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Session: Emotional geographies and the digital

Title: "Too hot to handle": Making missing and stolen pets present in virtual space.

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Abstract: Pets are socially, culturally, and emotionally entangled in human lives. We live with pets, sharing sofas and beds, changing the spatial layout of our homes by bringing animal furniture in. Some would rather go without, to care for their pets, whilst others spend lavishly on animal care (such as spas and hotels). For humans, pets are loved, a bond that extends beyond companionship to incorporate emotions and mental health benefits. Pet theft is a crime that exploits these emotional relationships.

In this paper we explore the emotional geographies of online search/ing for missing and stolen pets. To do so, we utilise interviews with people whose dogs are stolen and have not returned, and those who have been reunited, and interviews with charities dedicated to missing and stolen pets. We also make use of tweets from 20 accounts dedicated to missing and stolen pets.

In sharing posts online in an attempt to find missing and stolen pets, humans undertake a number of tactics. First, posts are shared with the idea of making them "too hot to handle". This involves using images and hashtags in an attempt to "go viral". Second, the posts are imbued with emotion, detailing the difficulties of losing a pet. Third, the use of images and descriptions of the pets' charismatic qualities and characteristics are used in an attempt to make their pets visible online. The findings here have relevance to literature on absence and presence as well as to inform practices of missing and stolen animal charities.