

Original Article

Perception of People Toward Free Roaming Dogs in West Bengal

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Abstract - Various factors affect people's perception towards stray animals. The attitudes and perceptions of local communities towards stray dogs are lacking objective data. Some of the factors that affect the same include cultural beliefs, socioeconomic status and personal experiences. Education and community involvement are also extremely important when it comes to fostering a compassionate and responsible approach toward stray animals, which is something that needs to be worked upon in a vast country like India. This paper tests the roles of these factors in shaping their attitudes and the extent to which they correlate with each other. For the present study, a sample of 90 respondents (male=32, female=58) were asked to fill in a survey that utilised questionnaires to measure attitudes and perceptions toward strays. This study found statistically significant differences between the age of respondents and their perception toward strays, pet ownership and their perception toward strays, feeding strays and their perception toward strays. Additionally, the findings showed no significant differences between gender and their perception toward strays, as well as between educational qualifications and people's perception toward strays.

Keywords - Attitude toward strays, Community, Human-animal relationships, Stray dogs, Urban ecology.

1. Introduction

Stray animals are a ubiquitous presence in many parts of the world. Their existence has often been a subject of concern, fascination, and debate. In India, cultural and social dynamics play a significant role in shaping public attitudes, which is why perceptions of stray animals are particularly complex. Gaining insight into people's perceptions of stray animals is essential for creating effective policies and interventions that address both animal welfare as well as public health and safety. Humans and Free-ranging Domestic Dogs (FDD) are known to coexist in the same spaces throughout the developing world. Current estimates on Indian urban ecology consider these free-ranging dogs to be an extremely important part of the biotic structure of various Indian cities, and they stand at about 59 million. (Gompper, 2013). The relationship between humans and these dogs varies from one of dependence to apathy or conflict. There is a paucity of data on this subject, which has led to a general and commonly acknowledged lack of government investment in the matter.

The Indian Constitution establishes the foundation for stray animal welfare. Article 51A(g) imposes a fundamental duty on citizens to protect and have compassion for animals, aligning the nation's moral responsibility with animal-friendly practices. Moreover, Directive Principles under Article 48A mandate the state to safeguard the environment and protect wildlife, which extends to domestic and stray animals (Mishra

& Choudhary, 2019). While India is moving towards progressive laws on stray animal welfare, the lack of effective enforcement results in widespread violations, such as the unauthorized killing of strays or misuse of municipal funds allocated for animal programs

Based on social identity theory, being part of social groups enhances a person's self-concept. One study argues that humans can expand their social identity to include animals, effectively redefining their in-group to encompass non-human members. This inclusion is not just symbolic but has a significant impact on people's views, ethical beliefs, and actions toward animals (Amiot et al., 2019). Animal identification, for instance, frequently promotes a sense of accountability and community, which can inspire prosocial actions like protecting wildlife, supporting animal rights, or switching to a vegan or vegetarian diet. This psychological bond enriches human understanding of animals and aligns personal values with actions that benefit animal welfare. Ethical beliefs about the treatment and rights of animals often lead individuals to regard animals as deserving of inclusion in their in-group. When moral considerations align with empathy and perceived similarity, they collectively strengthen the human-animal bond.

Modern relations between Indians and dogs bear a colonial history. A "state of exception" founded on the socio-



political construction of the human/animal duality is jointly produced by colonialism and informality (Narayanan, 2016). The impact of colonialism on human-dog relationships persisted beyond political decolonization, with dogs continuing to play significant roles in postcolonial racial discourse and security arrangements (Doble, 2020). The public and government have differing views on how to handle stray animals in cities, and worries about viruses like rabies stoke a lot of the worry. At first, stray populations were managed by gathering unused canines and euthanizing those that were judged unsuitable for adoption. (Volsche et al., 2019). The usage of animal birth control methods, which include catching, neutering, and either releasing or adopting strays, has been impacted more recently by animal welfare organizations. The method has the support of accredited veterinary colleges and skilled specialists, many of whom are also certified in managing feeding colonies and handling dogs.

It was projected that India's cities and towns are home to about 62 million stray dogs, according to the latest report of the Pet Homelessness Index of India (Institute of Global Homelessness, 2024). The majority of scholarly research in India remains centered on free-ranging dogs. Research suggests that in Indian villages, dogs may either be considered community-owned shared dogs (Taylor et al., 2017) or be relocated to the outskirts of the village as pariahs (The Domestic Dog, n.d.). This work frequently focuses on how free-ranging dogs can spread disease, particularly rabies, or act as invasive species that harm native biodiversity. This probably results from a number of factors, such as the fact that dogs roam freely in many parts of India, including both urban and rural areas. Free-ranging dogs are vital to urban ecology despite the fact that experts have been preoccupied with concerns about disease. In societies with comparable historical backgrounds, opinions regarding free-ranging dogs in urban and rural areas are compared.

Existing studies provide a substantial foundation for understanding the public perception of stray animals. For instance, Srinivasan (2013) wrote an analysis that distinguishes between sovereign power, where humans exercise control over animals without considering their welfare, and biopower, which involves interventions justified by concerns for animal well-being.

The ABC Rules ("भारत का राजपत्र : असाधारण," 2023) were established via a gazette notification in accordance with the PCA Act and regulate the management of stray dogs in India. Before these techniques were introduced in the mid-19th century, stray dogs were electrocuted or poisoned during British control in largely haphazard attempts. However, the ABC Rules, which include vaccination and neutering as the authorized methods of managing street dog numbers, are exactly what this "technique" permits. They transcend any other rules that are less detrimental to the animals, both individually and collectively, including state and municipal

government legislation that permits the killing of street dogs, even when they do not expressly prohibit it.

Research by Fielding et al. (2023) sheds light on the community attitudes and perceptions towards free-roaming dogs in Goa, India. On the other hand, objective information about local communities' opinions and perceptions of Free-Roaming Dogs (FRD) is lacking. Respondents in the aforementioned survey noted issues brought on by FRD and suggested possible fixes. Their findings indicate that while some people perceive stray animals as a public nuisance and health risk, others regard them as sentient beings worthy of care and compassion.

A study by Srinivasan and Nagaraj (2007) examines the marginalization and culling of stray animals in India through various legislative, political, and ecological discourses over the last 20 years. It draws attention to how colonialism and informality have led to violence against dogs in urban areas. Despite India's animal protection laws, cities often violate these laws due to fear-based narratives portraying dogs as threats.

A variety of factors, including personal experiences, social level, and cultural beliefs, influence West Bengal's attitudes toward stray animals. The public's opinion of stray animals is greatly influenced by awareness and education. The efforts of various Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and animal welfare groups in West Bengal have been instrumental in promoting awareness

1.1. The Role of Media in Shaping Perception towards Stray Animals

The influence of the media cannot be understated. Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram have become powerful tools that allow animal welfare organizations to reach a wider audience, share success stories, and mobilize support. This digital activism has significantly contributed to changing public attitudes and encouraging community participation in animal welfare activities.

The media in India has a profound influence on public perceptions of stray animals, shaping how people view and interact with these creatures (Mukherjee, 2023). One of the most significant impacts is through raising awareness and educating the public. Positive media coverage often highlights the humane treatment of stray animals, portraying them as sentient beings deserving of care and compassion. Stories about rescuing injured or abandoned animals, broadcast on television or shared online, help cultivate empathy and motivate people to get involved in animal welfare issues. These stories often go viral, spreading a message of kindness and compassion that encourages people to take action—whether by adopting a stray animal, volunteering at shelters, or supporting sterilization programs. In addition, the media plays a critical role in promoting campaigns and initiatives run

by the government or Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) aimed at controlling the stray population. For example, media reports on spaying, neutering, and vaccination drives emphasize the importance of population control and disease prevention, shifting public opinion towards seeing strays not as nuisances but as animals in need of help and care. Media coverage also often includes educational segments on the legal rights of animals, highlighting the importance of treating stray dogs and cats with dignity, as well as the efforts of organizations working to protect these rights. All these factors encourage people to view Free-Ranging Dogs in a much more positive light.

However, the media does not always portray stray animals positively. Sensationalism can distort the public's perception, particularly when incidents involving stray animals, such as dog bites or accidents, are given disproportionate coverage (Saleem et al., 2020). By focusing heavily on these negative interactions, media outlets may contribute to a climate of fear, leading people to view stray animals as dangerous or uncontrollable.

This kind of coverage often paints an incomplete picture, as it overlooks the fact that most stray animals live peacefully alongside humans without causing harm. Selective reporting further skews public perception, with media outlets prioritizing stories of conflict over the more common, harmonious relationships between humans and strays. This tendency can reinforce negative stereotypes and contribute to calls for extreme measures, such as culling, rather than fostering a more compassionate and balanced approach to managing the stray animal population.

In both urban and rural areas, the media's influence can differ depending on local priorities and concerns. In cities, where the stray animal population is more visible, and people often encounter stray dogs and cats in their daily lives, media portrayals of these animals as either companions or nuisances can shape how urban residents respond. Positive media stories may lead to more people feeding, adopting, or advocating for the sterilization of stray animals. At the same time, negative portrayals may heighten fear and lead to avoidance or hostility towards strays. In rural areas, the media's focus is often more pragmatic, highlighting the challenges strays pose to livestock or crop management. In these regions, media reports tend to emphasize the need for stricter control measures to protect livelihoods, which can influence how people perceive and treat stray animals.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive overview of the perception of the public toward stray animals in West Bengal, a region known for its rich cultural heritage and diverse population, to explore the multifaceted perceptions of its residents toward stray animals by drawing from existing literature and through conducting a quantitative study. This research seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on animal welfare in India.

2. Methodology

2.1. Aim

To map people's perception towards stray dogs in West Bengal within the city of Kolkata and its suburbs.

2.2 Objectives

- To explore differences in perception towards stray dogs among different genders.
- To explore differences in perception towards stray dogs between different age groups
- To explore differences in perception between different people with different educational qualifications.
- To investigate how pet owners and non-owners view stray dogs differently.
- To explore differences in perception towards feeding stray dogs.

2.3 Hypothesis

H1: The perceptions of males and females regarding strays will differ significantly

H2: Age groups' attitudes regarding strays will differ significantly from one another.

H3: There will be a significant difference between educational qualification and perception towards strays.

H4: There will be a significant difference between pet owners and non-owners with regard to their perceptions toward strays.

H5: The perceptions of respondents regarding feeding strays will differ significantly.

2.4. Participant and Sampling Technique

In the present study, participants were procured using a convenience sampling technique. The survey was completed by 90 people, 32 of whom were men and 58 of whom were women. Of the 90 people who responded, 35 did not own a pet, and 55 did.

2.5. Instrumentation

In the present study, different research papers and questionnaires assessing people's attitudes and perceptions towards stray animals/dogs were taken into consideration. A total of 24 items were combined to map people's perceptions towards stray dogs.

1. A Survey of Attitudes Toward Responsible Pet Ownership (Selby, Rhoades et al., 1983): The survey assesses attitudes toward responsible pet ownership for dogs and cats using a Likert Scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 represents "strongly agree." In the present study, only items directed towards free-roaming dogs were taken into consideration, while the ones directed towards cats were ignored.
2. Survey of Community Attitudes and Perceptions towards Free-Roaming Dogs (Corfmat et al., 2022): A five-point Likert Scale was used to assess the perception of people

towards Free-Roaming Dogs. In the present study, only 7 items, such as “Rate your level of agreement with the following statements with regard to strays; Right to live on the streets,” were used to map people's attitudes.

3. An Exploration of Attitudes toward Dogs (Volsche, Mohan et al., 2019): A total of eight items on a Likert Scale of 1-5, with one equaling strongly agree and five equals strongly disagree, were used to explore people's attitudes towards dogs an example item is-“Stray/feral dogs should be cleared from public spaces and streets.”

3. Results

The results of the current study indicated that:

Table 1. Shows the T-test values for gender and perception toward strays.

		n	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Perception toward strays	Male	32	72.88	17.18	-1.97	.052	0.43
	Female	58	79.9	15.65			

Table 1 revealed no significant mean differences in gender and perception toward stray dogs($t = -1.97, p > 0.05$). The findings showed that females scored higher in their perceptions toward strays($M=79.9, SD=15.65$) compared to males($M=72.88, SD= 17.18$). However, the mean difference

2.6. Data collection procedure

Data was collected from the respondents using Google Forms. The form was filled out by all participants after informed consent. Their responses remained confidential. There are no conflicts of interest.

2.7. Statistical Analysis

Statistical tests, including the t-test and ANOVA, were conducted using DataTab.

is not statistically significant. The value of Cohen's D was 0.43, indicating a small effect size. H1, which states that perceptions of males and females regarding strays will differ significantly, has been *rejected*.

Table 2. Shows the ANOVA Values for Age and Perception toward strays.

	n	M	SD	F	p	η^2
10-18	13	84	10.89			
19-25	19	85.11	14.2	3.7	.015	0.11
26-50	38	74.5	16.96			
50 and above	20	71.3	17.28			

Table 2 revealed significant mean differences in age and perception toward stray dogs($F=3.7, p < 0.05$). Findings showed that respondents between the ages of 19-25 exhibit higher scores on perception toward strays($M=85.11, SD=14.2$) compared to other age ranges.

The value of η^2 was 0.11, indicating a large effect size. H2, which states that age groups' attitudes regarding strays will differ significantly from one another, is thus *accepted*.

Table 3 revealed no significant mean differences between people's educational qualifications and their perception toward strays($F=1.66, p > 0.05$). The findings showed that individuals with post-graduate education exhibited higher scores in their perceptions toward strays($M=80.51, SD=15.69$) compared to others. The value of η^2 was 0.06, indicating a small effect size. H3, which stated that there would be a significant difference between educational qualification and perception toward strays, is therefore *rejected*.

Table 3. Shows the ANOVA values for educational qualification and perception towards strays.

	n	M	SD	F	p	η^2
Undergraduate	28	74.89	17.3	1.66	.181	0.06
Post-graduate	39	80.51	15.69			
School student	15	79.13	16.33			
Above-Post Graduate	7	67.14	16.28			

Table 4. Shows the t-test values for the perception of strays in pet owners vs non-owners

		n	M	SD	t	p	Cohen's d
Perception toward strays	no	55	73.65	15.24	-2.81	.006	0.61
	yes	35	83.29	16.8			

Table 4 revealed a significant mean difference in perceptions toward stray dogs between pet owners and non-owners ($t = -2.81$, $p < 0.05$). Findings showed that pet owners exhibit higher scores in regard to perception toward strays ($M = 83.29$, $SD = 16.8$) compared to non-owners ($M = 73.65$,

$SD = 15.24$). The value of Cohen's D was 0.61 , indicating a moderate effect size. H4, which stated that there is a significant difference between pet owners and non-owners in terms of their perception of strays, is thus *accepted*.

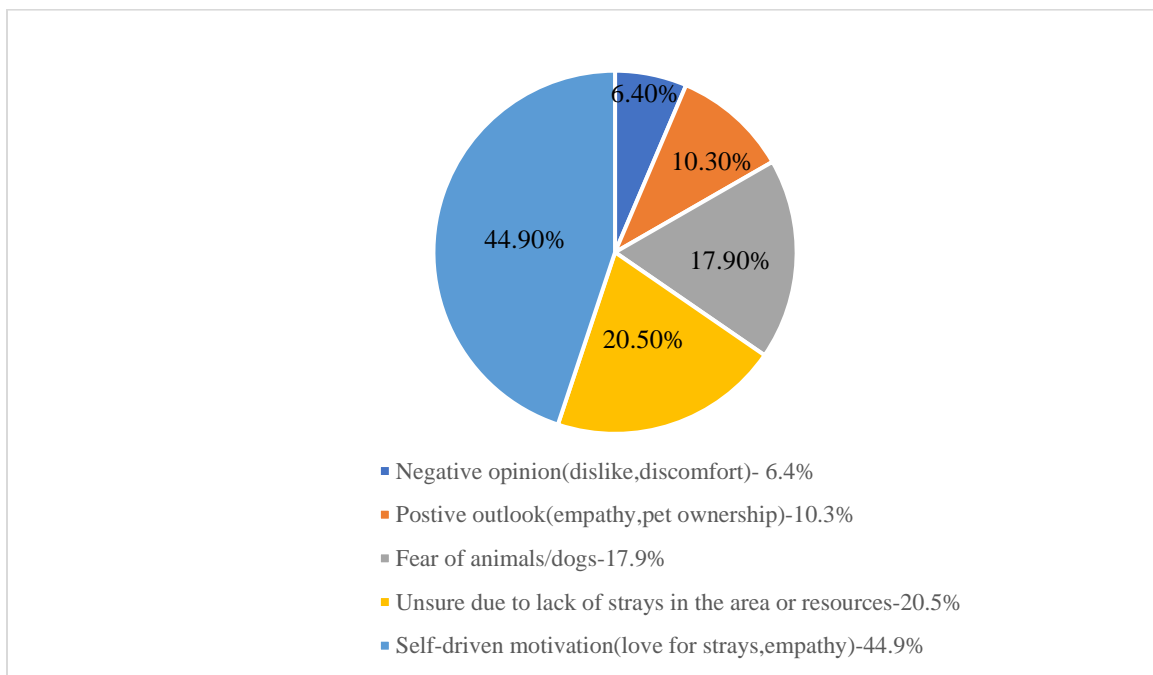
Table 5. Shows the ANOVA Values for respondents and their attitudes toward feeding strays.

	n	M	SD	F	p	η^2
Yes	36	83.19	17.54	7.04	.001	0.14
No, but I support those who do	31	77.84	14.86			
No	23	67.74	12.38			

Table 5 revealed a significant mean difference between people who feed stray dogs and their perception toward the same ($F = 7.04$, $p < 0.05$). The findings showed that individuals who feed strays scored higher in their perceptions toward strays ($M = 83.19$, $SD = 17.54$) compared to those who do not feed strays ($M = 67.74$, $SD = 12.38$) as well as those who support people who feed strays but do not feed them themselves ($M = 77.84$, $SD = 14.86$). The value of η^2 was 0.14 , indicating a large effect size. H5, which states that the perceptions of respondents regarding feeding strays will differ significantly, is therefore *accepted*.

Respondents were also asked to specify their reason for feeding/not feeding stray dogs. 44.9% of respondents had a self-driven motivation when it came to feeding strays, with

some respondents indicating that they do it because of their love for strays and because they feel helpless when they see the strays struggling with food. 20.5% of respondents were unsure about how they could engage in feeding strays due to a lack of stray animals in their locality or a lack of financial resources to do the same. 17.9% of respondents claimed that their fear of animals or their fear of stray dogs prevented them from being able to feed them. Apart from these responses, certain respondents had a negative opinion ($N = 6.4\%$) regarding feeding strays, which stemmed from not being comfortable with the smell or sight of a stray dog or a general dislike toward pets. There were also respondents who had a positive outlook toward feeding strays ($N = 10.3\%$) due to empathy toward animals and their own status of pet ownership.

**Fig. 1 Shows the respondents' reasons behind feeding/not feeding strays**

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to look at people's perception of strays in West Bengal, India. The participants primarily consisted of individuals residing in Kolkata and its surrounding suburbs, along with a few from various locations, including Jamshedpur. It aims to compare and understand how various factors affect people's attitudes toward stray animals, in particular stray dogs. To compare the differences between responders, statistical techniques such as the t-test and ANOVA were used.

The results of this study indicated that there was no notable difference in perception toward strays based on gender, educational qualifications, or pet ownership. Contradictory findings from studies have showcased that women, particularly Japanese and British women, tend to be more considerate toward dogs compared to men (Miura et al., 2000). According to yet another study, women behave and think more positively toward animals than men do. This can be attributed to the fact that men have been more inclined towards hunting, whereas women have been more involved in animal protection (Herzog, 2007). Social Identity Theory also explains this in a different way that, in contrast to men, women typically view animals as equal members of their social group. However, research has also indicated that there is no significant difference between men and women in relation to their interactions with dogs (Mallon, 1993). A study analysing people's attitudes toward stray cats in India has noted no significant difference between gender and people's attitudes toward the same (Changrani-Rastogi & Thakur, 2023).

Findings for this study, for instance, have shown that opinions toward strays varied significantly depending on one's age. Research often shows that children are more inclined to prioritize animals over humans. One particular study found that children typically choose to rescue multiple dogs instead of a single human, and some individuals believe that a dog's life holds equal or greater value than that of a human. (Wilks et al., 2020). Another study found that women between the ages of 18 and 24 were more tolerant of strays than men between the ages of 25 and 50. Younger respondents also generally had more empathetic responses regardless of gender (Carnovale et al., 2022). Another study revealed that fifth graders were more eager to learn about stray animal issues, whereas older pupils' interest in this topic was diminishing (Ioannidou et al., 2022).

When examining the differences between educational levels and perception toward strays among the respondents, the study found that there is no significant difference for the same. Similarly, in some studies, it has been shown that about 80.69% of illiterate people, as well as 43.75% of Higher Secondary Classes and above-educated people surveyed, thought that providing animals with a favourable environment is important (Paul et al., 2020). Another study revealed that more positive sentiments toward animals were more likely to

be linked to higher levels of formal education. (Pinheiro et al., 2016). The same was found in a study into the correlation between people's educational qualifications and their attitude towards local wildlife, for which education did not appear to play any part at all (Mir et al., 2015). However, it has also been shown that college graduates are less likely than non-graduates to feed strays and feed them more frequently, according to Finkler and Terkel (2012).

The results of this study showed that with regard to non-demographic characteristics, pet owners and non-owners perceptions of strays differ significantly. Similarly, owners are shown to devote greater importance to conservation and welfare matters pertaining to strays than non-owners (Farnworth et al., 2010). In another study, it was shown that owning pets led to a more positive attitude toward strays as well as better knowledge of their struggles. In this same study, it was also shown that the more animals kept, the more positive a person was toward other strays (Prokop & Tunnicliffe, 2010).

5. Conclusion

This paper delved into the differences in people's perceptions of strays and looked at various factors that could affect them. The mistreatment of stray animals is a common concern within the country, which makes it crucial to look into the perception and attitudes of people toward their interaction with strays. Since these animals are present in every street and corner of India, it is extremely important to gain more insight into the matter of their welfare. The present study also looked into understanding the perception of respondents on various ways to accommodate strays in society. Most responses were centred around building more shelters and improving government policies regarding the treatment of strays, especially in terms of their vaccination. Apart from these, there were responses centred around changing public attitudes towards stray dogs and hence modifying their behaviour towards them, as well as focusing on adopting or fostering strays. There were some neutral answers as well, which stated that the respondent had not thought of this problem, as well as some negative ones, which stated that strays should be eliminated. In conclusion, the study's findings showed that there was no meaningful distinction in people's perceptions regarding their gender and educational qualifications. However, there was a significant difference when it came to their age, whether they owned a pet or not and if they partook in feeding stray dogs.

5.1. Limitations

Although this study's results contribute to the body of literature, it is not short of limitations. Firstly, the sample size of the study could have been larger to help map the perception of people within West Bengal more accurately. People from different sections of this society and different socio-economic situations could have been a part of this research to help generalize the findings to a wider population. Secondly, a

mixed-method approach could have been adopted to help identify the factors that affect the development of people's perceptions.

5.2. Future Recommendations

1. A cross-sectional research study could be conducted between different states in India to understand further the role geographical factors play in people's perception of stray animals.
2. Socio-economic differences can be mapped to study the differences in perception toward strays of people belonging to different strata of society.
3. Future researchers could focus on developing policy recommendations by conducting a large-scale study on the topic and involving an interview method.

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