Perceptions of Pit Bulls and Other Canine Breeds

Author: Mallary Paoli
Mentor: Dr. Linda Blythe

Materials and Methods

The survey was designed to analyze people’s perceptions of pit bull breed dogs compared to their perceptions of non-pit bull breed dogs. Participants were enrolled in Baccalaureate core classes at Oregon State University and volunteered to participate. The survey presented a picture of a dog and then seven questions regarding the participants’ view of each breed. The pit bull breeds were the American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Bull Terrier, and Boxer. The non-pit bull breeds included the Cocker Spaniel, Rottweiler, Labrador Retriever, and German Shepherd. The survey used a five point Likert scale. The final page collected demographic information and asked if the respondent was a dog owner and pit bull owner. Data were analyzed using NCSS 2007 one and two-way analysis of variance, including variance tables, means and effects, and Fisher’s LSD Multiple-Comparison Test.

Survey Questions

1. How trainable is this breed? (Not trainable to Very trainable)
2. How friendly is this breed? (Not friendly to Friendly)
3. Is this breed appropriate as a family pet? (Not appropriate to Very appropriate)
4. How likely is this breed to attack a human? (Not likely to Very likely)
5. How likely is this breed to attack another animal? (Not likely to Very likely)
6. How would you feel if this dog was off leash and approached you at the park? (Very uncomfortable to Very comfortable)
7. Is this breed considered a pit bull breed? (Yes or No)

Results

The Breeds correspond to the following numbers: Bull Terrier (11), Boxer (12), American Staffordshire Terrier (13), American Pit Bull Terrier (14), German Shepherd (21), Labrador Retriever (22), Cocker Spaniel (23), and Rottweiler (24).

Means of Survey  Question 7: correct identification of a breed’s pit bull/non-pit bull category. P < 0.05. 1 = correct identification, 0 = incorrect identification.

Conclusions

When compared by breed, each question yielded significant data. Overall, respondents rated the pit bull breeds similarly with the exception of the Boxer. The Rottweiler was rated similarly to the pit bull breeds in almost every question. This observation is explained by the pit bull identification question. Respondents had trouble categorizing Boxers, Bull Terriers, and Rottweilers. The grouping of Rottweilers and pit bull breeds is explained by the fact that 30% of respondents thought it was a pit bull breed and also the fact that Rottweilers share some of the same stereotypes as pit bulls.

The American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Bull Terrier, and Rottweiler all received a lower mean response than the other four breeds. It is significant that the average of the lower scores was 3.3, which is still on the positive side of the rating spectrum. This shows that while people may perceive the non-pit bull breeds more positively, they do not see pit bulls negatively. Labrador Retrievers had the highest rating (4.4), followed by Cocker Spaniels (3.9), German Shepherd (3.7) and Boxers (3.6). There was no significant difference in ratings between dog owners and non-dog owners or pit bull owners from all others. There were also no significant differences due to the respondents’ age or gender. Future research with a larger, more representative population could help identify respondent factors that are correlated to perceptions of pit bulls. This could help animal shelters better educate the public, along with future dog owners, about pit bull breed dogs.

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Myths About Pit Bulls

• Myth: Pit bulls have locking jaws.
• Fact: Pit bulls do have very strong jaw muscles due to the anatomy of their skull, but their jaw does not have a locking mechanism.
• Myth: Pit bulls don’t feel pain.
• Fact: Many pit bull breeds are known for their “gameness” or determination and will to not give up. This is not unique to pit bulls. For example, Border Collies will herd for hours even when they are tired and Labrador Retrievers have been known to literally drop from exhaustion when bird hunting. Gameness can be exploited negatively (dog fighting), but is more often a positive trait (search and rescue, agility trials, loyalty).
• Myth: Pit bulls have a chemical imbalance in their brain that makes them vicious.
• Fact: Pit bulls do not have any distinguishing chemicals in their brain compared to other breeds. Like all dogs, genetics and environmental factors both affect how pit bulls behave. All dogs have some genetic disposition of aggression, but training and socialization play a much larger factor in the dog’s behavior.