility, hope and emotional support. This means the page’s impact should not be measured only by direct reunions. Emotional reassurance and sustained motivation during the search were also important forms of support.

Trust also appeared in the accounts of helpers. P10 said that helping reunite a dog “healed something” in him because strangers had once helped him during his own pet-loss experience (P10, 36, spotter/helper). P19, who reported a wrong sighting, said, “Even wrong attempts come from care” and added that the page “turns empathy into action” (P19, 35, wrong-sighting informer). This shows that the page encouraged participation even when outcomes were uncertain, while also highlighting the need for careful verification.

The page also shaped future behaviour. P17 said, “Sharing is the least I can do” and described social media as creating “chain reactions” (P17, 29, active resharer). P21 said, “If an animal already has a loving family waiting, helping them return home is one of the best forms of welfare” (P21, 30, cat rescue/adoption page admin). P22 summarised the wider meaning by saying, “Animal welfare today is no longer individual effort. It’s community driven” (P22, 36, independent rescuer).

This theme shows that trust and gratitude were not only emotional reactions. They reflected the page’s social role. Users saw *lostpetsofchennai* as a reliable community resource that connected people, gave reassurance and encouraged future participation in animal welfare.

3.6. Integration of Findings with the Conceptual Framework

The findings support the conceptual framing of the study. First, the page functioned as a networked public because missing and spotted animals became visible beyond the pet guardian’s immediate family, street or neighbourhood. Posts, stories, captions, comments, reposts and direct messages helped circulate animal welfare information across connected and non-connected users.

Second, the findings show participatory culture in practice. Participants did not remain passive viewers of lost pet alerts. They contributed through small but meaningful actions such as sharing posts, tagging local contacts, checking locations, reporting sightings, calling guardians, contacting feeders and reposting stories. These actions show how ordinary Instagram users can become active contributors to companion-animal welfare communication.

Third, the findings show the page as a form of online community support. Pet guardians described the page as helping them feel less alone, receive practical guidance and connect with people who could support the search. Spotters, feeders, rescuers and followers also described the page as a trusted space that helped organise attention, care and local response. Together, these findings show that *lostpetsofchennai* works as a

digital local support network where online visibility becomes meaningful through offline community action.

4. Discussion

This study shows that *lostpetsofchennai* functions as a digital companion animal welfare support page rather than simply an Instagram account for missing pet announcements. Its role can be understood through four connected functions, visibility, guidance, emotional support and community participation. This extends earlier work on Instagram based animal related outreach (Muca et al., 2023) and lost pet recovery research (Weiss et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018; Arathoon et al., 2024; Venaktramanan & Roberts, 2024) by showing how a local Instagram page can operate as a digital-local support network during urgent companion animal cases.

First, the page creates visibility for missing and spotted animals. This is important because animals cannot explain their location or distress and may be exposed to traffic, hunger, fear, injury, theft or displacement. Instagram posts, stories, captions, hashtags and reposts help make animals recognisable and allow information to move beyond the guardian's immediate family or neighbourhood network. This finding connects with the idea of networked publics, where digital platforms make people, content and participation visible across connected audiences (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2007)

Second, the page provides practical guidance during moments of panic. Interview participants described pet loss as a distressing experience marked by fear, guilt, uncertainty and worry for the animal's safety. The page helped by advising guardians on what details to share, why location matters, how to approach frightened animals and how to combine online alerts with offline methods such as posters, CCTV checks, feeder networks and neighbourhood searches. This supports earlier lost pet research showing that searching behaviour, identification methods and timely information sharing influence recovery efforts (Weiss et al., 2012; Huang et al., 2018).

Third, the page supports emotional reassurance. Participants described feeling less alone when strangers shared posts, responded to alerts or offered help. This shows that lost-pet communication is not only informational; it is also emotional. Human animal bond literature helps explain this response because companion animals are often experienced as attachment figures, family members and sources of emotional support (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2020; Brooks & Greenberg, 2023). When such animals go missing, digital support can help guardians manage uncertainty, fear and emotional exhaustion.

Fourth, the page encourages micro participation in animal welfare. Small actions such as resharing a story, tagging a local contact, watching a street, reporting a sighting, calling an owner or contacting a feeder can become meaningful forms of support. This aligns with participatory culture and online community research, which show how ordinary users can become contributors through low-barrier digital practices such as sharing, commenting, responding and circulating information (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009; Preece, 2000; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). It also reflects collective intelligence, because lost-pet support often depends on many users contributing small pieces of local knowledge that can become useful when connected through a shared platform (Lévy, 1997).

The findings also connect with Indian animal welfare and responsible care frameworks. Public participation in lost pet support is important because animal welfare is not limited to formal institutions. It also involves responsible ownership, care for animals in shared urban spaces and public awareness about preventing avoidable suffering (Animal Welfare Board of India, 2015; Government of India, 1960). In this study, Instagram based participation helped ordinary users contribute through small actions rather than formal rescue membership. This is especially relevant in urban contexts such as Chennai, where pet guardians, feeders, neighbours, delivery workers, volunteers and animal welfare pages may all become part of a local care network.

The study also highlights the ethical responsibility involved in social media based animal welfare communication. Lost pet posts and direct messages may include phone numbers, exact locations, emotional messages and identifiable details. Therefore, visibility must be balanced with privacy, accuracy and responsible reporting. Internet mediated research ethics emphasise that online data should be handled with

care even when it is publicly visible, especially when it involves identifiable or emotionally sensitive content (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; British Psychological Society, 2021; Nissenbaum, 2010). Overall, the findings position Instagram based lost pet communication as a form of digital civic care where online attention, local knowledge and offline community action work together to support companion animal welfare.

The findings also strengthen the conceptual understanding of Instagram based lost pet communication. The page reflects the idea of networked publics because it makes missing animals, guardians, spotters and helpers visible across connected audiences (boyd & Ellison, 2007; boyd, 2007). It reflects participatory culture because users contribute through low barrier actions such as sharing, tagging, commenting, reposting and reporting sightings (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2009). It also reflects online community support because participants experienced the page as a source of information, emotional reassurance, trust and practical help (Preece, 2000; Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Therefore, the study shows that Instagram based lost pet communication is not only a process of posting alerts, it is a form of digital civic care where platform visibility, user participation and local animal welfare action work together.

5. Conclusions

This study shows that *lostpetsofchennai* operates as a digital companion animal welfare support page. Through Instagram posts, stories, captions, hashtags, direct messages and reposts, the page helps transform individual lost pet cases into wider public alerts. Its value lies not in fixed recovery numbers but in the way users experience it as a visibility network, guidance source, emotional support space and community based animal welfare platform.

The interview findings show that participants experienced pet loss as a care crisis because animals were seen as family members and vulnerable beings. The page helped users spread information quickly, receive practical guidance, feel emotionally supported and connect with people who could assist through sharing, watching, reporting sightings or supporting offline search efforts.

The strongest finding is that lost pet support was built through micro participation. Small actions by ordinary users, such as sharing, tagging, watching, calling, checking or reporting sightings, can collectively support companion animal welfare. The study therefore positions Instagram-based lost pet communication as a form of digital civic care in which online visibility and offline community action work together.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, because the study involved low-risk interviews with adult participants and anonymised analysis of social media content.

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Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants involved in the study. Permission was obtained where identifiable user-generated content or direct-message material was reproduced. All screenshots used in the manuscript were anonymised by removing or blurring usernames, contact numbers, private addresses and identifying details.

Data Availability Statement: Aggregated coded data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. Raw interview transcripts, direct messages, screenshots, usernames, phone numbers, exact location details and identifiable Instagram data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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