"I. Am. Crying. Of. The. Level. Of. Cuteness":
Representations and Reactions to the Illegal Slow Loris Pet Trade on Social Media

by

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Abstract

Over the past several years, slow lorises, a group of endangered primate species found in Southeast Asia, have fallen victims to the illegal primate pet trade. Slow lorises do not fare well in captivity, as they are nocturnal animals, have a specialized diet, and are venomous. Yet, these small primates have appealing physical appearances which propels their popularity in the pet trade and on social media. Captive and pet slow lorises have been featured in viral videos across media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. This research explores the online representations and reactions to the illegal slow loris pet trade, specifically on Facebook. This paper reveals the online perceptions of Facebook users through analysis of their comments on conservation videos, which call for the end of the trade, and viral videos that depict captive pet slow lorises. This project draws on digital anthropology, primatology, and provides an anthropological perspective on conservation. This research seeks to produce comprehensive and meaningful results towards understanding individuals' online perceptions about the slow loris illegal pet trade, conservation and sustainability efforts. This research contributes to the significant gap in anthropological knowledge on this topic and develops our understanding of the ways in which social media can impact the conservation of animals.

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Introduction

Slow lorises (genus *Nycticebus*) are nocturnal primate species who, despite their legal protection, are amid the most threatened primates in Southeast Asia (Thach *et al*., 2018). All nine recognized species of slow lorises are listed on the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flaura (CITES) Appendix I, meaning slow lorises are threatened with extinction (Nekaris & Nijman, 2016). There are many factors contributing to the critical endangerment and potential extinction of slow lorises, such as vast habitat loss (Nekaris & Nijman, 2016), the animals' value for practitioners of "traditional" medicine, and local folklore (Thach *et al*., 2018, Nekaris & Starr, 2015), and notably, their "cuteness" (Nekaris, Campbell, Coggins, Rode, & Nijman 2013).

These animals have very large eyes, resultant of their nocturnal nature, soft fur, and small bodies, all of which contribute the slow lorises' appealing physical appearance. The appeal of slow lorises' has caused the animals to become particularly well-known on social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013). In fact, the viral videos and pictures of slow lorises shared on social media have become a contributor to the animals' popularity among wildlife traders, resulting in slow lorises falling victim to the illegal primate pet trade (Nekaris *et al.,* 2013, Kitson & Nekaris, 2017). Further complicating conservation efforts, slow lorises are slow-reproducing primates and the ability to recover their numbers in the wild is limited. Thus, the internet-fuelled trade is an immediate threat to the conservation and well-being of wild slow lorises.

Anna Nekaris, a primatologist at Oxford Brooks University and leading expert on slow lorises and the illegal primate pet trade, has argued that internet and social media platforms have become "important forum[s] for exchange of public information" and the consumption of content

(Nekaris *et al.*, 2013, p.2). Therefore, to comprehend the presence and impact of slow lorises within the illegal pet trade, one must first study the viral videos on Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram which are fuelling the trade. Facebook was selected for this study as it is the most popular social media platform, often used by individuals to share and view pictures, photo albums, posts, and popular online videos (Di Minin, Tenkanen, & Toivonen 2015).

Therefore, my research asks two key questions.

1. How do Facebook users react via their comments to the ways in which the slow loris pet trade is represented in conservation videos and videos featuring captive pet slow lorises?

2. What could the common discourses in the comment sections reveal of the conservation efforts done by primatologists, conservation biologists, and animal rights advocates on Facebook?

Considering the number of references to the illegal nature of the slow loris pet trade and the "cuteness" of the animals, it is clear that there are complex feelings and viewpoints associated with conservation and the welfare of the animals in Facebook comment sections on slow loris videos. Thus, I argue the efforts to educate Facebook users on the harm of the trade done by conservation groups and activists through initiatives, such as the Little Fireface Project headed by Anna Nekaris and the International Animal Rescue's "Tickling is Torture" campaign, have been somewhat successful. However, considering the high number of comments referring to the animal as "cute" and commenters tagging other individuals, I further argue that unless the commenters had prior knowledge on the illegal slow loris pet trade, Facebook users' online perceptions are shaped by the video and the representation of the illegal slow loris trade that they view and consume.

In this paper, I will draw on primatology (Nekaris *et al.,* 2013, Nekaris & Starr 2015, Nekaris & Nijman 2016), digital anthropology (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017, Miller & Horst 2012), and employ an anthropological perspective to conservation (Hausmann, Slotow, Fraser, & Di Minin 2017, Skibins, Powell, & Hallo 2013) as to study the online perceptions of Facebook users by examining comments made on videos concerning the illegal slow loris pet trade. As a novel research approach to understanding individuals' perceptions of the primate pet trade, the comment section of Facebook videos has rarely been considered by anthropologists and primatologists. Yet to me, the interrelatedness between digital anthropology, primatology, and the anthropology of conservation is essential to fully comprehend conservation issues. Facebook has become a site in which public debate on issues of conservation, pet ownership, illegality, and animal abuse is occurring. Therefore, the need for studies into the trends within Facebook comment sections of videos showcasing captive and abused animals, specifically slow lories, is pressing and relevant. By employing an interdisciplinary and integrated approach, this research project fills the significant void in anthropological understanding of Facebook comments on slow loris videos and the implications these comments may have on the success of online conservation efforts. Additionally, the research project proposes and advances new concepts for the fields of digital anthropology and primatology, ideas that can be easily applied within the online terrain and public discourse that is entangled with conservation.

What Are Slow Lorises?

Slow lorises belong to the taxonomic family *Lorisidae* and the genus *Nycticebus*. Eight species have been described and found within Southeast Asia and neighbouring regions, ranging from North India and China to the southern Philippines and Indonesia. All slow loris species have round faces, slender snouts, and large eyes, a result of their nocturnal nature, while the colour

patterns on their fur can vary between the multiple species (Nekaris & Nijman 2007). Slow loris species' adult size may also vary, with some slow lorises weighing 265 grams, as seen with the Philippine slow loris species (*Nycticebus menagensis*) to 2,100 grams, seen in the Bengal slow loris (*N. bengalensis*). The natural habitat of slow loris species varies from tropical rainforest, to Acacia scrub, swamps, and montane forests (Nekaris 2014). Like most primate species, the natural habitats of slow lorises are imperiled as their territories continue to diminish and shrink in size, a result of deforestation and human development (Nijman & Nekaris 2016). Despite the threats from habitat loss, it is the illegal primate pet trade which is devastating the wild slow loris populations and causing the greatest threat of endangerment for the species (Nijman & Nekaris 2016, Nekaris *et al*., 2013, Nekaris & Starr 2015).

Slow lorises are difficult to care for, highly vulnerable to stressors and poorly suited to captivity. Even with specialised knowledge of the species and their ecology, mortality rates are high when slow lorises are in captivity (Nekaris *et al*., 2013, Nekaris 2014). The stressors they experience in captivity can be linked to their nocturnal nature. Many viral videos circulating social media and the internet feature pet slow lorises in brightly lit rooms, which causes great discomfort and stress to the nocturnal animals. Another stressor is linked to the slow lorises' specific diet. These animals are referred to as tree gum gouging specialists, meaning their lower front teeth are shaped into a toothcomb, which allows them to produce holes in trees so that tree gum, their preferred food, will leak and be available for consumption. Slow loris species also feed on nectar and, in some cases, fruits (Nekaris and Starr 2015).

Their specialized toothcomb is also linked the unique feature of slow lorises, their venomous nature. When a slow loris feels threatened, oil is secreted by their brachial gland, which is found in the animal's elbow. The loris then raise their arms, lick the oil and mix it with saliva,

which creates a venomous bite. The slow loris will use their strong toothcomb to inject the venom into their predators (Nekaris 2014, Nekaris & Nijman 2016, Nekaris & Starr 2015). In popular online videos where pet slow lorises are being tickled, the animals raise their arms, a clear depiction of the animals' defense tactic. When it is tickled, the slow loris feels threatened and attempts to activate the brachial gland in its elbow as to create a venomous bite to deter the predator (Nekaris & Starr 2015). Clearly, slow lorises are not suited to be household pets, yet their popularity within the illegal primate pet trade continues.

Slow lorises are easy targets for wildlife traders because of the animals' slow locomotion (Nekaris & Nijman 2016). Once captured in the illegal primate pet trade, the teeth of the slow loris is removed, often without anesthetic, as to make the animal safe for handling by humans. As the only venomous primate species, a slow loris bite can cause great discomfort and harm to humans. Many of these slow lorises die from the teeth removal due to infection, dental abscess, or pneumonia (Nekaris & Nijman 2016, Nekaris & Starr 2015, Nekaris *et al.,* 2013). For the slow lorises that survive the procedure, the loss of their specialized toothcomb has significant damage to their wellbeing and survival. Without their toothcomb, slow lorises are no longer able to eat their favoured food (gum) or partake in important social behaviors, such as grooming (Nekaris & Nijman 2016). Therefore, any captive slow loris whose teeth and toothcomb have been removed are unlikely to survive if released to the wild (Nekaris & Nijman 2016). The study by Nekaris (2013) linked the popularity of slow lorises within the illegal pet trade with the internet and social media. The videos of pet slow lorises circulating the internet are fuel to the illegal trade, thus furthering the endangerment and abuse of the animals (Nekaris *et. al* 2013, Nekaris & Nijman, 2016). The study of the perceptions held by social media users when they encounter videos of slow

lorises is essential in understanding the impetus for the trade, which is why this study examined the comments left on pet slow loris related Facebook videos.

Methods: Online Ethnoprimatology

The methods used in this project draws largely on the work done by primatologist and professor Anna Nekaris (2013) in her study on the comments left on a YouTube video of a captive slow loris. Nekaris and her team downloaded all 12,411 comments and placed them into categories based on their content. Additionally, Nekaris evaluated the comments with a temporal lens as to see if the types of comments changed from month to month (Nekaris *et al.* 2013). The methods and comment categories presented by Nekaris *et al.* (2013) were adapted to specifically address the research questions of this project. Notably, in my study, the comments left on ten Facebook videos were studied, and limited to the top 30 comments, whereas every comment of one YouTube video was the foci of Nekaris' study.

My methods additionally considered ethnoprimatology, a theoretical approach which draws on ethnographic and primatological research and theoretical methods (Malone *et al*., 2014, Robinson & Remis 2018). This emerging methodology approaches the study of non-human primates by encompassing social, economic, and political elements with traditional primatology, which solely focuses on natural environments and primate populations (Robinson & Remis 2018). In short, ethnoprimatology allows researchers to study the ways in which humans and primates "respond to one another, rather than focusing on one side of the interaction" (Palmer & Malone 2018). This blurring of disciplinary boundaries contributes to understandings of the human-primate interfaces and the ways in which relationships form beyond the human-nature boundary (Malone *et al.,* 2014).

Since my research focused on humans and primates and the ways in which they interact via social media, thus rejecting the idea that humans are separate from natural ecosystems and accepting that we have culturally and ecologically interconnections with primates, it certainly fell within the realm of ethnoprimatology (Fuentes 2012, Fuentes, Cortez, & Peterson 2016). Most enthnoprimatological work pertains to the physical world, with fieldwork focusing on in-person primate and human interactions, such as Andrew Haloran's study of human disturbances at the Tonkili chimpanzee site (2016). Additionally, Joshua J. Smith's study of primates and people visiting the zoos in which the animals are kept (2016) provides another example of the focus ethnoprimatology places on in-person primate and human interactions. Ethnoprimatological studies have yet to explore the digital interactions between human internet/social media users and primates via digital videos. Therefore, this paper develops what might be termed online ethnoprimatology, as it considered the social media users and their online perceptions of slow lorises, the representations of the animals on Facebook, and the ways in which these impact the primate populations and the illegal slow loris pet trade. By employing ethnoprimatology and exploring online perceptions and discourses, my research provided a more complex view of the ways in which humans and primates are entangled in multispecies arrangements (Kirksey & Helmreich 2010), thus illuminating how Facebook and online perceptions affect both humans and primates.

Video Selection Methods

For my research, I analyzed ten videos containing slow lorises, which had been uploaded to Facebook between 2013 and 3019, as well as the top 30 "most relevant" comments found on each video. Given the time and resource constraints, a smaller sample size than that of Nekaris *et al.* (2013) was used in the study. To find these videos, I used the search term "Slow Loris", scanned

the results to ensure the videos were trade related, and selected videos from the search results for further analysis. I selectively sampled five videos which depicted a captive pet slow loris, thus depicting the illegal slow loris pet trade, and five conservation-oriented videos, which called for the end of the trade and condemned the act of keeping a slow loris as a pet. Three videos posted by separate Facebook pages were titled "Slow Loris eating a rice ball" and featured the very same pet slow loris. Evidently, these are, in fact, one video which had been posted by three entirely different Facebook pages. The original creator and uploader of this video is unknown. Additionally, the Facebook page Animals Lebanon posted the same video as the International Animal Rescue. Though, Animals Lebanon credited the International Animal Rescue Facebook page, as it is their original "Tickling is Torture" video. See Figure 1 for a detailed list of the Facebook videos used in this project.

It is important to note that "Reactions" to videos, posts, and images, i.e. the likes, sad reacts, angry reacts, heart reacts, surprised reacts, and laughing reacts, were added to Facebook in February 2016 (Krug 2016). Older Facebook posts did not have this feature when they were initially posted, which is why this data was not available for certain videos in this study, notably the two videos posted in 2013. Although certain videos used in this study were posted prior to the implementation of "Facebook Reactions", the reaction feature became available in 2016 nonetheless. Therefore, Facebook users who viewed the older videos after the 2016 implementation had access to the six types of reactions, if they chose to use them.

Video Title	Facebook Page	Type of Video	Date Uploaded	Number of Reactions	Number of Comments
Slow Loris eating Banana	Best Vines Online	Pet slow loris	November 23rd, 2014	12,000 👍 likes	4,600
Slow Loris	Extraordinary Pets Shop	Pet slow loris	August 22nd, 2016	1,000 likes 👍 27 ☹ sad 11 😠 angry 211 ❤ heart	250

				12 ☺ surprised 6 😆laughing	
Slow Loris eating a rice ball	Spoon University	Pet slow Loris	October 16th, 2015	136 👍likes 1 😠angry	66
Slow Loris Eating a rice ball	Cute Vines	Pet slow loris	January 16th, 2014	691 👍likes 2 ❤ heart	195
Slow Loris Eating A Rice Ball	Traveling	Pet slow loris	November 23rd, 2013	338 likes 👍	58
Slow Loris Pet Trade	Revelist	Trade related/ conservation video	April 12th, 2016	957 👍likes 127 ☹ sad 93 😠angry 11 ❤ heart 5 ☺ surprised 1 😆laughing	128
Slow Lorises Went Viral and it Almost Killed Them	The Dodo	Trade related/ conservation video	February 14th, 2016	12,000 👍likes 77 ☹ sad 12 😠angry 66 ❤ heart 1 ☺ surprised 1 😆laughing	477
Tickling a slow loris is actually torture	In the NOW	Trade related/ conservation video	Over 1 year ago in 2018 (no exact date given)	302 👍likes 255 ☹ sad 322 😠angry 7 ❤ heart 7 ☺ surprised 3 😆laughing	66
Tickling is Torture	International Animal Rescue	Trade related/ conservation video	April 20th, 2018	486 👍likes 637 ☹ sad 399 😠angry 27 ❤ heart 6 ☺ surprised	86
The truth behind the slow loris pet trade and 'cute' tickling	Animals Lebanon	Trade related/ conservation video	March 28th, 2018	345 👍likes 148 ☹ sad 69 😠angry 20 ❤ heart 2 ☺ surprised	67

Figure 1. The Facebook videos used in the study.

Comment Selection Methods

As for the selection of the comments studied, the top 30 "Most Relevant" comments on the videos were selected and transcribed verbatim within an excel program for later analysis. Currently on Facebook videos, the comment section has three options; "Most Relevant", "New Comments", and "All Comments". The default setting is "Most Relevant", which means that comments written by the user's Facebook friends and those with the most views, replies, and reactions will appear at the top of the comment section. To avoid the Facebook algorithm influencing the comment section based on my profile and friends' list, I ensured that I was logged out of my personal Facebook account in order to evaluate the "Most Relevant" comments from a neutral page. Therefore, considering the Facebook algorithm, the 30 most relevant comments found on these videos were likely representative of the comments the average Facebook user would encounter if they would read through the comment section. I additionally recorded the age of the comment, the number of likes it received, and whether there any replies to the comment as to have a complete database.

Similar to Nekaris (2013), I placed the comments into categories based on their content. First, there was the category of comments which referenced the animal as cute, adorable, and/or funny, and secondly, the type of comment where a Facebook user tagged another user by commenting their name. Further comments were categorized when a user referenced the trade, the threatened status of the species, or the illegal nature of having captive slow lorises. Comments which referenced the animal's behavior/what the loris was doing was categorized as a distinct subset. My fifth category contained comments wherein Facebook users expressed a desire to purchase a slow loris as a pet, such as "where can I get one" or "I want one". Comments which referenced factual information (the animal's ecology, their toxic bite, danger) were placed into the sixth category. Any rebuttal comments which replied to factual/trade related comments were placed into a separate category. The eighth comment category recorded jokes/foolishness and the

ninth comment category included foreign language comments that could not be translated properly with the resources I had available to me (i.e. Google Translate). The final comment category was labelled as "miscellaneous" and was for comments which did not fit into the aforementioned categories. Importantly, a comment may have been scored in more than one comment category considering their content (e.g. it's adorable, where can I buy one?).

<div align="center">Analysis and Interpretation Methods</div>

The analysis and interpretation of the comments collected in my study built on the work of digital anthropologists (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017, Miller & Horst 2012), and provided an anthropological perspective on conservation efforts and terminology (Hausmann *et al.,* 2017, Skibins *et al*., 2013) The analysis of the comments section of my research considered the work by Jóhanna Björk Sveinbjörnsdóttir, an Icelandic digital anthropologist, who launched a study into the Facebook comment section on articles written by an East Greenland news source. Sveinbjörnsdóttir found that the comment sections on these articles became a space for public debate, thus holding importance for anthropologists as these debates may represent "changing cultural traditions within the media landscape" (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017, p. 26-27). Adapting the ideas presented by Sveinbjörnsdóttir, I considered the online Facebook comment sections as insights into individuals' beliefs, online debates and discourses, and public perceptions.

My analysis also considered the work of digital anthropologists Daniel Miller and Heather A. Horst, who stated that the digital world is no more or less material than the surrounding world (Miller and Horst 2012, p. 3-4). By considering the online representations and reactions to the slow loris trade on Facebook as equally material and "real" as the world surrounding us, my argument affirmed that these comments should be considered reflections of culture and individuals' opinions. Thus, the digital platform on which social media users express their public perceptions,

and the comments themselves, were analyzed as culturally significant data. Further, ideas presented by Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry support the approach of Miller and Horst. These authors explored the perceived binary between the physical "real" world and the digital world. They argued that this perceived dichotomy is a falsehood which ignores the entanglement the digital world has with our "real" world. They advocate that this separation is "fundamentally misleading in almost the same manner as a distinction between the 'digital' and the 'non-digital' is untenable…such a dichotomy completely fails to acknowledge how the online is, indeed, real" (Frömming *et al.,* 2017, p.13).

Resonating with these concepts presented in digital anthropology, the interpretation of my data set considered entanglement between the digital world and our physical one and the effect this produces on slow loris populations. This idea had been briefly explored by Nekaris (2013), as she wrote; "images presented by media can have damaging effects if viewers do not know the context", since the circulation of popular slow loris pet videos can encourage and further popularize the trade (Nekaris *et al.,* 2013, p.2). While analyzing my data, I employed these concepts by interpreting the comment sections and slow loris videos as entangled with the surrounding "real" world, thus having the potential to create negative and positive consequences for slow lorises. This strategy provided a more holistic and accurate lens through which the data was analyzed.

Concepts

Building on the ideas of digital anthropologists (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017, Frömming *et al.,* 2017, Miller and Horst 2012) I developed and utilized the valued social media comments concept. This concept was essential to my analysis as it considers the value and meaning of comments left on videos, images, and posts on Facebook and other social media platforms. This concept asserts

that these comments are reflections of the reactions and perceptions of social media users. By mobilizing this concept for my Facebook comments analysis, the study of the slow loris video comments uncovered the influence that conservation groups have on those who view the footage. Finally, by utilizing this concept and studying the Facebook comments left on the videos, the internet-fuelled motivation for the illegal slow loris pet trade, namely social media users viewing and desiring the animals' "cuteness", was revealed.

This research also employed anthropological perspectives to build on the notion of charismatic megafauna (CMF), which is used by conservation biologists, zoologists, economists, and more (Sibkins *et al.,* 2013, Feldhamer *et al*., 2010, Hausmann *et al.,* 2017). CMFs are large animals, such as apes, big cats, bears, whales and elephants; animals that have become cornerstones of "the wildlife tourism industry and a rallying point for conservationists" (Skibins *et al*., 2013, p. 960). These recognizable animals, and the cultural understandings and empathy associated with them, are utilized by marketing campaigns, evident with breweries advertising (Feldhamer *et al.,* 2010), and, notably, in the ecotourism industry (Hausmann *et al.,* 2017). Importantly, the animals and their *charismatic* personalities are argued to influence wildlife tourists towards caring for the wellbeing of the animals, "facilitate a connection to nature", and encourage the visitor to support conservations issues (Skibins et al., 2013, p. 960). My research additionally considers the theory presented by Konrad Lorenz, who stated that humans are more likely to feel affection for animals with juvenile features, such as large eyes and bulging craniums (Lorenz 1970, Gould 2008).

Slow lorises possess the features Lorenz described as they are nocturnal animals with large eyes, slender noses, and round faces (Nekaris & Nijman 2007). Therefore, slow lorises are considered by many as visually appealing, or cute, animals. The "cuteness" of these small animals

has been a leading reason for their popularity in the illegal primate pet trade and the circulation of videos featuring captive slow lorises (Nekaris 2013). Thus, by utilizing and building on the theories presented by Lorenz as well as the charismatic megafauna concept, I developed and employed the concept of charismatic microfauna (CMIF). Charismatic microfauna are small animals, such as slow lorises, which produce a connection to nature among wildlife tourists and those who view the animal, thus encouraging conservation through their cute appearance and "charismatic" personalities, analogous to charismatic megafauna. In short, my data analysis considered whether the charisma and the "cuteness" of the slow lorises influence those viewing conservation videos and the Facebook users whose comments call for wellbeing of the animals and the end of the trade.

Results

I analyzed 300 comments in this research project and placed them into ten categories based on the content of the text. Comments that were applicable to more than one category were scored individually into each category, bringing the number of scores to 361. Figure 2 includes examples of the types of comments in each of the ten comment categories and the results of the scoring process. Across the ten videos, the three most common types of comments referenced the illegal slow loris pet trade and the threatened status of the animals (n=118, 32.7%), a Facebook user tagging another individual (n=64, 17.7%), and commenters referring to the animal as cute, adorable, and/or funny (n=43, 11.9%). The comment category with the least number of scores were comments on the animal's behaviour and what the slow loris was doing (n=2, 0.6%).

Comment Category	Example	Number
1. Cute, adorable, funny	"I. Am. Crying. Of. The. Level. Of. Cuteness"	43 (11.9%)
2. A user tagging someone else	"@Name omggg"	64 (17.7%)

3. Reference to trade, illegal, threatened	"Poor thing! So many die from the stress of being caught and transported to be sold as pets! Horrible!"	118 (32.7%)
4. Comment on behaviour, what the loris is doing	"Awwww. He looks a little scares. Like "wtf is this camera for?""	2 (0.6%)
5. "Where can I get one"/"I want one"	"I want one of these"	15 (4.2%)
6. Reference to factual information (ecology, toxin, danger)	"It has a poison elbow"	31 (8.6%)
7. Rebuttal to factual/trade related comment	"They have the lights turned down for his eyes, he is a nocturnal animal, and they are feeding him the right food the need a special diet to survive. Then he must be OK."	14 (3.9%)
8. Joke/Foolishness	"I had to punch a wall to feel manly again…"	15 (4.2%)
9. Foreign language (could not translate)	"Aaa duša!!!"	21 (5.8%)
10. Miscellaneous	"Anyone who tortures an animal is the son of a prostitute"	38 (10.5%)

Figure 2. Examples of comments and the results of the study.

When the analysis solely focused on conversation-related videos, different weightings of the comment categories occurred. Unsurprisingly, on conservation videos, the most frequent comment category was Facebook users referencing to the illegal slow loris pet trade (n=80). Interestingly, this frequent type of comment was discernably prevalent, accounting for 48.8% of all comments left on these Facebook videos (figure 3). The second most frequent type of comment was those categorized as miscellaneous (n= 26, 15.8%). Interestingly, the comment sections on conservation related videos often included comments which did not fit into the pre-established comment categories. For example, the comment "This is a result of capitalism, where everything is sought to be turned into a business… even if its wrong" expressed anger towards the trade, yet the content of the text did not fit into any of the comment categories. Thus, I scored it as

miscellaneous. The third most frequent comment category on conservation videos was foreign language, wherein I could not translate the comment with the limited resources I had available to me, mainly Google Translate (n=16, 9.8%). With Facebook averaging 2.32 billion monthly users as of December 2018, it was unsurprising that I could not translate a number of comments on these popular videos ("Facebook Newsroom" 2018).

The comment category for Facebook users referencing the slow loris' behaviour received no scores on conservation videos. Interestingly, two comments wherein a Facebook user expressed desire to purchase a slow loris were found on conservation videos. A user commented "Its so cute i want it ❤️😍🤲" and another Facebook commenter asked, "Where can I buy one of these?", despite the Facebook videos in question condemning the slow loris pet trade. Finally, comments that referred to the slow loris cute and adorable were infrequent on conservation videos (n=6, 4%).
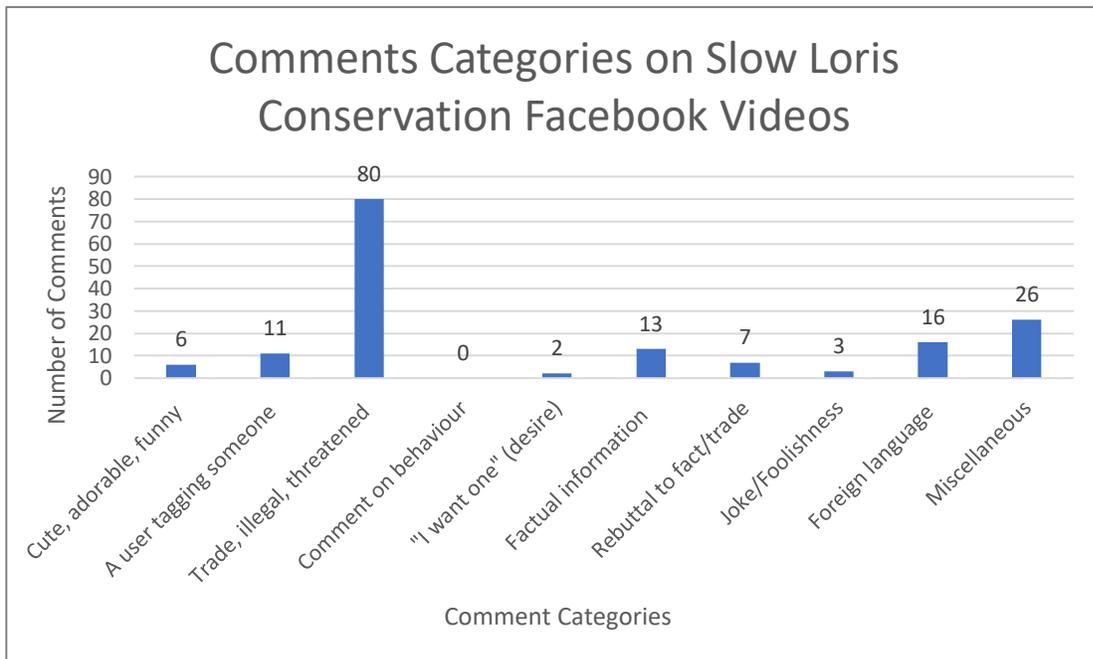

Figure 3. Results of comment categories left on conservation slow loris videos.

When the analysis was focused solely on pet slow loris videos, different weightings of the comment categories once again occurred (figure 4). The most frequent types of comments on videos featuring a captive slow loris was a commenter tagging another Facebook user (n=53, 26.9%). Interestingly, although tagging other Facebook users was the most frequent comment category on pet slow loris videos, it by no means dominated the results. In fact, this category only accounted for 26.9% of the comments analysed (figure 4). Furthermore, the second largest comment category was comments referencing the illegal slow loris pet trade and the threatened status of the animals (n=38, 19.3%). The third most frequent type of comment were Facebook users referring to the captive animal as cute, adorable, and/or funny (n=37, 18.8%). Notably, comments wherein Facebook users refer to the illegal slow loris pet trade and the threatened nature of the animals was the only comment category present in the top three most frequent categories on both the pet slow loris and conservation results.

Parallel to the conservation videos, the least common type of comments on pet slow loris videos were those which referenced the slow loris' behaviour, i.e. what the animal was doing (n=2, 1.3%). The other smallest comment categories on pet slow loris videos were comments made in a foreign language (n=12, 8%) and miscellaneous comments (n=12, 8%). Interestingly, on pet slow loris videos, the content of comments categorized as miscellaneous departed significantly from those found on conservation videos. For example, a Facebook user commented "For that thing to survive it must be the worst tasting animal ever". Other examples of comments scored as miscellaneous on pet slow loris videos are "Sloth" and "Damn". These miscellaneous comments did not fit into any comment category and seemed quite random.
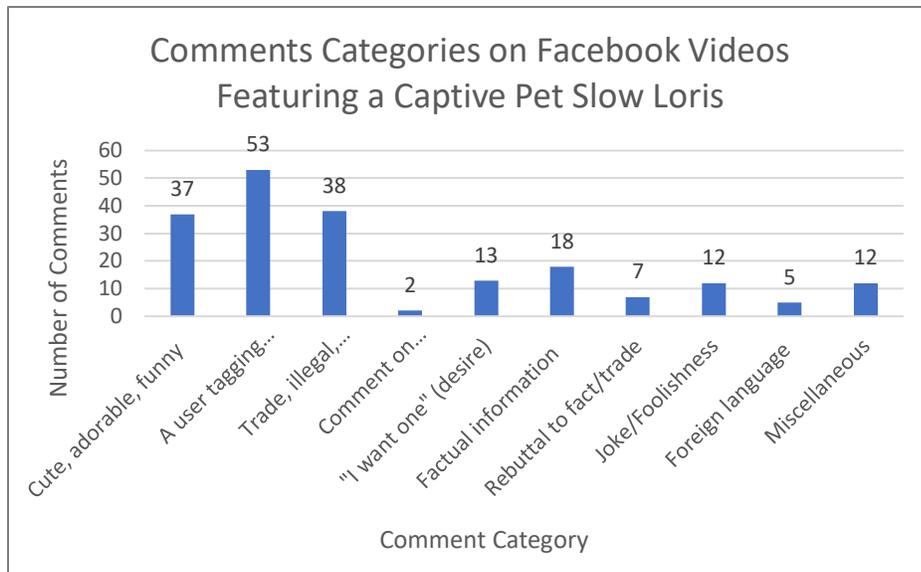
Figure 4. Results of comment categories left on pet slow loris videos

Discussion

Social media sites, such as Facebook, have connected people from across the globe to slow lorises. Their popularity on social media has introduced slow lorises to a general public who would not have usually come into contact with the animals (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013). In her study on the comments left on a YouTube video of a pet slow loris, Anna Nekaris concluded that despite the ability of slow loris videos to serve as a means of increasing public understanding of the animals' conservation, the dominant discourses among the viewers of the video were centered on their desire to purchase one as a pet and comments that the captive animal was cute (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013). My research, which was completed six years after Nekaris' work, demonstrates a shift among social media users, as the most frequent type of comments across ten Facebook videos refer to the illegal slow loris pet trade, the endangered status of the animals, and call for the end of captive pet slow lorises (figure 2). In fact, discourses in the comment section of the analysed Facebook videos show a heightened awareness of the illegal slow loris trade, perhaps indicating the success of online efforts by conservation groups.

On June 8th, 2015, the UK based charity International Animal Rescue (IAR) launched a celebrity-backed campaigned titled "Tickling is Torture". This campaign works to expose the cruelty of keeping slow lorises as pets, as well as counter the craze for captive slow lorises caused by online videos ("Tickling is Torture", 2015). This campaign is noteworthy as it serves as an example of the efforts being done online to counter the illegal slow loris trade and provide a counternarrative to the popularity of pet slow loris videos. The International Animal Rescue created a pledge for people to sign via the internet. The pledge, which is found on the "Tickling is Torture" campaign website, reads as follows; "I pledge not to support and encourage the illegal pet trade in slow lorises. I will not 'share' or 'like' any video or photo that shows a slow loris being kept as a pet and, where possible, I will 'comment' directing people to the International Animal Rescue slow loris rescue information page to help expose the truth and end the suffering" ("Sign the Pledge", n.d.). Evidently, the pledge and the campaign are intentioned to share accurate information on the illegal slow loris pet trade and end the popularity of pet slow loris videos on social media.

Further propelling their conservation agenda, the "Tickling is Torture" campaign also released a video featuring footage of slow lorises in captivity, having their teeth clipped out, and the conditions in which pet slow lorises are kept. The video is narrated by British actor Peter Egan and features a number of celebrity supporters. This video has been posted multiple times by the IAR Facebook page, with the most recent post serving as an example of a conservation-related slow loris video in this study (figure 1). At the time of this study, the most recent post of the "Tickling is Torture" campaign video, which was uploaded to Facebook on April 20th, 2018, had received 30,000 views, 906 shares, 1,500 reactions, and 86 comments. The campaign video has additionally been reposted by a number of other conservation Facebook pages, such as Animals

Lebanon. The effort made of the IAR to inform the general public on the harm of the slow loris trade and to popularize the "Tickling is Torture" campaign is reflected in the comment sections on slow loris videos analyzed in this study.

Figure 2 reveals that the largest comment category of the 300 Facebook comments analyzed in this study refer to the illegal slow loris pet trade and the threatened nature of the animals. Of those 118 trade-related comments, 11.8% reference the "Tickling is Torture" campaign and provide links to the International Animal Rescue website, the campaign video, and/or the campaign's website. When looking exclusively at the comments left on videos showing pet slow lorises, 6.7% of the 150 comments reference the "Tickling is Torture" campaign and/or the IAR. These results clearly indicate success on the part of the International Animals Rescue charity and their campaign, as most comments being left on slow loris videos reference the illegal trade and a significant number directly link to the IAR and "Tickling is Torture".

The results of this study also suggest success on the part of other conservation projects and campaigns, such as Anna Nekaris' Little Fireface Project (LFP). The LFP became an independent project in 2011, after having previously been created by the Nocturnal Primate Research Group at Oxford Brookes University, UK in 1994 ("Welcome to the Little Fireface Project", n.d.). Nekaris and her LFP team study all lorises (family *Lorisidae*), including Asia's slender and slow lorises and African pottos. The LFP team also organizes outreach and education programmes for the local communities to encourage the people to get to know the animals and join in conservation efforts. Additionally, the project uses, monitors and evaluates social media as to educate the public on the harms of the illegal loris trade ("Welcome to the Little Fireface Project", n.d.). Although the LFP is not directly referenced in any comments by Facebook users in my study, the awareness of the

illegal slow loris pet trade and the plight suffered by the animals within the comment section certainly implies success and effectiveness of the conservation and education project.

Interestingly, a Facebook comment made by Dr. Anna Nekaris herself was discovered and included in the analysis of this study, as seen in figure 5. Nekaris responded to an individual who left a comment on a conservation-related slow loris video posted by the Facebook page "The Dodo." The Facebook user condemned viral videos of slow lorises, though they did assume that the viral videos began with the mistake on the part of pet owners who thought the animals enjoyed being tickled by the pet owners. Nekaris responded with a link to her 2013 article on viral slow loris videos and encouraged the user to read more on the harms of these types of viral videos. In this instance, it is Nekaris herself sharing information on the harms of the slow loris trade and engaging with Facebook users. Evidently, an effective strategy, as the Facebook user replied that they were eager to read the article in full and Nekaris' comment received four "likes" by other social media users.

The valued social media comments concept, which builds on the theories and ideas on the importance of the digital world by digital anthropologists and its entanglement with our physical world (Frömming *et al.,* 2017, Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017, Miller and Horst 2012), considers the value and meaning of comments left on videos posted to Facebook and other social media platforms. By utilizing this concept, I argue that the comments made by the Facebook users reflect their reactions and perceptions of the slow loris pet trade. Thus, we can conclude that the conservation efforts by the "Tickling is Torture" campaign, the Little Fireface Project, Dr. Anna Nekaris, and many more, are gaining success in spreading information among social media users and the general public on the harms of the slow loris pet trade, the endangerment of the animals, and the danger of the popularization of pet loris videos on social media and the internet.
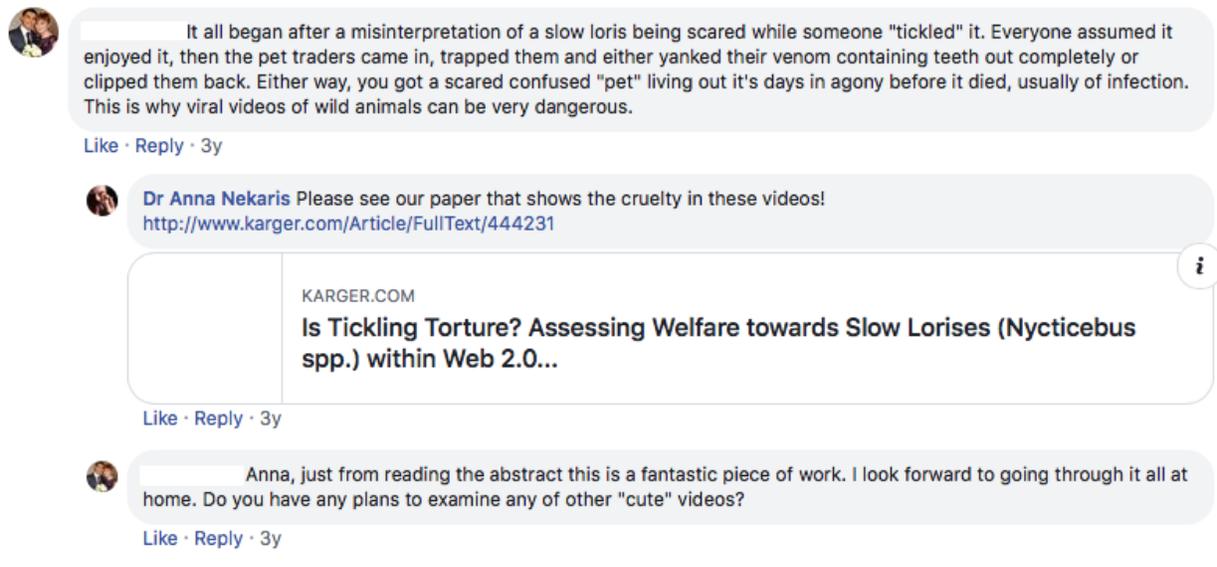
Figure 5. Comments left by a Facebook user and Dr. Anna Nekaris on the conservation-related slow loris video posted by the Facebook page the Dodo on February 14th, 2016.

There are a number of notable trends in the comment sections of slow loris Facebook videos. First, on conservation-related slow loris videos, the comments left by Facebook users tended to be much lengthier and more detailed (figure 6), whereas most comments left on pet slow loris videos were limited to a single word or a few short phrases (figure 7). In fact, personal stories and anecdotes were often shared on conservation videos, such as an individual who commented "After having Sugar Gliders an exotic pet in the past. My husband and I know and admit that we were wrong in doing so... I feel absolutely foolish that I ever thought it was okay to "own" them as pets. Animals like the Slow Lorises, the Sugar Gliders and etc. should never be pets, period…". This comment received 50 likes and 5 replies from other Facebook users, stating their admiration and respect for the individual. Additionally, as seen in Figure 5 and Figure 6, Facebook users shared information and articles, thus creating a respectful dialogue and raising awareness on the slow loris pet trade. Thus, conservation videos' comment sections were a place for discussion, personal stories, and for the sharing of information among Facebook users.
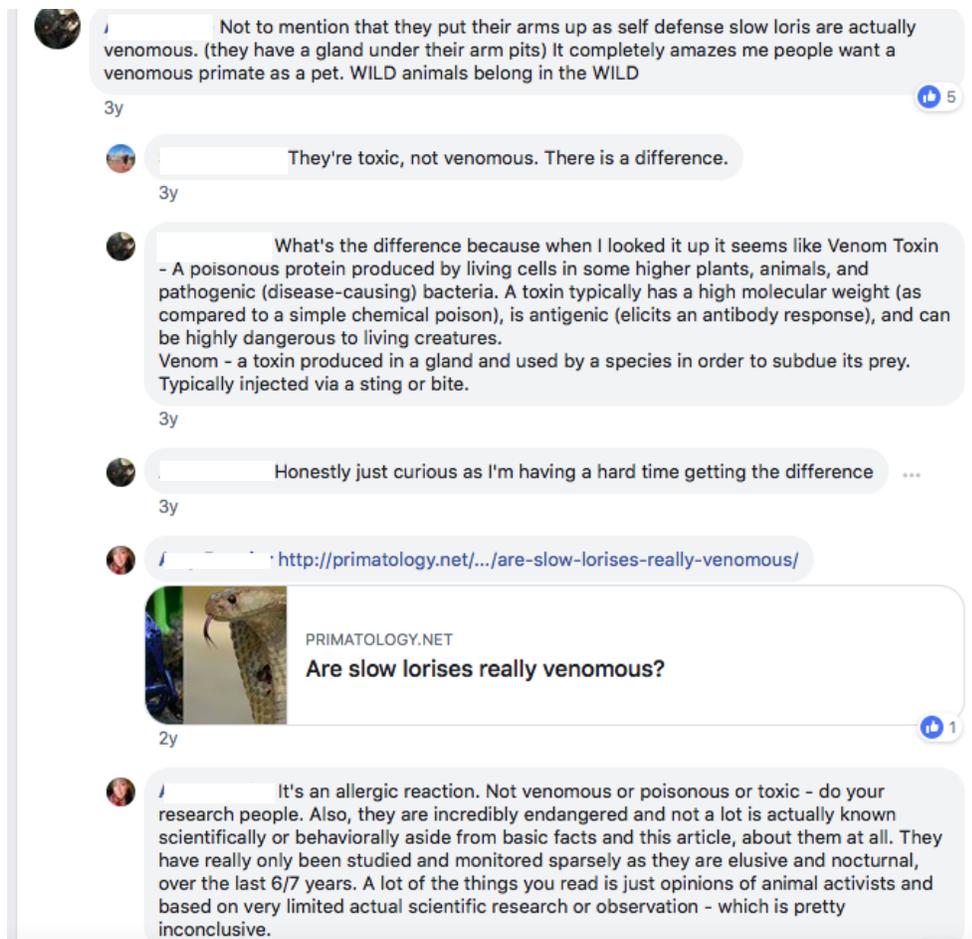
Figure 6. Comments left on the "Slow Lorises Went Viral and It Almost Killed Them" Facebook video, posted by The Dodo on February 14th, 2016. This exchange serves as an example of the lengthy comments on conservation-related slow loris videos as well as the sharing of information among Facebook users within the comment section of these videos.
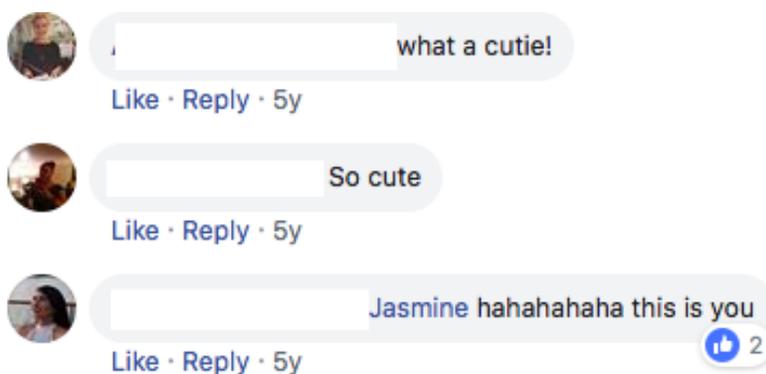

Figure 7. Comments left on the "Slow Loris Eating A Rice Ball" Facebook video, posted by Traveling on November 23rd, 2013. These comments are representative of the short comments left on pet slow loris videos, with very few words and short phrases.

Interestingly, the trend of sharing articles, websites, and factual information on the harm of the slow loris trade is evident in the comment sections of pet slow loris videos. However, in my research, there were no examples in pet slow loris videos' comment sections of factual information on the illegal slow loris trade being welcomed by other Facebook users. Instead, the sharing of factual information was met with disbelief, frustration, rebuttal, and/or indifference by other Facebook users. An example of this type discourse is seen in Figure 8, wherein a Facebook user replies angrily to another individual who commented the "Tickling is Torture" campaign website and condemned their use of the word "cute". The trend of rebuttal and dismissal of factual information of the slow loris trade certainly echoes the conclusions made by Sveinbjörnsdóttir (2017), namely that the Facebook comment section is a space for public debate. These online debates should hold importance for anthropologists and primatologists as they may illustrate the beliefs held by individuals, online perceptions, and changing cultural traditions (Sveinbjörnsdóttir 2017), which in turn may affect conservation efforts to end the trade (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013).

Figure 8. Comments between two Facebook users on the "Slow Loris Eating A Rice Ball" video posted by Spoon University on October 16th, 2015. This is an example of trade information being unwelcome and met with dismissal by a viewer of a pet slow loris video.

This research revealed another trend across pet slow loris and conservation videos, the use of forceful and angry language by Facebook commenters condemning the trade. For example, an individual commented "How wicked people are all in the name of profit again poor animals suffering I feel ashamed to be human [sic]", and another wrote "that's torture you little shits". Language expressing anger and condemnation of the trade by Facebook users aware of the trauma suffered by the animals was expected, given that those viewing the slow loris videos would be motivated and impacted by the images of animal abuse presented in the videos and may feel an emotional connection towards the slow lorises.

Moreover, I found comments which called for violence towards those abusing the slow lorises on two Facebook videos. Although not a prevalent trend, appearing only twice in my research, with both examples were found in the comment sections of conservation-related videos. The first instance is in the comments on the conservation video posted by the Facebook page This is NOW, with an individual commenting "OH GOD THESE PEOPLE WHO DO THESE THINGS FOR MONEY SHOULD BE HUNG". This comment received one "like" from another Facebook user. The second example, a Facebook user commented on the The Revelist video, where a Facebook user wrote; "Just wanna line those bastards up and shoot them one by one. Nice and slow so they can see whos next". Considering the context of the video, the term "bastards" is likely referring to slow pet owners and/or wildlife traders. This comment received a reply from another Facebook user who simply stated "Absolutely". This anger, to the point where Facebook users called for the death of wildlife traders, was quite shocking to me, as the high level of resentment towards traders and slow loris pet owners was an unanticipated result of the study.

Furthermore, the meaning and use of the words "cute" and "adorable" differ significantly between the comments left on conservation videos and those on pet slow loris videos. On

conservation videos, the words are used within a conservation context, as in "They look adorable SO LEAVE THEM IN THE WILD". Whereas comments on pet slow loris videos use the word cute as to describe the animal's aesthetic features, as in "I. Am. Crying. Of. The. Level. Of. Cuteness". Additionally, on conservation videos, themes of anger and outrage were often found to be connected with the appealing visual appearance and "cuteness" of slow lorises in a few comments left on videos. Comments such as "Poor little things!... How selfish of these people to use their cuteness for money. They belong in the wild! Leave them alone!" reference the cuteness of the slow lorises while simultaneously calling for the end of the trade. This association of the animals' cuteness with conservation demonstrates the concept of charismatic microfauna (CMIF), wherein the slow lorises are producing a connection to the nature and a desire to aid in conservation among those who view the videos.

The cuteness of the slow lorises and their charismatic personalities are thus encouraging Facebook users to support conservation efforts and their calls for the end of the slow loris pet trade (Sibkins *et al.,* 2013, Feldhamer *et al*., 2010, Hausmann *et al.,* 2017). The Facebook users feel affection for these animals based on their appealing physical characteristics (Lorenz 1970, Gould 2008). Therefore, I argue that the cuteness and charisma of the slow lorises are motivating the anger felt by those leaving Facebook comments condemning the trade. The extreme anger and calls for violence found in the comments on slow loris videos can also be understood with the concept of charismatic microfauna, as these individuals, who feel a connection to slow lorises, are perturbed by the abuses suffered by the animals to the point where their emotional distress is expressed through passionate Facebook comments. To end the slow loris pet trade, the online dimension of conservation must be considered, and social media users' perceptions must be contemplated. Therefore, to capitalize on the charisma of slow lorises, conservation groups, animal

rights campaigns, biologists, and primatologists should focus on creating videos and conservation materials which utilize the cuteness and charm of slow lorises to appeal to social media users. By utilizing the emotional connection and empathy felt by social media users towards slow lorises, conservation efforts can gain further support and more effectively work towards ending the slow loris pet trade.

There were still a significant number of Facebook users whose comments do not reference the illegal slow loris pet trade. The type of comment wherein a Facebook user tags another individual was the second most frequent comment category in this study (17.7%). Notably, tagging another Facebook user is only seen 11 times on conservation videos, thus accounting for only 17.2% of this specific comment category. Therefore, tagging other individuals is mostly seen on pet slow loris videos, furthering the popularity of these damaging videos among Facebook users who are likely unaware of the damage of the trade.

Additionally, there were a significant number of comments referring to the animals' cuteness and stating that the pet slow lorises were funny and adorable (11.9%), such as "Look how cute this is ☺☺☺". These types of comments used the words "cute" and "adorable" to refer to the slow loris' aesthetically appealing appearance and therefore do not reflect the concept of charismatic microfauna. Moreover, comments stating the Facebook user would like to purchase a pet slow loris (4.2%), such as "Where can I buy one of these?" were still present in this study. Unsurprisingly, these types of comments were dominantly found on pet slow loris Facebook videos. Therefore, I argue that unless the Facebook user had prior knowledge of the illegal slow loris trade, their reactions are shaped by the videos they view and consume. Thus, to reiterate, it is crucial for conservation groups, projects, and primatologists to focus on creating videos which will appeal to Facebook users as well as educated of the harms of the illegal trade, especially for users

who remain ignorant and unaware of the devastating effects of the trade on the slow loris populations. Strategically, by focusing more on engaging conservation-related online materials for social media, the popular pet slow loris videos, which fuel the trade (Nekaris *et al.*, 2013), may be countered and their damage may be mitigated.

Conclusion

Considering the Facebook comment sections of slow loris videos analysed in this research project, social media users appear to have an awareness of the illegal slow loris pet trade. Of the 300 comments analysed, the most frequent type of comments were those referencing the illegal slow loris pet trade, the harm of the trade, and/or the threatened status of these primate species. These comments were found across conservation and pet slow loris videos and were often accompanied with language expressing anger. The anger felt by certain Facebook users towards the illegal slow loris pet trade, as well as the use of the words cute/adorable in a conservation context, demonstrate the concept of charismatic microfauna, wherein small animals elicit an emotional reaction and connection to nature from those who view it.

Yet, there remains a significant number of Facebook users tagging other individuals, commenting on the animals' cuteness, and stating that they wish to buy a pet slow loris for themselves. These types of comments show no awareness of the pet trade. Thus, Facebook users' reactions to the illegal slow loris trade are shaped by the type of videos they view. Therefore, those working towards conservation, such as conservation campaigns, animal rights advocates, and primatologists, need to focus on creating educational videos on the harms of the trade, while still appealing to social media users. These groups should utilize the cuteness of slow lorises to gain further support for the animals' conservation from social media users.

To conclude, further research is needed. This study offers insights into online ethnoprimatology, which has only been utilized in one other research project prior to this study (Nekaris *et al*., 2013). Online ethnoprimatology can be utilized by researchers and scholars to further understand the interrelatedness of primates with the digital and the physical world. Larger sample sizes of videos, studies into other primate species' online pet videos, and further research into all forms of social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, is necessary as to understand and counter the online dimension of the illegal primate pet trade. Primatologists must interpret social media and the internet as a part of our real and physical world. To successfully work towards ending the internet-fuelled primate pet trade, primatologists and anthropologists must contemplate the intersection of digital anthropology and primatology by considering social media and the online dimension of conservation.

Acknowledgments

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