

A Social Communication Study of Attitudes toward Guide Dogs in China

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ABSTRACT

Although there is a relative lack of academic research on guide dogs in China, public opinion is extremely concerned about them. Public attitudes toward guide dogs are not homogeneous, but show a diversified pattern of evaluation. In this study, we analyzed the data of 50 respondents from different backgrounds (ranging in age from under 18 to over 45, and including students, white-collar workers, and freelancers) through questionnaire surveys and textual analyses, and combined them with the framework of Evaluation Theory, in order to explore the public's attitudes towards guide dogs and the logic of social communication behind them. The significance of the study is to reveal the characteristics of guide dogs as an "information community" and their interaction with the visually impaired and the social environment, so as to provide references for relevant policy making and public education.

KEYWORDS

Guide dogs; Social communication; Evaluation theory

1 Introduction

With their absolute obedience, superb skill and sufficient companionship, guide dogs bring valuable life convenience to the visually impaired. Through guide dogs, visually impaired people are able to communicate better with the outside world, establish connections and improve their quality of life. However, if the image of guide dogs is not sufficiently supported and encouraged in public, it may lead to a decrease in users' reliance on guide dogs, and ultimately a situation where the number of guide dogs may decrease and the interests of the visually impaired community may be jeopardized. Therefore, how to guide the society to have a correct and comprehensive understanding of guide dogs, how to clarify the relationship between guide dogs and other social subjects in the complex social environment, and how to shape a positive image of guide dogs and promote their practice through multi-dimensional communication have become key issues that need to be explored urgently.

There are about 17.31 million visually impaired people in China, and the number of guide dogs should be around 170,000^[1], but there are only about 400 professionally trained guide dogs in China. The gap between demand and supply reflects the preciousness and rarity of guide dogs, and also the fact that China's guide dog business is in a difficult starting stage. The training fees and daily expenses when applying for a guide dog, as well as the cost of training a guide dog, have created a dilemma for the development of guide dogs in China: the average cost of training a guide dog is around 200,000 yuan, and it takes a year and a half of training time, while the extremely strict screening process has resulted in the elimination of about 55% of the guide dogs^[2]. Article 16 of the Regulations on the Construction of a Barrier-free Environment, which came into effect on August 1, 2012, stipulates that "visually impaired persons carrying guide dogs in public places shall comply with the relevant state regulations, and the staff of public places shall provide barrier-free services in accordance with the relevant state regulations"^[3]. The appearance of guide dogs in public places inevitably enters the "public sphere", triggering widespread concern and discussion in society. Every person in the public sphere may have different opinions about guide dogs and react accordingly, which is full of risks and challenges for guide dogs and their users. People tend to satisfy their curiosity by gazing at guide dogs, and they may also intervene excessively in the image of guide dogs through communication channels such as the media, creating a new, personalized image. However, excessive attention and intervention may also lead to situations where guide dogs overreact or deviate from their original trajectory.

Therefore, it is particularly important to study public attitudes towards guide dogs and the social communication logic behind them. This issue is not only related to the future development of the guide dog industry, but also to the quality of life and social integration of the visually impaired community. With the gradual popularization of guide dogs in public space, it has become an urgent task to guide society to correctly understand and accept guide dogs, as well as how to enhance social awareness and support for guide dogs through effective communication strategies. The urgency and importance of this study is reflected in the need to not only solve the problems of insufficient number of guide dogs and limited social awareness, but also to promote the healthy development of the guide dog cause by enhancing the overall public awareness and attitude.

2 Literature review and research methodology

2.1 Research review

In the past, the number of academic studies on "guide dogs" in China was scarce, single-source and repetitive in direction, and most of them were story-type reports about the experiences of guide dogs in transportation trips, which could not be fully called academic studies in the scientific sense. Most of the few relevant results discuss the current situation and development of guide dog breeding, and there are almost no results in the field of communication science.

2.2 Research methods

2.2.1 Evaluation framework

Evaluation theory is concerned with the various attitudes negotiated in discourse, the intensity of emotions, and the way in which values are sourced and allied to the reader ^[4]. The evaluation system consists of three interrelated subsystems of meaning: attitude, intervention, and gradation ^[5]. Existing research utilizing evaluation theory can be divided into three main categories: first, the theory's identification, synthesis, and introduction; second, its application in the discourse analysis of news reports and translations; and third, investigations in fields such as medicine, ecology, and occupation. Evaluation theory provides a good standard for analyzing the attitudes and perceptions of guide dogs in order to understand how people perceive the subject of the study.

2.2.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The study invited 50 volunteers from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Tianjin and Qingdao to participate in the interviews. All the participants did not know the specific content and arrangement of the interviews in advance, except for the theme and purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted in a combination of online and offline methods, including 20 offline interviews with an average length of 37 minutes, and 30 online WeChat interviews with an average length of 32 minutes. The survey data shows that 94% of the respondents have a positive attitude towards guide dogs (e. g. "professional and reliable" and "helps visually impaired people to travel"), but their popularity is still low (45% of the respondents think that they are "not too popular"). This paradoxical phenomenon reflects the special position of guide dogs in the public sphere - both imbued with emotional value and facing the challenge of practical promotion. Awareness of guide dogs among the youth group (18-30 years old) mainly comes from social media (e.g. Xiaohongshu, Weibo, etc.), accounting for 72% of the total. For example, a student respondent aged 18-30 said, "Guide dogs help visually impaired people avoid risks and improve their safety." (Respondent 46) This perception is highly compatible with the youth group's enthusiasm for participation in public service.

3 Survey Analysis of Public Attitude Evaluation Survey on Guide Dogs

Table 1

Type	Respondent No.	Age range	Occupation	Attitude	Contact Channel	Suggestions for Improvement
Examples of positive evaluations	4	18-30 years old	Student	Lovely, docile, great first impression	Social Media	Policies in place to ensure guide dogs have smooth access to public places
	16	45 years old and above	Freelancers	Facilitating travel	Press Releases	Increase publicity channels
	31	18-30 years old	White Collar	Protecting the rights of the visually impaired	Social media	Doing a good job in spreading the knowledge of the people concerned in public places
	38	30-45 years old	Freelancers	Mindfulness	Seen it with my own eyes	Carrying out charitable activities
Examples of negative controversial reviews	20	30-45 years old	Civil servants	No knowledge at all	Don't know much about it	Increase publicity
	42	30-45 years old	Civil servants	Limited Beneficiary Population Reservations about	Press Releases	Increased subsidies for incubators and adoption of visually impaired persons
	43	18-30 years old	Freelancers	guide dogs in public places	Social Media	Strengthening the control of guide dog breeding

Summary: Although the majority of public attitudes are overwhelmingly positive, the public's perception of guide dogs is more emotional, and information is mainly obtained through social media, which is a closed source of information. At the same time, a small number of very typical negative/problematic attitudinal evaluations and suggestions made by the public reflect the lack of public popularity of guide dogs, confusion in management, and

difficulties in the development of and other problems. These views will help us to take a more comprehensive view of the public's attitude towards guide dogs, and help us to find out the hidden thinking and behavioral mechanisms behind them, and if necessary, provide references for future guidance and regulation.

4 Characteristics and avoidance: Do we really love guide dogs unconditionally?

4.1 Instinctive sense of distance

The study found that people's attitudes toward guide dogs are evaluated with a seemingly innate "sense of boundaries": First, there is a boundary between the owner and the guide dog. For example, interviewee 12 suggested that the owner and the guide dog need a lot of repetitive bonding training, and that there is still a gap and a "generation gap" between them; secondly, there is a boundary between the guide dog and the outside society. As suggested by Interviewee 17, guide dogs should not be the only means of guiding the blind, and related support services should also be provided, which seems to require the mobilization of more social resources. Interviewee 15 also expressed concern about how guide dogs would be placed after retirement and how they would spend the rest of their lives; thirdly, there is a boundary between guide dogs and the popularization of knowledge about guide dogs. Interviewee 03 pointed out that the basic knowledge of guide dogs was not yet understood by the public, and that it was only natural that guide dogs would not be given a high rating.

4.2 Love of "dogs" or "guide dogs"

Interviewee 24 emphasized in the interview: "In the scenes I have seen about guide dogs, whether they are videos or real-life situations, it seems that people have naturally put their love for dogs into them. If the guide dogs were not dogs, would people give them such exaggerated attention? I think this is something we need to seriously reflect on." In fact, similar voices have a place in cyberspace. Either radical or moderate, some people even think that "guide dogs" is entirely a wishful thinking of "dog lovers" to carry out the "deification movement". It must be said that the "dog" attribute of the guide dog is a double-edged sword for it, which may make people recognize and evaluate it from the original ontological concept of "dog" and may also make people focus on its "dog" halo to produce some undesirable effects. It may also make people focus on its "dog" halo and create some bad impressions.

4.3 Structure and devaluation of the value system

Interviewee 37 mentioned that the cost of breeding a qualified or even a good guide dog is huge and may be a costly endeavor. "It's horrible and sad, isn't it, that the guide dog is treated like an unfeeling machine, produced on an assembly line like a one-size-fits-all consumable commodity, with individuality suppressed in training and forced to submit to outside control ...?", What is the difference between a guide dog and a luxury item if it doesn't help the majority of blind people? "How to evaluate the guide dog is a kind of 'cultural freedom', there is no high and low noble and low, also can not be in its 'evaluation' on top of the judgment, can only say that to solve the problem of the path of view, some of the piercing voice will be things It can only be said that in terms of the path to solving problems, some harsh voices will be the driving force for the development and progress of things.

5 Another perspective: guide dogs in the eyes of their owners and their social exchanges

Xiao Hei is one of the few only three licensed guide dogs in Qingdao, and its owner Mr. Yue said: "Xiao Hei is my second pair of eyes. After having a guide dog, life and work have changed a lot, every day Xiao Hei took me to travel by bus to work, greatly improving the radius of activity, twice as fast as traveling with a cane, and more secure and accurate. Even in unfamiliar places, I just need to take out my cell phone and tell the dog how to go, and it can successfully take me to every place I want to go"; another Ms. Ding described her deep connection with her guide dog "Apple" in this way: "One by one, it's as if it happened yesterday"; After so many years of living in darkness, my life has been full of sunshine since I got a guide dog, and Apple has brought me a lot of convenience and happiness". Every owner has his own life story and journey, and it is difficult to be indifferent to the feelings of guide dogs, but almost all owners and members of the society are concerned about the "social communication" function of guide dogs. But almost all guide dog owners and members of society are concerned about the "social communication" function of guide dogs, which is also the biggest communication characteristic of guide dogs.

It is not difficult to find that the social communication of the guide dog is not only with "people" including its owner, family members, social people, etc., but also with the integration of "technology", this technical level of social communication is more secondary, for example, the guide dog through the "traffic light" system to determine when to go forward and signal the owner, this social communication is also two-way. For example, the owner sometimes indicates the guide dog's subsequent choices according to the voice broadcast on the cell phone. If the interaction between the

guide dog and the human belongs to the research field of "health communication", then the process of the guide dog's acceptance belongs to the public communication of "persuasion and attitudinal change". Guide dog breeding organizations should do a good job of "public relations" and so on.

To summarize, the guide dog is not only a "bridge" between the visually impaired and the outside world, but also a "reference". It helps its owner to establish social communication beyond the existing physical conditions and gives feedback to their thinking and decision-making. At the same time, on this basis, the guide dog can also give play to its own charm, attracting more new attention that it did not originally have, thus benignly promoting the development of the cycle of communication between the owner and the society, which is of great importance and far-reaching significance to the social integration and physical and mental health of the visually impaired.

In order to establish and expand the social communication of owners and guide dogs, firstly, we should see that this kind of social communication is "wide-mouth" and "multi-path". Secondly, we should make full use of the Internet, television and other technical means to build a barrier-free environment for the digital society and promote information flow. Lastly, we must learn to mobilize social capital, including but not limited to human resources and materials, in order to gain support and win the hearts and minds of the people as far as possible on the basis of inclusiveness and universality.

Guide dogs are not only a tool, but also a touchstone for social inclusion. In the future, it is necessary to balance the investment of resources and actual needs, and promote the harmonious development of "human, dog and environment". Emotions not only have natural attributes but also social attributes, so emotional communication can often activate individual emotions, arouse emotional resonance and intensify emotional tensions under different archetypal precipitation mechanisms. The special companion function of guide dogs not only leads the way for the visually impaired, but also opens the window of their hearts.

6 Summary and discussion

To sum up: (1) There is a rich philosophy behind "guide dogs" and their activities, and there are complicated reasons for the survival and development of guide dogs in China. (2) Most of the attitudes and evaluations towards guide dogs are positive, but a few negative evaluations can hit the nail on the head. (3) Human society should not only be aware of but also actively address the issues of acceptance and respect for guide dogs and other animals, working to improve public attitudes and their overall image.

Based on the above research, this paper has formed the following views: (1) In the future, we can increase the "soft" publicity and guidance to avoid the formation of public resistance to guide dogs (2) We should establish "hard" constraints at the level of the law or other systems. (3) Be cautious about traditional measures such as "blindly or blindly increasing the investment in the guide dog business", for example, some interviewees in this study have already expressed their aversion to this kind of action. In order to change the embarrassment of guide dogs in reality, it is necessary not only to regulate and supervise the law, but also to make the public understand and accept guide dogs, and the self-management of the visually impaired and guide dogs is also essential. This "subject-object-environment" paradigm is indeed a useful attempt to promote the cause of guide dogs. It is reasonable to believe that after the comprehensive attitude evaluation system of guide dogs is clarified and the corresponding problems are solved, the "guide dogs" will appear in front of us with a higher attitude and excellent performance, which may be an unexpected answer to the question of how we recognize ourselves.

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