

Behaviour matters

Nicky Trevorrow gets online with MewTube, cats and social media

The popularity of the cat in media has grown exponentially in recent years. The internet in particular has seen an explosion of cat videos with many internet users sharing cat-based content. There has even been research carried out which suggests that looking at cat videos increases feelings of happiness as well as increasing energy levels. So called 'celebrity cats' have achieved fame either online, in books or in the media. Clearly we love cats, but what does all this mean for cat welfare?

There are endless cat videos on YouTube. Certainly cats like Maru, who loves to dive into cardboard boxes is not only cute and funny, but it is also showing something that we can all identify with – the fact that cats naturally love cardboard boxes. The meme (a captioned photo, often humorous that often gain popularity on the internet) "if it fits, I sits" showing cats trying to squeeze themselves into often small spaces like a shoe box also demonstrates this normal cat behaviour. The beauty of it is that it encourages people to provide their cat with a variety of cardboard boxes to see if their cat will replicate it. In doing so, owners can meet their cat's needs by



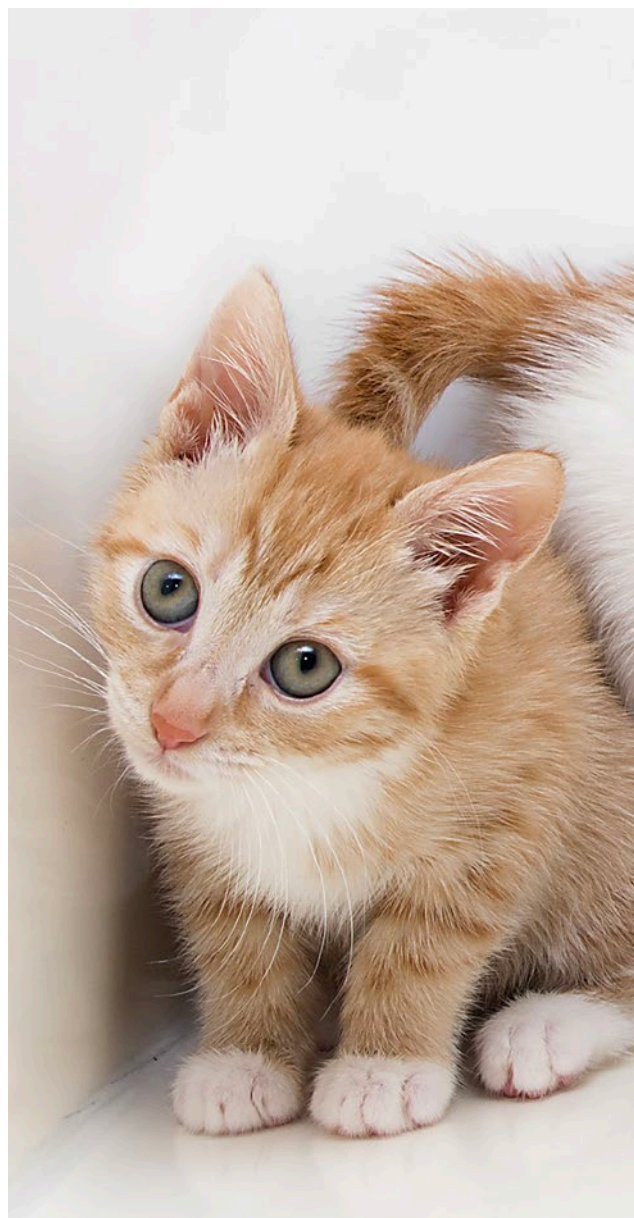
ILLUSTRATION: SIMON'S CAT LTD PHOTO: CP LIBRARY

Cats = cute!



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not only providing a hiding place, but it has the potential to be a toy. By cutting a few holes into a cardboard box, it can be transformed into a fun game, much like *The Box* cartoon featuring the hilarious antics of *Simon's Cat*. The subtleties of cat behaviour are captured beautifully.

Things to look out for

What about the videos where the cat's vocalisations are meant to sound like the cat is speaking words? Again, many people find these videos funny, but what is



the cat communicating? This is where a bit of cat knowledge on body language, facial expressions, behaviours and vocalisations can go a long way. Next time you watch a video, try watching it with the sound off. Notice whether the cat's eyes are wide and their pupils dilated, or relaxed with constricted pupils. Then let's look at the ears. Are they in a relaxed, normal position, or alert and pointing forwards? Or are they turned out to the side or even pressed back on the cat's head? Does the cat flick or swish their tail or is it held

straight up with a curve at the tip? It is all about taking these signs and looking at them in context. So if a cat has a camera close to their face, showing dilated pupils with the ears back and the cat is hissing, growling or yowling, then it's safe to say that the video is showing a very stressed and fearful cat that feels threatened. As cat lovers, we would not want to see cats suffering, however cat behaviour is very subtle and if the videos are presented as a compilation promising the funniest cat videos, many people find them amusing.

No kitty costumes

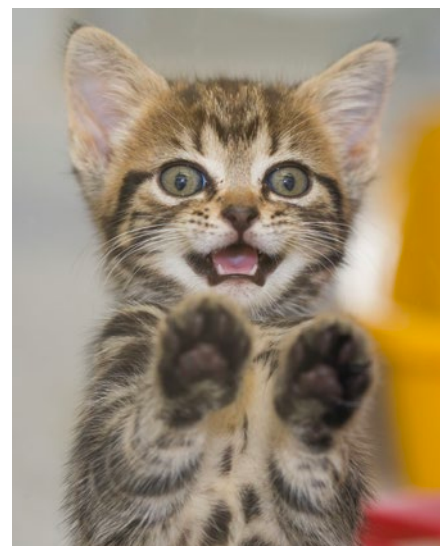
Sometimes images or videos of cats can seem appealing from a human perspective. For example, Christmas cards may feature cats dressed up in Father Christmas outfits or hats. Dressing cats up to look like little furry people is an example of what is called 'anthropomorphism'. This means giving human characteristics, emotions or motivations to animals. It is a natural human tendency, and is extremely common, but it can cause misunderstanding of cats' needs. So we need to ask ourselves what is the cat's experience? ►

▶ Dressing cats in clothing restricts their movements and therefore they are unable to express natural behaviours. Cats do not like it and many would find it stressful. Unless the cat has a medical problem whereby the vet has suggested some protective clothing as a short term measure to help the condition, then it not recommended.

Anthropomorphism can be a problem when it comes to dealing with an animal's unwanted behaviour. For example, owners often believe that their pets have toileted inside the house out of 'spite' or 'revenge', and the pet knows they have been 'naughty'. Again, this is characterised by a

growing trend for 'guilty' pet videos online. By making this assumption, the real reason for this unwanted behaviour is missed and a solution is not found, often resulting in the behaviour continuing. If we are to address such behaviours we must understand that cats have different needs and motivations to humans, and they have their own unique way of viewing the world.

Anthropomorphism is rife in the media. Cartoons, feature films and YouTube clips show animals behaving in a human-like way. It can be unhelpful and unfortunately encourages the tendency to misinterpret an animal's behaviour, to the detriment of their welfare.



Encouraging compassion

However there are occasions when using anthropomorphism can be useful. Certainly cats are emotional animals, so it would be wrong to say that they don't have any emotions. They feel anxiety, fear, frustration, depression, happiness, relief and have an emotional response to pain. So if people feel pain from a wound and needs pain relief, an animal with a wound is also likely to feel pain and needs pain relief too. Anthropomorphism encourages compassion and empathy towards animals and can be useful at times when trying to explain a situation from a cat's perspective. But, in general, when thinking about cat behaviour, it is important to consider things from the cat's own perspective and all that comes with being a real cat.

When sharing content with others, first consider whether the cat is showing normal behaviour and a positive emotional state rather than signs of distress.

Social media can be a great platform to share ideas that are engaging and encourages promoting what a cat really needs. ●

No cats in hats or clothing

