

Title: Patterns of Human Behaviour in Digitally Mediated Environments: A Case Study of *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019)

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Abstract

This paper examines patterns of human behaviour as depicted in the Netflix documentary series *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019). Through a multidisciplinary lens integrating psychology, sociology, and media studies, the study analyzes identity construction, collective behaviour, obsession, ethical ambiguity, and media feedback loops. The findings indicate that digital environments amplify core human tendencies, including the desire for recognition, moral vigilance, and collective problem-solving, while simultaneously introducing new risks related to accountability, ethical ambiguity, and attention-driven reinforcement. The paper highlights the dual role of digital platforms as both enablers of social collaboration and amplifiers of potentially harmful behaviour. Implications for understanding digitally mediated human interaction are discussed, with recommendations for responsible engagement in online environments.

Keywords: digital vigilantism, attention economy, human behaviour, feedback loops, social learning, online communities

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed not only how individuals interact, but also how collective human behaviour manifests. Online platforms enable geographically dispersed individuals to converge around shared interests, values, and emotions, often producing forms of social organization that are both powerful and unpredictable. The Netflix documentary *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* offers a compelling case study through which these dynamics can be examined. Chronicling the efforts of an online community attempting to identify an individual responsible for acts of animal cruelty, the documentary reveals the emergence of collective intelligence, moral outrage, and obsessive engagement within a digital environment.

At a fundamental level, the events depicted in the documentary are not novel in terms of human psychology. Patterns such as the desire for recognition, the formation of in-group identities, and the pursuit of justice have long been documented across historical and cultural contexts. However, the digital environment amplifies these tendencies in significant ways. The speed of information dissemination, the relative anonymity of participants, and the feedback mechanisms embedded within online platforms all contribute to an intensification of behavioural patterns that might otherwise remain constrained in offline settings.

This paper argues that *Don't F**k with Cats* illustrates how digital environments magnify core human behavioural tendencies particularly obsession, moral signalling, and collective identity formation while simultaneously introducing new ethical challenges. The documentary demonstrates that while online communities are capable of sophisticated, coordinated problem-solving, they are equally susceptible to misinformation, emotional escalation, and harmful forms of vigilantism. By analyzing both the perpetrator and the online community pursuing him, this paper seeks to identify recurring patterns of human behaviour and assess how these patterns are reshaped in the context of digital interaction.

Literature Review

1. Introduction to Theoretical Context

The behavioural patterns depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* can be understood through an interdisciplinary framework that draws from psychology, sociology, criminology, and media studies. The convergence of these fields is necessary because the events portrayed in the documentary exist at the intersection of individual cognition, group dynamics, and technologically mediated interaction. This section reviews key theoretical concepts that illuminate how and why individuals behave as they do within digital environments, particularly in contexts involving collective investigation, moral outrage, and the pursuit of justice.

2. Deindividuation and Online Anonymity

One of the most widely discussed concepts in social psychology relevant to online behaviour is deindividuation. Originally developed to explain behaviour in crowds, deindividuation refers to a psychological state in which individuals experience a reduced sense of personal identity and accountability, often leading to behaviour that diverges from social norms.

In digital environments, anonymity and physical distance contribute significantly to this phenomenon. Users are able to participate in discussions

and actions without the immediate social consequences that typically regulate behaviour in face-to-face interactions. This reduced accountability can encourage both positive and negative behaviours. On one hand, individuals may feel empowered to contribute information or insights they might otherwise withhold. On the other hand, anonymity can facilitate hostility, impulsivity, and the rapid escalation of group-driven actions.

Within the context of the documentary, members of the online community operate under varying degrees of anonymity, which both enables their investigative efforts and contributes to moments of collective overreach. The misidentification of individuals and the intensity of emotional responses can be partially explained through this framework, as participants become less constrained by personal responsibility and more influenced by group dynamics.

3. Collective Intelligence and Crowd sourcing

Contrasting with the risks associated with deindividuation is the concept of collective intelligence. This refers to the enhanced problem-solving capacity that emerges when individuals collaborate and pool their knowledge. Digital platforms have significantly expanded the potential for such collaboration, allowing large groups of people to contribute to complex tasks in real time.

Research in this area suggests that diverse groups can outperform individuals or even experts under certain conditions, particularly when information is aggregated effectively and critical thinking is maintained. The online community depicted in the documentary demonstrates several characteristics of collective intelligence, including distributed expertise, collaborative analysis, and iterative hypothesis testing.

However, the effectiveness of collective intelligence is highly dependent on the structure and norms of the group. Without mechanisms for verification, moderation, and accountability, the same processes that enable accurate conclusions can also produce errors. The documentary highlights this tension, showing how moments of insight are interspersed with instances of flawed reasoning and premature conclusions.

4. Moral Panic and Collective Emotion

The concept of moral panic provides another important lens through which to interpret the behaviour of the online community. Moral panic occurs when a group of people perceives a threat to societal values and responds with heightened emotional intensity and urgency. This often leads to the amplification of fear, the simplification of complex issues, and the identification of clear “villains.”

In digital environments, moral panic can spread rapidly due to the speed and scale of communication. Content that elicits strong emotional reactions is more likely to be shared, increasing its visibility and reinforcing collective sentiment. The acts depicted in the documentary, particularly those involving harm to animals trigger a powerful emotional response that serves as a catalyst for group formation and action.

This shared emotional response contributes to the development of a collective identity centred on justice and protection. While this can motivate constructive action, it can also lead to the marginalization of dissenting perspectives and the escalation of punitive attitudes. The intensity of the group's response, including the willingness to pursue individuals based on limited evidence, reflects the dynamics commonly associated with moral panic.

5. Digital Vigilantism

Digital vigilantism refers to the use of online platforms by individuals or groups to investigate, expose, and punish perceived wrongdoing. This phenomenon has become increasingly prominent with the rise of social media and online communities. Unlike traditional forms of vigilantism, which are often constrained by physical proximity and risk, digital vigilantism operates in a space where information can be disseminated globally with minimal barriers.

The documentary provides a clear example of this phenomenon, as participants take on roles typically associated with law enforcement. They gather evidence, analyze data, and attempt to identify suspects, often with a strong sense of moral justification. This reflects a broader shift in how individuals perceive their capacity to influence justice outcomes in the digital age.

However, digital vigilantism raises significant ethical concerns. The lack of formal oversight increases the risk of misidentification, harassment, and unintended harm. Furthermore, the public nature of online platforms means that accusations and judgments can have lasting consequences, even if they are later proven to be incorrect. The documentary underscores these risks, illustrating how the pursuit of justice can, in some cases, produce outcomes that conflict with the very values the group seeks to uphold.

6. Obsession and Psychological Investment

Another key behavioural pattern evident in the documentary is the development of obsession among members of the online community. What begins as a casual interest evolves into a sustained and deeply personal commitment. Individuals dedicate significant amounts of time and energy to the investigation, often at the expense of other aspects of their lives.

This pattern can be understood through theories of reinforcement and cognitive investment. As participants contribute to the investigation and receive validation from others, their commitment is reinforced. Each new piece of information or perceived breakthrough strengthens their sense of purpose and involvement.

Additionally, the structure of online platforms encourages continuous engagement. Notifications, updates, and ongoing discussions create a sense of immediacy and urgency, making it difficult for participants to disengage. This can lead to a feedback loop in which increased involvement leads to greater emotional investment, which in turn drives further involvement.

7. Media Feedback Loops and Attention Economy

The role of media in shaping behaviour is a central theme in the documentary. The concept of the attention economy is particularly relevant, as it highlights how visibility and engagement function as forms of currency in digital environments. Content that attracts attention is prioritized, creating incentives for individuals to produce material that elicits strong reactions.

The perpetrator's actions can be interpreted within this framework, as they appear to be designed to maximize visibility and provoke response. This suggests a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the audience, in which each reinforces the behaviour of the other. The more attention the content receives, the more it encourages further action.

At the same time, the online community's response contributes to this dynamic. By sharing, discussing, and analyzing the content, participants increase its reach and impact. This creates a feedback loop in which both the perpetrator and the audience play active roles in sustaining the cycle of attention and behaviour.

8. Summary

The theoretical perspectives reviewed in this section provide a foundation for understanding the complex behavioural dynamics depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*. Concepts such as deindividuation, collective intelligence, moral panic, digital vigilantism, and the attention economy each offer valuable insights into different aspects of the phenomenon.

Taken together, these frameworks suggest that the behaviours observed in the documentary are not isolated or anomalous. Rather, they reflect broader patterns that are increasingly characteristic of human interaction in digital environments. The following sections will build on this foundation, applying these theoretical insights to a detailed analysis of the events and behaviours portrayed in the documentary.

Methodology

1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine patterns of human behaviour as depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to this analysis because the focus of the research is not on quantifiable variables, but on the interpretation of behaviours, motivations, and social dynamics within a complex, media-mediated environment.

The research is grounded in an interpretive framework, which assumes that human behaviour is shaped by subjective meanings and social context. Rather than attempting to establish causal relationships through statistical analysis, this study seeks to understand how individuals construct meaning, form identities, and engage in collective action within digital spaces. The documentary serves as a rich, narrative-based case study through which these processes can be explored.

2. Data Source and Case Study Selection

The primary data source for this study is the documentary *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*, which provides a detailed account of both individual and collective behaviour in response to a series of criminal acts. As a curated media text, the documentary offers a structured narrative that includes interviews, archival footage, and digital artefacts such as social media posts and online discussions.

The selection of this documentary as a case study is justified on several grounds. First, it captures a real-world instance of digitally mediated collective action, making it highly relevant to the study of online behaviour. Second, it presents multiple perspectives, including those of participants in the online community, law enforcement officials, and media representations, allowing for a multi-layered analysis. Third, the documentary explicitly foregrounds themes such as identity, obsession, and moral judgment, which align closely with the research objectives of this paper.

While it is acknowledged that documentaries involve processes of editing and narrative construction, this does not diminish their value as data sources. Instead, the documentary is treated as both a representation of events and a cultural artefact that reflects broader societal attitudes and interpretations.

3. Analytical Method: Thematic Analysis

The primary method of analysis employed in this study is thematic analysis. This approach involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for flexibility in examining

complex and layered behaviours without being constrained by rigid methodological structures.

The analysis was conducted in several stages:

3.1 Familiarization with the Data

The documentary was reviewed multiple times to ensure a comprehensive understanding of its narrative structure, key events, and participant perspectives. Initial observations were recorded, focusing on notable behaviours, interactions, and emotional responses.

3.2 Initial Coding

Segments of the documentary were systematically coded based on observable behaviours and underlying psychological or social processes. Examples of initial codes included “identity performance,” “group reinforcement,” “moral outrage,” “obsessive engagement,” and “speculative reasoning.”

3.3 Theme Development

Codes were then grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across the dataset. These themes correspond to key areas of analysis in the paper, including identity construction, collective intelligence, digital vigilantism, and the role of media feedback loops.

3.4 Interpretation and Theoretical Integration

The identified themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review. This stage involved connecting observed behaviours to concepts such as deindividuation, moral panic, and the attention economy, allowing for a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics.

4. Narrative and Discourse Analysis

In addition to thematic analysis, elements of narrative and discourse analysis are incorporated to examine how events and individuals are represented within the documentary. This involves analyzing the language, framing, and sequencing of information to understand how meaning is constructed for the audience.

Particular attention is given to:

- How the perpetrator is portrayed in relation to media attention and identity
- How members of the online community describe their actions and motivations
- How the documentary frames the ethical implications of digital vigilantism

This dual analytical approach allows the study to address not only what behaviours occur, but also how those behaviours are interpreted and communicated.

5. Ethical Considerations

Although this study relies on publicly available media rather than direct human subjects, ethical considerations remain important. The documentary includes real individuals, some of whom were subject to misidentification and online harassment. As such, this analysis avoids unnecessary speculation about individuals and focuses instead on broader behavioural patterns and systemic dynamics.

Additionally, care is taken to critically engage with the documentary as a constructed narrative. Recognizing that editing choices influence how events are presented, the study does not treat the documentary as an objective record, but rather as a mediated representation that both reflects and shapes audience perception.

6. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the reliance on a single documentary as the primary data source restricts the scope of the analysis. While the case study provides depth, it may not fully capture the diversity of online behaviours across different contexts.

Second, the documentary format inherently involves selection and omission. Certain events, perspectives, or details may be emphasized or excluded, potentially influencing the interpretation of behaviour. This limitation is mitigated by situating the analysis within broader theoretical frameworks, but it cannot be entirely eliminated.

Finally, as a qualitative study, the findings are interpretive rather than generalised. The goal is not to produce universally applicable conclusions, but to generate insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of human behaviour in digital environments.

7. Conclusion

This methodology provides a structured and theoretically grounded approach to analyzing the behavioural patterns depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*. By combining thematic analysis with elements of narrative and discourse analysis, the study is able to examine both the actions of individuals and the broader social dynamics in which those actions occur.

The following sections will apply this methodological framework to a detailed analysis of key behavioural patterns, including obsession, ethical ambiguity, and the interplay between media attention and human action.

Analysis Section I: Identity Construction and Performance Behaviour

One of the most striking behavioural patterns evident in the documentary is the deliberate construction of identity by the perpetrator. Rather than acting in isolation, the individual at the centre of the investigation engages in a form of performance behaviour that is explicitly designed for an audience. This suggests that the actions themselves cannot be fully understood without considering the role of observation and recognition.

From a psychological perspective, this behaviour aligns with theories of narcissism and external validation. The perpetrator demonstrates a clear awareness of how content circulates online and appears to derive satisfaction not only from the acts themselves but from the reactions they provoke. This indicates a shift from private deviance to public performance, in which the visibility of the act becomes central to its meaning.

The digital environment plays a crucial role in enabling this transformation. Online platforms provide immediate feedback in the form of views, comments, and shares, effectively rewarding content that generates strong emotional responses. In this context, the perpetrator's actions can be interpreted as part of a feedback loop in which attention reinforces behaviour. The more disturbing the content, the greater the reaction, and consequently, the greater the perceived validation.

Importantly, this pattern is not limited to the perpetrator. The online community itself participates in a parallel process of identity construction. Members of the group begin to see themselves as investigators, defenders of justice, and participants in a morally significant mission. This shared identity is reinforced through interaction, collaboration, and the collective interpretation of evidence.

Analysis Section II: Collective Intelligence vs. Mob Mentality

The documentary provides a compelling illustration of collective intelligence in action. Individuals with diverse skills and perspectives collaborate to analyze data, identify patterns, and generate hypotheses. In many instances, the group demonstrates a level of analytical sophistication that rivals formal investigative processes.

However, this collective intelligence exists in tension with the potential for mob mentality. As the group becomes more emotionally invested, the distinction

between careful analysis and impulsive judgment begins to blur. The same mechanisms that enable effective collaboration rapid communication, shared focus, and mutual reinforcement also facilitate the spread of misinformation and the escalation of collective emotion.

One particularly significant moment in the documentary involves the misidentification of a suspect, highlighting the dangers of decentralized investigation without accountability. This incident underscores a key limitation of online collective behaviour: the absence of formal structures for verification and responsibility. While traditional institutions are often criticized for inefficiency, they provide mechanisms for oversight that are largely absent in digital communities.

This duality between intelligence and impulsivity reflects a broader pattern in human behaviour. Groups have the capacity to produce outcomes that exceed the abilities of individual members, but they are also prone to error when emotional intensity overrides critical thinking. The digital environment amplifies both possibilities, creating a context in which the consequences of collective action can be both highly effective and deeply problematic.

Analysis Section III: Obsession and Psychological Investment

1. Introduction

One of the most compelling behavioural patterns depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* is the gradual transformation of casual interest into sustained obsession among members of the online community. What begins as a reaction to a disturbing video evolves into a prolonged and deeply personal commitment to identifying the perpetrator. This shift is not incidental, but rather reflects underlying psychological mechanisms that are intensified within digital environments.

Obsession, in this context, is not limited to pathological fixation. Instead, it represents a spectrum of heightened cognitive and emotional investment characterized by persistent attention, reinforced motivation, and a narrowing of focus. By examining how this pattern develops and is sustained, it becomes possible to identify broader dynamics of human behaviour that extend beyond the specific case presented in the documentary.

2. Curiosity to Commitment

The initial engagement of participants is driven primarily by shock and moral outrage. Exposure to acts of animal cruelty triggers an immediate emotional response, which motivates individuals to seek additional information and engage with others who share their reaction. At this early stage, participation is

relatively low-cost and exploratory, consisting of viewing content, reading discussions, and making occasional contributions.

However, as individuals begin to interact within the group, their level of engagement increases. This escalation can be understood through the concept of cognitive investment. Once individuals contribute time and effort whether by analyzing a video, posting a theory, or collaborating with others they become more psychologically committed to the outcome. This investment creates a sense of ownership over the investigation, making disengagement less likely.

Importantly, this transition is often gradual and largely unintentional. Participants do not necessarily set out to become deeply involved; rather, their involvement intensifies through repeated exposure, interaction, and reinforcement. The digital environment facilitates this process by providing constant access to new information and ongoing discussion, effectively sustaining attention over extended periods.

3. Reinforcement Mechanisms in Digital Environments

The persistence of obsessive engagement is closely linked to reinforcement mechanisms embedded within online platforms. These mechanisms operate on both social and psychological levels, creating a feedback loop that encourages continued participation.

3.1 Social Reinforcement

Participants receive validation from others in the form of responses, agreement, and recognition. Even relatively minor contributions can be acknowledged and rewarded, reinforcing the behaviour that produced them. This validation is particularly significant in group settings, where shared goals and collective identity amplify the value of recognition.

3.2 Informational Reinforcement

The investigation itself provides intermittent rewards in the form of new clues, discoveries, or perceived breakthroughs. This pattern of unpredictable reinforcement is especially powerful, as it mirrors the dynamics observed in other forms of sustained engagement, such as gaming or gambling. The possibility of uncovering critical information motivates participants to remain active, even during periods of uncertainty.

3.3 Emotional Reinforcement

Emotional intensity plays a crucial role in sustaining obsession. Feelings of anger, urgency, and moral righteousness not only motivate action but also create a sense of purpose. These emotions are continually reactivated through exposure to content and interaction with other participants, preventing the natural decline of interest that might otherwise occur.

Together, these reinforcement mechanisms create a self-sustaining cycle in which engagement leads to reward, which in turn drives further engagement.

4. Identity and the Internalization of Role

As involvement deepens, participants begin to internalize their role within the group. They no longer see themselves as passive observers, but as active contributors to a meaningful cause. This shift represents a critical stage in the development of obsession, as the activity becomes integrated into the individual's sense of identity.

In the documentary, members of the online community frequently describe their actions in terms that reflect responsibility and purpose. They position themselves as investigators, protectors, or advocates, adopting roles that carry moral and social significance. This identity construction is reinforced through interaction with others who share similar perspectives, creating a strong sense of belonging and collective mission.

The internalization of role has important implications for behaviour. Once individuals define themselves in relation to the investigation, disengagement is no longer a neutral choice. Instead, it may be perceived as a failure to fulfil a responsibility or a withdrawal from a shared moral commitment. This increases the likelihood of sustained involvement, even when participation becomes stressful or disruptive.

5. The Blurring of Boundaries

A notable consequence of sustained psychological investment is the blurring of boundaries between the investigation and other aspects of participants' lives. As obsession intensifies, the activity begins to occupy a central position in daily routines, influencing how individuals allocate time, attention, and emotional energy.

This blurring is facilitated by the accessibility of digital platforms, which allow participants to remain connected to the investigation at all times. Unlike traditional forms of engagement that are limited by physical location or scheduled interaction, online participation can occur continuously, creating a sense of immersion that is difficult to disengage from.

The documentary illustrates how this immersion can lead to significant personal impact. Participants describe staying awake for extended periods, prioritizing the investigation over other responsibilities, and experiencing heightened emotional states. These patterns reflect a shift from voluntary engagement to compulsive involvement, in which participation is driven as much by psychological need as by conscious choice.

6. Obsession and Ethical Judgment

The development of obsession has important implications for ethical decision-making. As individuals become more emotionally invested, their capacity for critical evaluation may be influenced by their commitment to the outcome. This can result in a narrowing of perspective, where alternative interpretations or cautionary considerations are overlooked.

In the context of the documentary, this dynamic is evident in moments where the urgency to identify a suspect leads to premature conclusions. The desire for resolution, combined with the emotional weight of the situation, creates conditions in which evidence may be interpreted in a way that confirms existing beliefs rather than challenges them.

This pattern is consistent with broader research on motivated reasoning, which suggests that individuals are more likely to accept information that aligns with their goals and reject information that contradicts them. In a highly engaged and emotionally charged environment, this tendency is amplified, increasing the risk of error.

7. Broader Implications

The patterns of obsession observed in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* is not unique to this case. Similar dynamics can be identified in a range of digital contexts, including online activism, fandom communities, and conspiracy movements. In each case, sustained engagement is driven by a combination of cognitive investment, social reinforcement, and emotional intensity.

These patterns highlight a fundamental aspect of human behaviour: the capacity for deep focus and commitment when individuals perceive their actions as meaningful. However, they also underscore the potential risks associated with environments that amplify and sustain this engagement without providing mechanisms for reflection or regulation.

8. Conclusion

Obsession and psychological investment play a central role in shaping the behaviour of the online community depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*. What begins as a moment of shared outrage evolves into a sustained and deeply embedded commitment, driven by reinforcement mechanisms, identity formation, and emotional intensity.

This analysis demonstrates that obsession is not merely an individual phenomenon, but a socially and technologically mediated process. The digital environment not only enables sustained engagement but actively encourages it, creating conditions in which ordinary patterns of curiosity and concern can develop into extraordinary levels of involvement. Understanding this process is essential for interpreting both the strengths and limitations of collective action in the digital age.

Analysis Section IV: The Ethics of Digital Vigilantism

1. Introduction

The emergence of digital vigilantism as depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* raises significant ethical questions about the role of individuals and communities in the pursuit of justice. While the actions of the online group are often framed as morally justified responses to disturbing criminal behaviour, their methods and consequences reveal a more complex ethical landscape.

Digital vigilantism exists at the intersection of empowerment and risk. On one hand, it reflects a democratization of investigative capacity, allowing ordinary individuals to contribute to the identification of wrongdoing. On the other hand, it operates outside formal systems of accountability, increasing the potential for harm. This section examines the ethical tensions inherent in digital vigilantism, focusing on issues of legitimacy, responsibility, and unintended consequences.

2. The Moral Justification for Vigilantism

At the core of the group's actions is a strong sense of moral conviction. The initial acts of animal cruelty depicted in the documentary provoke widespread outrage, creating a shared belief that intervention is both necessary and justified. This response aligns with broader patterns of moral reasoning in which individuals feel compelled to act when institutional responses are perceived as insufficient or delayed.

Participants in the online community frequently frame their actions in terms of justice and protection. They position themselves as filling a gap left by formal authorities, suggesting that their involvement is not only justified but necessary. This perception is reinforced by the collaborative nature of the group, which creates a sense of collective legitimacy.

However, moral conviction alone does not resolve the ethical complexities of vigilantism. While the intention to prevent harm is significant, ethical evaluation must also consider the methods used and the consequences produced. The documentary illustrates that good intentions do not necessarily lead to

ethically sound outcomes, particularly in environments where oversight is limited.

3. The Problem of Legitimacy

A central ethical issue in digital vigilantism is the question of legitimacy. Traditional systems of justice are grounded in established procedures, evidentiary standards, and institutional accountability. These structures are designed to minimize error and protect the rights of individuals, even in the pursuit of justice.

In contrast, digital vigilantism operates without these safeguards. Participants are not bound by formal rules of evidence, nor are they subject to consistent standards of verification. This creates a situation in which conclusions may be reached based on incomplete or misinterpreted information.

The documentary highlights this issue through instances of misidentification, where individuals are wrongly accused and subjected to significant harm. These incidents demonstrate the risks associated with decentralized investigation, particularly when participants lack the training or resources necessary to evaluate evidence rigorously.

The absence of legitimacy does not necessarily invalidate all outcomes produced by digital vigilantism, but it does raise important questions about reliability and fairness. Without mechanisms for accountability, there is limited recourse for those who are harmed by incorrect conclusions.

4. Responsibility and Accountability

Closely related to the issue of legitimacy is the question of responsibility. In traditional investigative contexts, responsibility is clearly defined. Law enforcement agencies, legal institutions, and individual officers are accountable for their actions and decisions.

In digital environments, responsibility is often diffuse. Actions are distributed across a network of participants, making it difficult to attribute accountability to any single individual. This diffusion of responsibility can reduce the perceived consequences of harmful actions, as individuals may view themselves as only a small part of a larger process.

The documentary illustrates how this dynamic can lead to ethical ambiguity. Participants contribute to investigations, share information, and engage in speculation, but may not fully consider the potential impact of their actions. When harm occurs such as the targeting of an innocent individual it is unclear who should be held responsible.

This lack of accountability represents a significant ethical challenge. Without clear responsibility, there is limited incentive for caution, increasing the likelihood of error and harm.

5. Harm and Unintended Consequences

One of the most critical aspects of ethical evaluation is the consideration of harm. While digital vigilantism is often motivated by a desire to prevent wrongdoing, it can produce unintended consequences that are themselves harmful.

The documentary provides a clear example of this through the misidentification of a suspect, which results in severe personal consequences. This incident underscores the potential for digital communities to inflict harm even when acting with good intentions. The speed and scale of online communication amplify this risk, as information can spread rapidly and reach a wide audience before it can be verified.

In addition to direct harm, digital vigilantism can also contribute to broader social consequences. Public accusations and speculation can undermine trust, create fear, and reinforce a culture of judgment without due process. These effects extend beyond individual cases, influencing how justice is perceived and enacted in digital spaces.

6. The Role of Emotion in Ethical Decision-Making

Emotion plays a central role in shaping the ethical landscape of digital vigilantism. The strong emotional responses elicited by the initial acts of cruelty particularly anger and empathy serve as powerful motivators for action. However, these same emotions can also influence judgment, leading to decisions that prioritize immediacy over accuracy.

In the documentary, the intensity of emotional engagement contributes to a sense of urgency that can override caution. Participants are driven by a desire to achieve resolution, which may lead them to accept conclusions that align with their expectations. This dynamic reflects a broader tension between emotion and rationality in ethical decision-making.

While emotion is an essential component of moral reasoning, its influence must be balanced by critical evaluation. In the absence of such balance, ethical judgment may become reactive rather than reflective, increasing the risk of harmful outcomes.

7. Ethical Ambiguity and the Limits of Vigilantism

Ultimately, the ethical landscape of digital vigilantism is characterized by ambiguity. The actions of the online community cannot be easily categorized as

either wholly justified or entirely problematic. Instead, they reflect a complex interplay of intention, method, and consequence.

The documentary suggests that digital vigilantism operates within a space where traditional ethical frameworks are strained. The accessibility of information and the capacity for collective action create new possibilities for engagement, but also new risks. As individuals take on roles traditionally reserved for institutions, questions of authority, responsibility, and fairness become increasingly difficult to resolve.

This ambiguity highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of justice in the digital age. Rather than viewing digital vigilantism as inherently positive or negative, it is more productive to examine the conditions under which it produces beneficial or harmful outcomes.

8. Conclusion

The ethical dimensions of digital vigilantism, as depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*, reveal the complexities of collective action in digitally mediated environments. While the pursuit of justice is a powerful and often commendable motivation, the absence of formal structures for legitimacy and accountability introduces significant risks.

This analysis demonstrates that digital vigilantism is not simply a reflection of moral engagement, but a phenomenon shaped by the interplay of emotion, technology, and social dynamics. Understanding its ethical implications is essential for evaluating both its potential and its limitations in contemporary society.

Analysis Section V: Media Feedback Loops and the Attention Economy

1. Introduction

A central dynamic underlying the events depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* is the relationship between behaviour and attention. The actions of both the perpetrator and the online community are shaped, amplified, and sustained by systems that reward visibility and engagement. This relationship can be understood through the concept of the attention economy, in which attention functions as a scarce and valuable resource that influences behaviour across digital environments.

The documentary illustrates how attention operates not merely as a passive response to events, but as an active force that shapes those events. The interaction between content creation and audience engagement produces a feedback loop in which behaviour is continuously modified and reinforced. This section examines how these feedback loops function and how they contribute to the escalation of both individual and collective actions.

2. Attention as Motivation

In digital environments, attention serves as a powerful motivator. Metrics such as views, shares, and comments provide immediate and quantifiable indicators of visibility, creating incentives for individuals to produce content that captures and sustains audience interest.

The perpetrator's behaviour in the documentary can be interpreted through this lens. The progression of actions suggests an increasing awareness of audience response and a corresponding escalation in the nature of the content produced. Rather than acting in isolation, the individual appears to engage in a form of performance that is shaped by the expectation of observation.

This dynamic reflects a broader shift in how behaviour is motivated. Traditional forms of deviance often occur in private or within limited social contexts. In contrast, digitally mediated behaviour can be oriented toward a potentially global audience, transforming actions into performances designed to elicit reaction. The pursuit of attention becomes intertwined with the behaviour itself, blurring the distinction between action and representation.

3. The Feedback Loop Mechanism

The concept of a feedback loop is central to understanding how attention influences behaviour. In this context, a feedback loop consists of three key stages:

1. **Content Production** – An individual creates and shares content.
2. **Audience Response** – The content generates reactions, including emotional responses, discussion, and further dissemination.
3. **Behavioural Reinforcement** – The response influences future behaviour, encouraging similar or more extreme actions.

This cycle is evident throughout the documentary. The perpetrator produces content that generates strong reactions, which are then amplified by the online community. These reactions increase the visibility of the content, reinforcing the behaviour and encouraging further escalation.

Importantly, the online community is not merely a passive audience. By engaging with and disseminating the content, participants actively contribute to the feedback loop. Their efforts to analyze and share information increase the reach and impact of the material, unintentionally supporting the very behaviour they seek to stop.

4. Amplification through Digital Platforms

Digital platforms play a crucial role in sustaining feedback loops by prioritizing content that generates engagement. Algorithms are designed to surface material

that attracts attention, creating a system in which emotionally charged or controversial content is more likely to be seen.

This amplification has several implications:

- **Increased Visibility:** Content that provokes strong reactions is more widely distributed.
- **Accelerated Spread:** Information travels rapidly, reaching large audiences in a short period.
- **Reinforced Engagement:** Users are repeatedly exposed to similar content, sustaining their involvement.

In the context of the documentary, these dynamics contribute to both the rapid growth of the online community and the widespread dissemination of the perpetrator's actions. The same systems that enable collective investigation also facilitate the spread of harmful content, illustrating the dual nature of digital platforms.

5. Audience Complicity and Unintentional Reinforcement

A particularly complex aspect of the attention economy is the role of the audience in reinforcing behaviour. While participants in the online community are motivated by a desire to stop the perpetrator, their actions contribute to the visibility of the content and, by extension, to the feedback loop that sustains it.

This creates a paradox: efforts to expose and condemn harmful behaviour may simultaneously amplify it. The documentary implicitly raises this issue by highlighting the extent to which the perpetrator's actions depend on audience engagement. Without attention, the impact of the behaviour would be significantly reduced.

This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in digital culture, where the line between opposition and participation can become blurred. By engaging with content whether through criticism, analysis, or dissemination users may inadvertently contribute to its reach and influence.

6. Media Framing and Narrative Construction

In addition to user-driven amplification, formal media plays a role in shaping feedback loops. The documentary itself is part of this process, transforming events into a structured narrative that reaches a global audience. This raises important questions about the relationship between representation and behaviour.

Media framing influences how events are interpreted, which aspects are emphasized, and how individuals are perceived. By constructing a compelling narrative, media can both inform and intensify audience engagement. This

contributes to the ongoing circulation of the story, extending the life of the events beyond their original context.

While the documentary provides valuable insight into the dynamics of digital behaviour, it also participates in the attention economy it seeks to examine. This reflexive dimension highlights the complexity of analyzing media within systems that both reflect and shape human behaviour.

7. Broader Implications

The feedback loops observed in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* illustrate a fundamental characteristic of digital environments: behaviour and attention are deeply interconnected. Actions are shaped not only by internal motivations but by the anticipated and actual responses of others.

These dynamics extend beyond the specific case of the documentary. Similar patterns can be observed in areas such as social media influence, viral content, and online activism. In each case, the pursuit and distribution of attention play a central role in shaping behaviour.

Understanding these patterns is essential for addressing the challenges associated with digital media. Efforts to mitigate harmful behaviour must consider not only the actions themselves but the systems of attention that sustain them.

8. Conclusion

The concept of media feedback loops and the attention economy provides a critical framework for understanding the events depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*. By examining how attention functions as both a motivator and for reinforcement, this section highlights the interconnected nature of individual behaviour, collective action, and media systems.

This analysis underscores a key insight: in digital environments, attention is not neutral. It shapes behaviour, influences outcomes, and contributes to the escalation of events. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of human behaviour in the digital age.

Discussion

1. Introduction

The analysis of *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* reveals a complex interplay of psychological, social, and technological factors that shape human behaviour in digital environments. While each analytical section has examined a specific dimension identity construction, collective behaviour, obsession, ethical ambiguity, and media feedback loops the discussion synthesizes these elements to address the broader implications of the findings.

This section argues that the behaviours observed in the documentary are not isolated or anomalous. Rather, they represent intensified expressions of fundamental human tendencies, amplified by the structural and cultural characteristics of digital platforms. By situating these findings within the theoretical frameworks outlined in the literature review, it becomes possible to draw more general conclusions about the nature of human behaviour in the digital age.

2. Amplification of Core Human Tendencies

A central insight emerging from this study is that digital environments do not fundamentally alter human behaviour, but rather amplify pre-existing tendencies. Patterns such as the desire for recognition, the formation of group identity, and the pursuit of justice are deeply embedded in human psychology. What changes in digital contexts are the scale, speed, and intensity with which these patterns manifest.

The perpetrator's behaviour illustrates how the desire for recognition can evolve into performance action when an audience is readily available. Similarly, the online community demonstrates how group identity can form rapidly around shared emotional responses, leading to coordinated action. These patterns are consistent with established theories in psychology and sociology, but their expression in digital environments is markedly intensified.

This amplification is facilitated by key features of digital platforms, including anonymity, accessibility, and continuous connectivity. These features reduce traditional constraints on behaviour, allowing individuals to act in ways that may be less likely in offline contexts. As a result, behaviours that might otherwise remain moderate can escalate into more extreme forms.

3. The Dual Nature of Collective Action

The findings also highlight the dual nature of collective action in digital environments. On one hand, the online community in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* demonstrates the potential for collective intelligence. Participants collaborate effectively, share information, and contribute diverse perspectives, resulting in meaningful progress in the investigation.

On the other hand, the same processes give rise to risks associated with mob mentality. Emotional intensity, reinforcement of shared beliefs, and the absence of formal oversight can lead to errors, including misidentification and unjust targeting of individuals. This tension reflects a broader challenge in understanding group behaviour: the conditions that enable effective collaboration are often the same conditions that increase the likelihood of collective error.

The coexistence of these outcomes suggests that digital collective action cannot be evaluated in purely positive or negative terms. Instead, its impact depends on the balance between critical thinking and emotional engagement, as well as the presence or absence of mechanisms for accountability and verification.

4. Obsession as a Socially Mediated Process

Another key contribution of this study is the concept of obsession as a socially and technologically mediated phenomenon. Rather than viewing obsession solely as an individual psychological condition, the analysis demonstrates how it emerges through interaction, reinforcement, and environmental design.

Participants in the documentary do not become obsessed in isolation. Their engagement is shaped by continuous interaction with others, exposure to new information, and the rewards associated with participation. This suggests that obsession is not simply a product of individual predisposition, but a dynamic process influenced by social context and technological structure.

This perspective has broader implications for understanding behaviour in digital environments. It indicates that sustained engagement whether in investigative communities, social movements, or other online contexts is often driven by mechanisms that operate at both individual and collective levels. Recognizing this interplay is essential for understanding how and why certain forms of engagement intensify over time.

5. Ethical Complexity in the Absence of Structure

The ethical analysis of digital vigilantism underscores the challenges associated with action in environments that lack formal structures of authority and accountability. While participants are motivated by a desire to achieve justice, their actions occur outside established systems designed to ensure fairness and accuracy.

This creates a context in which ethical decision-making is shaped by emotion, urgency, and group dynamics rather than by consistent principles or procedures. The incident is a form of ethical ambiguity in which actions may be simultaneously understandable and problematic.

The findings suggest that the democratization of investigative capacity while empowering also introduces significant risks. Without mechanisms for oversight, individuals and groups may act in ways that produce harm, even when their intentions are aligned with socially valued goals. This highlights the importance of developing frameworks for responsible engagement in digital environments.

6. The Central Role of Attention

The concept of the attention economy provides a unifying framework for understanding the interactions between the perpetrator, the online community, and the broader media environment. Attention functions as both a motivator and for reinforcement, shaping behaviour at multiple levels.

The perpetrator's actions are influenced by the anticipation of attention, while the online community's engagement contributes to the visibility and impact of those actions. This creates a feedback loop in which behaviour and attention are mutually reinforcing. Importantly, this dynamic operates largely independent of intention; even actions aimed at stopping harmful behaviour can contribute to its amplification.

This insight has significant implications for how digital behaviour is understood and managed. It suggests that efforts to address harmful content must consider not only the content itself but also the systems of attention that sustain it.

Without addressing these underlying dynamics, interventions may be limited in their effectiveness.

7. Implications for Understanding Digital Society

The patterns identified in this study extend beyond the specific case of *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* and offer broader insights into the nature of digital society. As individuals increasingly interact within online environments, the dynamics observed in the documentary are likely to become more prevalent.

These include:

- Rapid formation of communities around shared emotions
- Intensification of engagement through reinforcement mechanisms
- Blurring of boundaries between observation and participation
- Increased potential for both collective problem-solving and collective error

Understanding these patterns is essential for addressing challenges related to misinformation, online harassment, and the ethical use of digital platforms. It also has implications for the design of technologies, suggesting a need for systems that encourage critical thinking, accountability, and responsible engagement.

8. Conclusion

The discussion demonstrates that the behaviours depicted in *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* are best understood as amplified expressions of fundamental human tendencies, shaped by the unique characteristics of digital environments. By integrating insights from psychology, sociology, and media

studies, this paper provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing these dynamics.

The findings highlight both the potential and the risks associated with digitally mediated behaviour, emphasizing the need for a nuanced approach to understanding and managing human interaction in the digital age.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* provides a compelling lens through which to examine the evolving nature of human behaviour in digitally mediated environments. By exploring the actions of both the perpetrator and the online community, this paper has identified a series of interconnected behavioural patterns that reflect enduring psychological tendencies while also highlighting the transformative impact of digital technology.

At its core, this study has argued that digital environments amplify fundamental aspects of human behaviour, including the desire for recognition, the formation of collective identity, and the pursuit of justice. These tendencies, while not new, are intensified by the structural features of online platforms, such as anonymity, immediacy, and continuous connectivity. As a result, behaviours that might otherwise remain moderate or contained can escalate in both scale and intensity.

The analysis of identity construction demonstrated how individuals may engage in performance behaviour shaped by the expectation of audience attention. In the case of the perpetrator, actions were not merely acts of deviance, but deliberate performances designed to provoke reaction and visibility. At the same time, members of the online community constructed identities centred on investigation and moral purpose, illustrating how digital spaces facilitate the rapid formation of meaningful social roles.

The examination of collective behaviour revealed the dual potential of online communities. On one hand, the group exhibited elements of collective intelligence, effectively collaborating to analyze information and generate insights. On the other hand, the same dynamics gave rise to instances of error and overreach, highlighting the risks associated with decentralized decision-making in the absence of formal oversight. This duality underscores the complexity of collective action, which cannot be understood in purely positive or negative terms.

The exploration of obsession and psychological investment further demonstrated how sustained engagement emerges through a combination of cognitive, social, and emotional reinforcement. Participants' increasing involvement was not solely a matter of individual disposition, but a product of

interaction within an environment designed to sustain attention and reward participation. This finding suggests that obsession, in digital contexts, is often a socially mediated process rather than an isolated psychological condition.

The ethical analysis of digital vigilantism emphasized the challenges of pursuing justice outside established institutional frameworks. While participants were motivated by a genuine desire to prevent harm, their actions raised significant concerns regarding legitimacy, accountability, and unintended consequences. The absence of formal structures for verification and responsibility created conditions in which harmful outcomes could occur despite well-intentioned efforts.

Finally, the discussion of media feedback loops and the attention economy highlighted the central role of attention in shaping behaviour. The interaction between content creation and audience response created a self-reinforcing cycle in which visibility influenced action, and action generated further visibility. This dynamic illustrates that attention is not a natural result of behaviour, but a driving force that actively shapes it.

Taken together, these findings contribute to a broader understanding of human behaviour in the digital age. They suggest that while technology introduces new contexts for interaction, the underlying drivers of behaviour remain deeply rooted in human psychology. What changes is the environment in which these drivers operate an environment that amplifies, accelerates, and, in some cases, distorts their expression.

The implications of this study extend beyond the specific case examined. As digital platforms continue to play an increasingly central role in social life, the patterns identified here are likely to become more prevalent. This underscores the importance of developing frameworks for responsible engagement, as well as systems that promote accountability, critical thinking, and ethical awareness.

In conclusion, *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* serves not only as a true crime narrative, but as a powerful case study of human behaviour under the conditions of digital mediation. By examining the interplay between individual motivation, collective dynamics, and technological structure, this paper has sought to illuminate the complexities of behaviour in an increasingly connected world. Understanding these dynamics is essential for navigating the opportunities and challenges that define contemporary digital society.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Behavioural Coding Table

Category	Example Behaviours	Observed in Case Study
Identity Performance	Use of pseudonyms, curated online persona	Investigators' avatars, perpetrator's videos
Obsessive Engagement	Repeated monitoring, detailed investigation	Forum tracking, timeline analysis
Collective Action	Coordinated analysis, sharing information	Geo-location, media verification
Ethical Decision-Making	Balancing moral duty with potential harm	Speculation on suspects, media engagement
Feedback Loop/Amplification	Responses to attention and peer validation	Likes, shares, news coverage

Appendix B: Timeline of Key Events

1. Early Animal Cruelty Videos Posted Online
2. Online Investigators Begin Tracking Perpetrator
3. Media Amplification Increases Public Awareness
4. Perpetrator Escalates Behaviour for Attention
5. Collaborative Investigation Leads to Arrest

Appendix C: Diagram of Feedback Loops

- Perpetrator Actions → Online Attention → Reinforcement → Escalation
- Investigator Actions → Peer Validation → Engagement → Amplified Collective Response
- Platform Algorithm → Content Amplification → Behavioural Intensification

Diagram: Feedback Loops and Behaviour in *Don't Fk with Cats**

Core Components

1. **Perpetrator Actions**
 - o Content creation (e.g., videos, posts)
 - o Escalation in behaviour
 - o Performance attention-seeking
2. **Online Community**
 - o Observation & investigation
 - o Information sharing
 - o Emotional and moral engagement
 - o Identity construction (investigator, whistleblower)
3. **Audience / Wider Media**
 - o Sharing and amplification
 - o Public attention & commentary
 - o News outlets / social media coverage
4. **Feedback Loops**
 - o Actions generate reactions → reactions influence future actions
 - o Escalation reinforced by attention
 - o Online collaboration and obsession amplify engagement
5. **Ethical & Psychological Mediators**
 - o Moral motivation
 - o Obsession / compulsion
 - o Ethical ambiguity

Visual Layout (Text-based for concept)

[Perpetrator Actions]

|

v

[Online Community Engagement] <-----> [Audience / Media Amplification]

|

v

[Behaviour Reinforcement]

|

+-----+

|

v

|

v

[Obsession / Identity] [Ethical Ambiguity]

|

v

(loops back to)

[Perpetrator Actions]