

Researchers reveal pivotal role of online communities in helping those affected by pet theft

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Graphical abstract. Credit: *Geoforum* (2024). DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104013

Social media and online communities can play a crucial role for owners

searching for their stolen pets, researchers have revealed, both in physically tracking them down and as a source of comfort after their loss.

The research team, including Keele's Dr. Daniel Allen, were investigating the use of social media by victims of pet theft to learn more about how they make use of it in searching for their missing companions.

The findings, published in the journal [Geoforum](#), paint a complex picture of the role social media plays for those searching for stolen pets, with the researchers hoping the findings will provide a useful guide to victims of pet theft and agencies that help them.

The research was conducted through a combination of interviewing owners whose pets had been stolen, and analyzing [social media posts](#) made by individuals and communities searching for lost and stolen pets.

The results showed that a number of common tactics were employed, highlighting the value and function of these [online communities](#).

As well as attempting to make the posts go viral and make the stolen pets "too hot to handle," another common theme that emerged was the owners' desires to make their pets "present" in a [virtual space](#).

They did this using highly emotional language to talk about the difficulty of losing their pet, and using images and descriptions of the pets' charismatic qualities and characteristics to make their pets present in the online space even though they are physically absent.

Dr. Daniel Allen, Lecturer in Human Geography at Keele University, said, "When pets are lost or stolen, official help from the police is minimal. This places the onus on families to put their time and energy

into searching. Many consider sharing posts on social media (X and Facebook) as a 'lifeline,' where online searching and online community building grows around a 'shared sense of hope for reunification.'

"Although 'going viral by design is unlikely,' we found there are various ways lost and stolen pets can be made more visible online to help improve the chance of being reunited. We hope the practical insights in this paper will be helpful for anyone searching for missing and stolen pets in the future."

More information: Jamie Arathoon et al, "Too hot to handle": Making lost and stolen pets present in virtual space, *Geoforum* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104013](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104013)

Provided by Keele University

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