



Who Would You Bring Home? People's Perceptions of Animal Adoptability

Nicole Gaglione ; Dr. M. Romolini

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Abstract

Although the motto "adopt don't shop" has increased the general public's awareness surrounding shelters and animal adoption, there is not a whole lot of information based on people's perceptions of what makes an animal "adoptable" or not and how this impacts shelter animals' quality of life. In one study, it was discovered how the act of shelter employees labeling each dog based on its breed could have a major impact on the dogs adoptability. So why is this? Why are people so caught up in the breed, attractiveness, age, health, or as one study describes the "sociability" of dogs as the main determinants for a dogs adoption? This research aims to better understand why and how people label animals as "adoptable" and what this means for shelters and the populations of animals within them. Research methods will include: 1) semi-structured interviews with animal care takers in several Los Angeles animal care facilities and 2) an in-person survey of the people who enter these facilities. Results will provide information about how animal owners perceive their own pets and/or potential pets based on characteristics of "adoptability," and how animal care workers view their role in influencing these perceptions. Findings may aid local shelters in promoting adoption and improving strategies to alter the general public's perspectives on viewing animals as more than just commodity pets but rather see them as individual beings that all deserve to be "adoptable."

Defining The Issue/Purpose

My research aims to assess how future pet owners decide what makes an animal adoptable or not. A better understanding of the reasons behind people's choices to purchase animals from pet shops or breeders rather than adopting pets in shelters may help to understand why "adoptability" is such a vital aspect in deciding which pet to take home, and which ones to leave behind.

- The study will look at people's preferences when deciding on adopting or buy a pet based on certain factors, like their age, breed, health, and so on. This assessment of pets having to be in a state judged as "adoptable" or not seeks to more deeply examine my assumption that there is a materialistic aspect of pet ownership, though the stated goal is to rescue animals for the sake of providing them with a better life.
- The lack of knowledge around shelters and the differences between kill and non kill shelters may be a major component in peoples' misconceptions of why buying pets from stores is actually more harmful than adopting or rescuing an animal living in shelters.
- Bringing these issues to attention may increase peoples awareness surrounding the misconceptions of animal adoptability and help better inform future pet owners on how to decide which pet is best suited for them.

Big Picture

Big picture: Improved understanding about why/how people view an animals adoptability could lead to the implementation of more involved adoption facilitations with the public in order to better inform people on the care of animals on the perceived adoptability of them. This could lead to an increase in adoption rates as well as educate people on shelters and the animals living there.

Research Questions:

- How do people judge an animal's "adoptability" ?
- Would people adopt elderly pets over younger pets or puppies?
- Would people adopt animals with disabilities, injuries, or issues with social behavior?



Methods

- In-person, semi-structured interviews with animal care specialists/staff members which will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic coding techniques. Interviews will be collected in Spring 2018.
- Voluntary surveys targeted at individuals who are interested in adopting their next pet. Approximately 50 surveys will be distributed at 3-5 shelters and pet stores in the Los Angeles area. The preliminary survey is shown below, and is still undergoing testing and refinement.
- This protocol was reviewed and approved by the LMU Institutional Review Board

1. Are you a pet owner? Yes No

If yes, did you adopt or buy your pet from a pet store? Adopt Pet Store

2. If you rescued your pet, what kind of shelter did you get them from? Kill Non Kill Don't Know

Prior to this survey, were you familiar with the terms kill or non kill shelters? Yes No

3. If applicable, please describe your current pet(s):

cat or dog (circle) breed: _____ age: _____ age when adopted or bought: _____

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cat or dog (circle) breed: _____ age: _____ age when adopted or bought: _____

4. What do you look for in a pet? (Please check any/all that apply)

younger high sociability w/ other animals specific breed

older high sociability w/ humans already trained

no preference of age no preference over appearance okay if not trained

5. Please answer the following statements by circling the most appropriate answer for you:

* I would be willing to adopt a dog who has issues with social behavior.

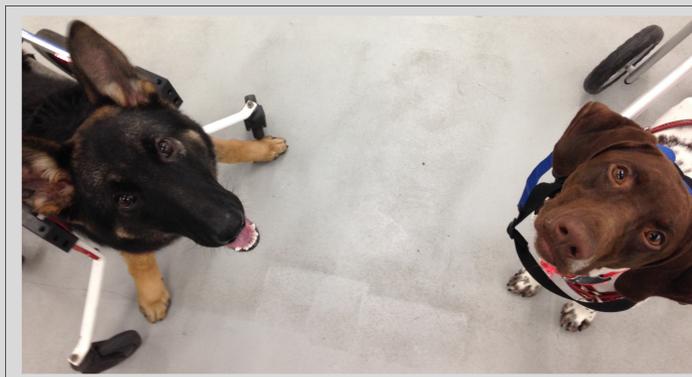
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

* I would rather adopt a dog who is younger/a puppy rather than an elderly dog.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

* I would be willing to adopt a dog who is disabled and would need special assistance (needs help walking, incontinent, etc.)

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree



Ava & Josie in their wheel chairs at Two Hands Four Paws

Anticipated Results

- **Surveys:** Respondents will be limited to those who are interested in adopting a new pet to provide a more focused understanding of the preferences of actual pet owners, rather than the general public.
 - Based on past research, I expect the majority of survey respondents to adopt pets based on positive social behavior, desire for certain breeds, and preference for younger rather than older animals.
 - In one study, it was seen how people judge whether or not to adopt a dog based on his/her "sociability," explaining that individuals saw these dogs as "more approachable, friendly, intelligent, and less dangerous and aggressive" (1). This seems to be a common trend among potential owners.
 - Another research project found that individuals often select dogs based on their breed, revealing how "dog breed identification practices are often based upon owner reports or staff determination according to the dog's appearance" (2).



- **Staff Interviews:** These in-person, semi-structured interviews will take place within several different animal adoption centers and shelters within the Los Angeles region. By selecting individuals who are adoption specialists, non-profit founders, and animal care staff will bring a unique and knowledgeable perspective to the concept of animal adoptability. Being that these individuals have dedicated their lives to helping animals, their hands on experience and personal relationship to animal welfare
- I anticipate that many of the experienced care takers will be aware of the stereotyping and categorization of "adoptable" versus "undesirable" pets.
- In a study about breed stereotyping, researchers interviewed shelter workers who described how they "would knowingly mislabel a dog of a restricted breed, presumably to increase the dog's adoption chances" (6). One of the aims of this study is to better understand the experiences of animal care staff in the Los Angeles with breed identification; if they see it as an obstacle to getting certain pets adopted; and if so, what are the factors that contribute to this.

Background Literature

1. "Dog Breed Stereotype and Exposure to Negative Behavior: Effects on Perceptions of Adoptability" by John C. Wright, Alison Smith, Katie Daniel & Karen Adkins
2. "What's in a Name? Effect of Breed Perceptions & Labeling on Attractiveness, Adoptions & Length of Stay for Pit-Bull-Type Dogs" by Rebecca T. Barber & Clive D.L. Wynne
3. "Human and Animal Factors Related to Relinquishment of Dogs and Cats in 12 Selected Animal Shelters in the United States" by MD Salaman, John G New Jr, Janet M Scarlett, Philip H Kass, Rebecca Ruch-Gallie, & Suzanne Hetts
4. "Prediction of Adoption Versus Euthanasia Among Dogs and Cats in a California Animal Shelter" by Merry Lepper, Philip H Kass, & Lynette A Hart
5. "Shelters and Pet Overpopulation: A Statistical Black Hole" by Andrew N Rowan
6. "Is That Dog a Pit Bull? A Cross-Country Comparison of Perceptions of Shelter Workers Regarding Breed Identification" by Christy Hoffman, Natalie Harrison, London Wolff, & Carri Westgarth

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