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Ethnography Report

Name of Group: Heartland's Mini Doodle Owners
https://www.facebook.com/groups/1067821890018875/

Social Media Platform: Facebook

Type of Group: Closed Group

# of Members: 577

Activity: 5-10 posts per week on average

Heartland Doodle owners is a closed Facebook group intended for owners of dogs from

Heartlands Mini Doodles and Goldendoodles; a breeder in Yorktown, Indiana. It was created by

an owner in 2017 as a place to post pictures, ask questions, share stories, and invite others you

may know who have a puppy from the same breeder. This is a great benefit since there is no

standard method for owners of dogs from the same breeder to stay connected. This is unfortunate

since owners from the same breeder may have great advice and insights to share due to the

shared littermates likely possessing similar characteristics and personalities. In an age of

connectivity, it's no surprise that this page exists and it's likely that there are many other pages

like it from other breeders. A group such as this one offers social support in a way that no other

avenue would be able to provide because it brings owners together in a space where questions

and content can be instantly shared and seen.

This page gained 11 members since my observations began on July 6. These members are

approved by one of the three administrators on the page, one of which is Bart, the breeder

himself. Although he is not active on the page, it is appropriate for him to be an admin on a

group which pertains to his business. The original creator of the page brought on an additional administrator to help her review content and approve members which was becoming a time-consuming task for her.

Unlike posting on your own Facebook feed to an **imagined audience** this allows for users to target those who have an interest in dogs from this particular breeder and are happy to start conversations and give advice. Eden Litt and Eszter Hargittai describe the imagined audience as a means of conceptualizing who we are communicating with in the vast audience that is our social media network. Everyone on this page loves to share information about their dogs‒how they made it through potty training, what foods worked best for them and how they overcame the fear of sending their puppy to be spayed or neutered. These types of posts are best suited for the group rather than posting it to everyone in your social media network with the imagined intention of the post only being seen or being of interest to like-minded dog owners.

The main purpose of this group like most groups is to connect with others who have shared interests. Groups tend to receive extra attention from Facebook users since the users in the group all have something in common which establishes early trust and therefore are likely to engage with you.

Sharing to this group is typically triggered by something positive and interesting versus negative or controversial. There is usually not more than 10 comments and replies on a post, likely because there is nothing controversial that would cause conversations within replies and comments to continue. Although there are posts which I have personally found to be controversial such as members who suggest harmful old-school training methods, I do not

respond in order to avoid conflict which may lead to my removal from the page by the page administrator.

Unlike the rest of the social-media world, groups are controlled by administrators who have the ability to censor and remove content as well as members. This is beneficial to the integrity and trustworthiness of the page. If a member suddenly posts something irrelevant or is posting obscenities it is in the best interest of the group to have the individual's membership and content removed. If this were not so, the page has a greater potential to lose focus and the structure of the group would crumble.

In the article Moral Outrage in the Digital Age by M. J Crockett, the author explains how before the internet, gossip was used as a way to learn who could be trusted in a local network and therefore functioned as a way to reinforce trust and cooperation. Facebook groups such as this one shares the same incentives that pre-internet groups and gossipers shared. What social media did for these dog owners was create a gathering place that makes it easy to connect with other Heartland doodle owners and therefore making it much easier to figure out who to trust.

The members of this group can be broken into three categories: soon-to-be owners, owners with a puppy, owners with a mature dog. Soon-to-be owners are typically visiting the page to see photos of adult dogs in order to have a better idea of what their puppy may eventually look like. They also seek advice from others as they prepare to bring home their puppy. This is especially useful for first-time dog owners. Many of these individuals are young women, both single and not single, are likely to be preparing to own the first dog they can call their own. These soon-to-be owners between the age of 25-35 are most likely to be

highly-engaged on the page once they become a member with a puppy due to their heightened excitement and emotions which ultimately leads to sharing their experience with the group.

An owner with a puppy is often posting photos, giving updates about their puppy and asking questions about how to potty train, stop puppy biting, which food to buy and often seeks advice on grooming techniques. These individuals are highly engaged for two reasons; the users are excited and the reaction to the excitement is to post on the group, and the users need support to help them through puppyhood.

The content on this page has a predictable expiration date, or in other words I can predict when the comments and reactions are going to stop.The pattern consists of a post, some reactions, some comments, and the original poster replying or thanking those individuals for answering their question or appreciating their photo. That is where it ends, likely to never be interacted with again even on posts with the highest levels of engagement such as as highly-cute photos or advice-seeking questions.

Content shared from these puppy owners of cute photos and questions are also the posts receiving the highest levels of engagement from the members with mature dogs. These mature dog owners have the most advice to give since they've been through the obstacles the new-puppy owners are facing. They will share links to products they use on Amazon, and their personal success stories of training their dog and methods they used which may help the new-puppy owner. The pattern of mature dog owners helping new dog owners is what gives this page a sense of community and support which reinforces the purpose of this group.

Although advice-seeking questions and cute photos both receive strong engagement in the group, questions often receive more comments and less reactions while cute photos receive more reactions and less comments. When it comes to the cute photos there is less of a trigger to comment and start a conversation. The likes, loves and other reactions are sufficient in delivering an acknowledgement to the user who posted the content.

This pattern is similar to the study Sonya Song mentions in her article Sharing fast and slow: The psychological connection between how we think and how we spread news on social media. In her study she discovered questions were correlated with a greater number of comments versus likes and shares. The author also points out that too many questions or dumb questions can lead to the opposite effect and receive less engagement. For instance, if a question about potty training came up in the group once a week, the questions are going to be less likely to be answered over time because the richness of the post would be lost.

Those with mature dogs are rarely posting content to this page. A reasonable explanation for this can be made based on the idea that **posting to social media is often an emotional reaction**. In chapter 22 of Nitins, Tanya & Burgess, Jean (2014) Twitter, Brands, and User Engagement, mentions how negative reactions to a brand lead to an increase in brand mentions as a result of negative emotional reactions during a crisis. Although the content on this page is not negative or controversial, it is the result of positive and exciting reactions form puppy owners. Those with puppies two years of age or younger are likely the most emotionally excited about their dog and therefore are more prone to posting.

Those who own dogs three years and older may not feel the same urge to post because their dog is no longer surprising them or exciting them the way they did when the relationship between dog and owner began. The owners with mature dogs are simply enjoying their pet

The difference in engagement between questions posed to the group and cute photos can be explained through Sonya Song's article on the book Sharing fast and slow: The psychological connection between how we think and how we spread news on social media by Daniel Kahneman. In the research mentioned in the article, Song states that there are two systems in play when we take in information. **System 2** is only in play when there is deeper thinking effort needed to interpret a situation. **System 1** handles the basic and more instinctual acts which come naturally to us and often without being conscious of it. It is an automatic response that we have because it is part of who we are and how we function.

System 1 is similar to how the majority of social media users interact with content. Liking or reacting to a comment involves System 1. Most often we do not involve System 2 when sharing a reaction to a cute photo of a puppy; however, we may call System 2 in if someone asks for help because they are out of methods to keep their dog from having accidents in the house.

Other examples of times System 2 will be called in is when owners share health concerns about their dog. Most often these individuals understand that a vet visit is needed, and if they don't people are sure to let them know that no matter what the issue may be. There are also those who decide to give medical advice even though they do not truly have the expertise. Regardless of the response, posts of this nature often take more critical thinking.

Often times when I respond to a post about training difficulties, I check the other comments to see if anyone has suggested what I am about to suggest, and to ensure that it's not something they've tried already. After analyzing the situation I will formulate a helpful response to the member. This style of engagement is effortful and requires my conscious attention.

System 1 is most often in play when browsing through social media. It does not take effort to like a post. It may take a small amount of additional effort to pick out a specific reaction but not enough to really constitute true conscious effort. There are slightly more posts on the group that are System 1 posts because they simply contain a photo of the dog with a sentence or two of accompanying copy which typically consists of how great and special the dog is. These posts receive a high level of likes and other reactions such as the heart symbol, but receive little to no comments. There is simply no reason to engage System 2 in this type of post since it did not cause cognitive strain on users.

I believe that a Facebook group is a great way to gain insights about an audience. Facebook groups are an extension of human culture. Groups have always existed as a means to share, learn about others, network and enjoy the company of like-minded individuals. A Facebook group is tailored to a users specific interest and therefore is also likely to receive more intentional and slow-thinking engagement which requires more System 2 thinking.

Knowing the significance groups play on social media as well as the division of labor between Systems 1 and 2 is important both professionally and academically. If I were to develop a research topic, Facebook groups would be a great place to gather observations and data, especially considering the richness of content and engagement due to its highly tailored nature. If

I had a very specific topic I was researching and a Facebook group existed that pertains directly to my topic, the group would be an extremely valuable place to gather information.

These findings are also very valuable to me professionally. As the Assistant Director of the Kalamazoo College Fund, I ensure the College's solicitations are reaching the right people. Sometimes this is done through general mail solicitations which are sent to virtually all alumni, while other times the messages are highly tailored and posted to Facebook groups of different class years. Not all class years have Facebook groups but the ones that do often respond much better than those who do not have a group. This research has helped me understand the value of these groups and encourages me to spend more time catering to the members.

Another aspect of this discovery that helps me professionally is how I write content. By thinking of these two systems, I can better understand what the outcome of a solicitation is going to be. For example, if I am writing a Facebook post to the Kalamazoo College Facebook page to encourage giving I typically try to keep it brief and to the point. What I may want to consider now is causing some cognitive strain to encourage the slow thinking process. I could do this by sharing unique stories from alumni or sharing surprising facts about the annual fund. If I simply create content that is easily digestible and requires no slow thinking but instead involves effortless engagement, I will likely see many likes and not many donations. This does not help me reach my goal and unfortunately is often the case with our social media presence.

Personally I see a greater deal of value in Facebook groups and their ability to help others than I did before this project. I realized that a group I joined simply to see photos of my dog's littermates turned into a social-support group where I often find myself offering help through

advice and sharing my personal experiences. I feel as if I am needed because of the success I've had in training and raising my own dog. I also am more aware of how valuable the simple connection with others who have dogs from the same breeder is. Knowing I can always go to these people for input if I have a dog-related problem gives me a sense of comfort and peace of mind.

The integrity and trustworthiness of this group is strong. Members of this group continue to grow at a steady rate. There is a structure that involves soon-to-be owners, puppy owners and mature-dog owners who together create rich content and engagement. Content that contains questions often receives more comments as a result of cognitive strain and the engagement of System 2 while photos receive mostly comments and the engagement of
System 1.

As people continue to adopt puppies and join this group we will continue to see a steady stream of cute puppy photos and questions due to heightened excitement and emotional reactions of new puppy owners. This group is serving its purpose and I hope it continues to have good administrators to keep it on topic so it can continue to be a social support group for its members for many years to come.

References

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