Analysis of the Causes and Predicaments of Capybara's Internet Popularity from the Perspective of Communication Studies

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Abstract: In recent years, the Capybara, a rodent native to South America, has rapidly swept global social media platforms through digital carriers such as emoticons and short videos, thanks to its cute appearance and gentle, lazy habits, becoming a "top Internet celebrity" across different social circles. This article takes the online popularity of Capybara as the research object and analyzes the causes, predicaments and solutions of Capybara's online popularity by combining relevant cases. Research has found that the Capybara has successfully "gone viral" thanks to its cute symbol's emotional healing function, social currency drive for dissemination, and technology empowerment for users to "cloud pet keeping". However, its online popularity has also led to chaos in Capybara keeping. This article proposes solutions from aspects such as strengthening content regulation on self-media platforms, enhancing media literacy among the public, and standardizing management and providing scientific guidance for breeders, offering references for balancing the pet economy and animal protection.

1. Introduction

"Capybara", as the largest rodent in the world, its blunt features, lazy posture and "indulgent" temperament naturally align with human's cognitive preference for "cuteness". Capybaras are social semi-aquatic animals that enjoy bathing and gathering in groups. They often live in groups of dozens in wetlands or near water bodies. They are vegans and mainly feed on aquatic plants, forage grass and other plants. They also supplement nutrients by eating feces. They have a gentle personality and are accustomed to diving into the water to avoid enemies when encountering them. Capybaras moved from the wild to zoo breeding in the 18th century when they were discovered by European explorers and introduced to zoos in Europe and America for display. In the early days, people relied on catching them in the wild. Later, through the study of their semi-aquatic habits and reproductive characteristics, breakthroughs in artificial breeding technology were gradually achieved. With its "Internet celebrity" image becoming popular, many zoos around the world have introduced and established artificial populations through regular channels, forming a breeding model that combines display and protection functions.

In 2023, the song "Capybara" composed by a Russian musician became popular on social media. The melody of this song is light and cheerful, and the lyrics are mainly repetitive "Capybara", which is very catchy. Subsequently, various videos related to Capybara began to spread "viral" with this song as the background music. Since then, the popularity of Capybara has continued to rise. A large number of related emoticons, jokes, and meme images have emerged on social media. Hot memes such as "Diagnosed with Capybara" and "Capybara personality type" have swept the Internet. As of August 2025, the topic "Capybara" on Douyin has been viewed over 11.6 billion times, and there are also over a million related notes on Xiaohongshu. In addition, the commercial value of Capybara has gradually emerged. The sudden popularity of Capybara has provided new ideas for the development of the cultural and tourism industry in various places: more than ten cities such as Changsha, Zhengzhou and Shanghai have introduced Capybara to their zoos and pet houses and created dedicated exhibition areas. Constant temperature pools and interactive feeding areas have become standard equipment, and countless tourists who love Capybara come here for its reputation. Not only that, many brands have launched Capybara series products. Through multi-dimensional development such as cross-border collaborations, trendy toy sales, and content industry extensions, an economic and cultural interaction phenomenon driven by the Capybara IP is taking shape.

2. Analysis of the Reasons for Capybara's Popularity

2.1 The Emotional Healing Function of Cute Symbols

In today's fast-paced and high-pressure social environment, people's demand for emotional healing is increasingly urgent. The cute symbol carried by capybaras precisely hits this collective psychological need, becoming one of the core driving forces behind their popularity. In 1974, American sociologist Katz first expounded the core viewpoints of the "uses and gratifications" theory. This theory, starting from the psychological motives and needs of the audience, holds that the audience are individuals with specific needs, and their media contact activities are a process of using media based on specific need motives to achieve need satisfaction. [1]When people watch capybara-related content online, it is a compensatory satisfaction of their emotional needs. Moreover, many netizens have given capybaras interesting nicknames such as "kiwi" and "chicken wing rice" based on their appearance. In his "Course in General Linguistics", Swiss linguist Saussure proposed that any symbol consists of two parts: the "signifier" and the "signified". The signifier is the material form of the symbol, such as sounds, images, and other parts that can be captured by the senses; the signified is the psychological concept formed by the symbol user about the object involved by the symbol. [2]As a symbol, "kiwi" has a signifier that includes its brownish-yellow, fuzzy skin and oval shape, which are visually perceivable material forms. The signified extends to the psychological concept that "capybaras have a cute appearance similar to kiwis". When people see capybaras and associate them with the signifier features of kiwis, the soft and round visual impression will activate the perception of "cuteness" in the brain, thereby releasing pleasure hormones. The signifier of "chicken wing rice" is its plump and round food-like shape, and its signified extends to "the posture of a capybara when it curls up". When people see a capybara curling up, they will associate it with the deliciousness and fullness of food, which brings pleasure. This also adds a sense of warmth and familiarity to the image of capybaras.

2.2 Technology Empowers Users to "Cloud Pet Care"

"Technology empowerment" refers to the use of advanced technological innovation tools to enhance the execution capabilities of individuals or organizations. This can be achieved through the popularization of technology, the optimization of the environment, and the establishment of

platforms. [3]The rapid development of technology has provided a solid foundation for the popularization of the "cloud pet care" model and has also become an important driving force behind the popularity of capybara. The popularization of 5G technology has brought about characteristics of ultra-high bandwidth, ultra-low latency and massive connections, enabling stable access to high-quality live streaming content even in remote areas or mobile scenarios. Guangzhou Zoo, Zhengzhou Yinji Zoo, Changsha Zoolung Indoor Zoo, etc. have keenly recognized the potential of live streaming marketing and arranged staff in their parks to conduct live broadcasts of capybara's grazing, dozing, bathing and other daily life activities at fixed times. They hold smartphones or other live streaming devices, enter the activity areas of capybara, and shoot their daily life scenes in real time from the first-person perspective. At the same time, they provide live explanations in vivid language. Users only need to open smart devices such as mobile phones and tablets, enter the designated live streaming room, and can join this "cloud companionship" anytime and anywhere. Some hosts will set up "feeding interaction" and "bidding gifts" sections in their live broadcasts. Users are no longer just spectators but can directly participate in the live scene by sending bullet comments and other means, interacting with the host and other viewers, forming a new consumption model of "cloud pet care".

2.3 Social Currency Drives Communication

On various social platforms, the popularity of Capybara-related content has been continuously increasing. Whether it is its leisurely posture in water, its calm demeanor while eating, or its friendly interactions with other animals, all these scenes can attract high user attention and generate a large number of interactions. When users on social platforms frequently like, comment on, and follow Capybara-related content, the platform's algorithm will recognize the user's interest preferences and precisely push related videos. Subsequently, live streaming notifications also arrive. These effectively strengthen the connection between users and the content. Moreover, the algorithm system can deeply explore implicit signals such as the duration of stay and the frequency of repeated playback. [4] Thus, it can more accurately identify "Capybara fans" and push related Capybara content. During the online craze sparked by Capybara, the social interactions such as likes and comments by users around it are not merely entertainment behaviors, but also contain tradable and valuable social value. This value operation logic is in line with the concept of "social currency" proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu: "Social currency" is the "virtual currency" in social behavior, a manifestation of the capitalization of social behavior. It covers all the interaction behaviors of users in the social network, and through these behaviors, users constantly shape their social image and influence. [5]Users who love Capybara post self-made or re-posted Capybara's meme pack in the comment section of related content, shaping their own "Capybara culture identifiers" in the "Capybara Gate" community, and thereby accumulating social influence within this community. In the exchanges and sharing among users, they deepen their love for Capybara and promote it from an animal image to a network cultural symbol.

3. Concerns Regarding the Rise of the Capybara Network

3.1 Unregulated business animal breeding practices

The popularity of Capybara has led to the emergence of related industries. Since it is not a traditional protected wild animal in our country, there are gaps in relevant regulations, some unregulated businesses lack effective management in areas such as animal epidemic prevention and breeding environment, resulting in some breeding irregularities： Firstly, there is the problem of mixed breeding. Although Capybara is gentle in nature and seems to be a "socialite" in the animal

world, it is not suitable for cohabitation with all animals. Previously, a video circulating on the internet showed that a certain zoo in Tianjin mixed Capybara with orangutans. The orangutans exhibited behaviors such as forcibly pulling the Capybara's front paws, dragging and rolling, and even falling from heights, which attracted widespread attention from netizens. Secondly, there are issues related to the water quality and hygiene in breeding. Capybara is a semi-aquatic animal that needs water to regulate body temperature. Its behaviors such as eating, socializing, and excretion are all centered around water. Therefore, the breeding must provide an appropriate aquatic environment. Currently, some zoos and pet breeding centers, due to factors such as space and cost, are unable to provide the water environment that meets their needs. Capybara is prone to abnormal excretion and decreased appetite, which can cause health problems. In addition, the socialization habit of Capybara as a social animal also needs to be considered. Capybara is a social animal that needs to "communicate" with companions or other animals. However, some small pet breeding centers or individual breeders, limited by space and cost factors, sometimes only keep one Capybara alone, which may lead to psychological problems for it.

3.2 Tourist Interaction Disorder

Content about Capybara's cute appearance and gentle nature has been widely spread on the internet. However, there are relatively few related articles on scientific breeding and proper interaction. This has led some tourists to focus only on the entertainment aspect during interactions, while neglecting the health of the animals and their own safety. On one hand, the popularity of Capybara has greatly increased the demand for interaction with it. Incorrect interaction behaviors may cause Capybara to get injured, for example, forcefully holding Capybara may hurt its spine. On the other hand, Capybara's digestive system is rather special, with a short interval between eating and defecation. If the feeding of tourists cannot be controlled within a reasonable range, there is a risk of Capybara getting indigestion. Moreover, some self-media have overly personified Capybara, shaping its "absolutely gentle" image. However, in reality, Capybara's line of sight is blocked, which may cause it to mistake the hand of the person getting too close as food and chew it. The stereotype that "Capybara won't bite" may make the public less vigilant when interacting with them, exposing them to the risk of being bitten.

4. Measures for Balancing the Pet Economy and Animal Protection

4.1 Self-media platforms: Strengthening content regulation and value guidance

As the core dissemination platform for Capybara-related content, the self-media platform needs to create a scientific and friendly dissemination environment through technology and rules: On one hand, the platform should enhance algorithm optimization and content review. For example, it can add an "animal welfare compliance" review indicator for "pet interaction" videos, identify bad content involving Capybara abuse, excessive feeding, or improper interaction, and reduce dissemination through measures such as "decreasing ranking" and "removing from the platform", and impose restrictions or ban on accounts that post illegal content; On the other hand, it should label "animal welfare friendly" for scientific and compliant breeding content and give priority to recommending and increasing traffic incentives; At the same time, it can collaborate with animal protection organizations and research institutions to launch a "Capybara science column", guiding users to form a correct understanding through interaction.

4.2 The general public: Enhancing media literacy and developing a sense of rational participation

The general public is the end point of communication, and their behaviors have a significant impact on the living environment of Capybara. First of all, the public should enhance their sense of responsibility, realize the impact of their actions on the animals, combine the entertainment needs of "cloud petting" with the social responsibility of "maintaining animal welfare", and when interacting and feeding Capybara at the zoo or petting zoo, they should adhere to the principle of moderation to prevent Capybara from overeating. When Capybara does not want to interact, they should not force the interaction either. In addition, the public can also report and expose to relevant departments when they find that the environment in zoos, petting zoos or exhibition areas in shopping malls does not meet the standards for the breeding and exhibition of Capybara, to create a "public supervision" social atmosphere.

4.3 Media: Guide public opinion, promote responsible consumption and social governance

In the era of new media, the media agenda needs to strengthen cooperation with the public agenda, collect valuable information from the public agenda, and also play the role of a gatekeeper to purify the public agenda. [6]The breeding and consumption of capybaras, as a topic of public concern, the media should actively set relevant agendas, guide the discussion to shift from "cute consumption" to "responsible consumption", and through continuous agenda setting, make the voices in favor of animal welfare become the mainstream: On one hand, the media can set up special columns to systematically disseminate knowledge about the habits of capybaras, invite the full-time keepers of capybaras in the zoo to serve as "animal welfare communication officers", and explain in an easy-to-understand way the habits of capybaras, such as "capybaras need to live in groups" and "thermal regulation requirements", etc.; on the other hand, the media can expose the illegal breeding and random selling behind the rise of capybaras through investigation reports, and present the damage to the health of animals caused by illegal breeding through investigation reports, creating a public opinion atmosphere of "refusing improper breeding". For instance, according to a report by a CCTV News reporter, the conditions in many pet stores in Beijing that breed capybaras are not good. Some stores have only a small bathtub for the capybaras to take a bath, and some do not even have windows for sunlight exposure or ventilation.

4.4 Content producers and disseminators: Strengthening responsibility and innovation awareness

Creators should focus on the cultural connotations and educational value of the content, achieving a combination of entertainment and education. This can expand the cultural boundaries of the capybara symbol. For example, it can be linked with mental health issues, and set agendas such as "Learn to reconcile with stress like Capybara". This can give the symbol a deeper social value and avoid the homogenization of the content. Key opinion leaders and other communicators need to play a leading role by refusing to participate in the production and dissemination of vulgar and false content. For instance, the high-quality pet content creator "Tim Dudu" on Bilibili, by recording his real experience of bringing a capybara home, tells everyone that capybara also likes to chew things and is somewhat destructive. When raising it, not only a relatively high room temperature is required, but also it needs to defecate in a pool. "Tim Dudu's" videos integrate knowledge and science into nature, allowing the audience to understand this animal subconsciously while watching the videos.

4.5 Keeper: Standardized management and scientific guidance

The keeper is the direct manager of capybara and needs to balance "display requirements" and "animal welfare" through space design and rule formulation. Firstly, the keeper must create an environment that suits the natural habits of capybara, setting up activity spaces with vegetation coverage and rest facilities, and providing suitable water areas for its activities. Secondly, the keepers of zoos and pet-themed attractions should regularly conduct popular science education and guidance, posting contents such as "capybara's natural habits for popular science" and "Correct interaction guidelines" on online platforms to meet the audience's demand for pet knowledge. In addition, zoos and pet-themed attractions can set daily feeding amounts and interaction times for capybara based on its living habits to prevent capybara from getting indigestion due to eating too much food or developing stress behaviors due to excessive interaction.

4.6 Government and regulatory level: Establish a mechanism for guiding norms

Law and regulation form the bottom line of governance. On one hand, relevant departments need to improve relevant laws and regulations, supplement the detailed provisions of the "Wildlife Protection Law" and the "Animal Epidemic Prevention Law" for the "internet-famous cute pets" industry, clarify the breeding qualifications, interaction norms, transaction processes of capybara, and set penalty standards for illegal hunting, abuse, and disorderly commercialization; on the other hand, market supervision, internet information departments, etc. should jointly enforce the law to crack down on the illegal trading chain of capybara, and hold accountable the platforms and creators who violate the release of bad content, clearly define the ethical bottom line for the dissemination of online animal content; in addition, relevant departments can not only establish a classification certification system for cute pet museums, but also should conduct filing and review of animal interaction activities in cultural tourism projects, requiring the operators to disclose welfare guarantee measures such as the duration of animal activities and environmental compatibility to avoid excessive commercialization causing harm to animals.

5. Conclusion

The popularity of capybara on the internet was not accidental; it was the result of the emotional healing function of the cute symbol, the technological empowerment of users to "cloud-pet" them, and the social currency-driven dissemination. This phenomenon not only showcases the new characteristics of mass culture in the digital age, but also provides new possibilities for the development of the pet economy. However, it is not to be ignored that the popularity of capybara has also brought some negative impacts: the irrational pet-keeping craze has damaged the living environment of capybara, and the content production driven by the pursuit of traffic has marginalized animal welfare. These dilemmas remind us that while enjoying the emotional comfort and economic benefits brought by the pet symbol, we must adhere to the bottom line of animal protection. In the future, measures such as strengthening content regulations through self-media platforms, enhancing media literacy among the public, promoting responsible consumption by the media, ensuring ethical bottom lines by content creators, fulfilling animal welfare protection responsibilities by keepers, and improving relevant laws and regulations by legislative bodies are needed to improve the situation. Only through the collaborative efforts of multiple entities can we achieve a positive interaction between the pet economy and animal protection, and ensure that animals like capybara receive true respect and kindness in human society.

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