The human response to pet rescue TV commercials

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Abstract: According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 6.5 million abandoned pets are housed in shelters in the United States. Of those   who are sheltered 670,000 dogs are euthanized. An opportunity exists to reduce the number of euthanized animals, primarily through adoption. Several benefactors to this animal rescue initiative have prompted pet rescue adoption through television commercials. This study explored the perception of viewer "attitude toward the ad" and "intent to adopt" for a pet rescue television commercial. Study respondents (N=335) watched "Somebody to Love" a commercial featuring a lonely man and his emotional attachment with an abandoned dog. Gender identity was significantly related to attitudes toward the commercial. Participants identifying themselves as feminine held more favorable attitudes towards the commercial, whereas participants identifying as more masculine reported less favorable attitudes towards the commercial. Work status and ethnicity were also significant predictors of attitude toward the ad. Non-workers were more highly responsive to the commercial, than were students or those in working capacity. Participants identifying as any ethnicity other than white held less favorable attitudes towards the commercial, which features white actors. This implies it is important to examine commercial content regarding plot and context, as the viewer response is affected by gender, ethnicity and employment status. Producers of future animal rescue commercials should consider content specific to alternate human identities, where rescue animals can facilitate a common compassion among potentially discordant identity groups.

Keywords: animal adoption; animal euthanization; pet adoption; pet advertising; pet rescue.

HIGHLIGHTS

• This paper presents a case study on animal rescue through television commercials.

• Researchers can assist pet rescue organizations in developing media messages that affect the highest response rates among viewers.

• Media promoting pet rescue must be sensitive to alternate ethnicities and

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cultures. Context and storytelling around the animal and its relationship with humans becomes critical.

INTRODUCTION

According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 6.5 million abandoned pets are housed in shelters in the United States. The largest proportion of animals are 3.3 million dogs and 3.2 million cats. Of those who are sheltered 1.5 million are euthanized (670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats). If any part of this statistic can be considered positive, it is that the number of euthanized animals has decreased from 2.6 million in 2011 ("ASPCA on Pet Statistics: How many pets are in the United States? How many animals are in shelters?," n.d.)

An opportunity exists to reduce the number of euthanized animals, primarily through adoption. Some countries, such as Italy, have enacted laws that do not allow euthanizing animals. Without the option of euthanizing, temporary adoption programs have been devised. Animals are matched to care givers based on breed and size of animal desired (Normando et al., 2006). Dotson and Hyatt (2008) canvased 749 dog owners to expose underlying dimensions that are part of the dog and human companionship model. The study concluded that gender, age and education were related to the highly reliable association between a pet and owner, which leads to emotional, physical and mental health. The pet-human relationship is also affected by quality time with the dog, length of association with the dog, and whether the dog is identified as mixed or purebred.

Several studies have explored the likelihood of an adoption. For example, animals who stay in the front portion of the kennel, do not bark, and gaze into the eyes of potential adopters increases the chances for adoption. This study concluded animals that ignored play initiation negatively affected adoption choice, while lying in proximity to the adopter positively affected the adoption choice (Protopopova & Wynne, 2014). Mondelli et al. (2004) indicated behavioral problems can emerge, exacerbated by lack of a yard or garden, or outdoor terrace. Some animals are adopted, but are eventually returned to their shelter of origin.

As a part of an initiative to increase the number of rescued pets, sponsors of pet rescue organizations have employed marketing messages to heighten the public awareness for lonely and abandoned animals. A study by Phillips (1996) indicated when animals are featured in commercials, they can assist in setting the cultural context for products and services. Some attachment to animals in television commercial settings has been likened to a consumer consumption experience. For example, people relate to unique benefits depicted in a product or service and respond to a call for action, which is to move towards purchase. People relate to the pets, see benefit in pet interactions, which leads to pet adoption as a perceived positive outcome.

Pets are welcomed into our most private endeavors, elevated to the status of children or friends. The unconditional love offered by pets make these consumption experiences meaningful in our actions and lifestyles (Holbrook, Stephens, Holbrook & Strazar, 2001). Associations between animals and society currently exist in culture and those associations can influence product interpretations. When companionship with their dog is a high priority, dog owners can experience emotional wellbeing, lower stress and reduce blood pressure. It has been suggested human attraction to canines is sacred, is in the

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moment and can lead humans into a different level of interaction (Maharaj, Kazanjian, & Haney, 2016).

To develop a strong response and success rate in pet rescue, it is essential to understand the motivators to adopt pets within the target audience. Societal shifts and cultural change within industrialized democracies has altered how humans view the animals they intend to rescue. Markovits and Queen (2009) explored the differentiations among gender within a canine rescue group. Individuals who identified themselves as females saw their commitment to animal rescue related to raising social capital. It reinforces ties to like-minded humans, more than creating opportunities for new relationships with people holding alternative values. The study concluded that females involved with dog rescue are part of a positive association process. Earlier studies indicated dog rescue among females was an effort to alleviate loneliness due to a lack of social contacts (Katz, 2003). Females may act as dog rescuers as part of a contribution to the social good in society. Men in this study held a perception that women had more time, and fewer responsibilities, which affected their ability and desire to adopt pets.

Animals in commercial and advertising settings are frequently focused on in consumer behavior research. Amyx (2017) identified subjects demonstrating high engagement with dogs and cats as pets. Dogs and cats as pets were portrayed in a commercial that used an experimental setting. Both cat and dog lovers preferred their respective advertisement, preferred the realtor depicted in the advertisement and held higher purchase (adoption) intentions. A scale used in the study indicated cat lovers are motivated by individualism and independence. Dog lovers are motivated by dependability and security. However, is important to study gender effect on pet rescue. Ramirez (2006) examined pet owners, gender norms, and development of relationship with their dogs. Gender norms are correlated with the perception of what is a suitable dog, definition of animal behavior through gender identity, and use of dogs to promote one's gender identity. For example, dogs have been historically identified as masculine while cats depict a feminine nature. Respondents in this study indicated cat ownership is well known as a favorite species among gay men.

When audience segmentation is further defined, gender identity reflects a sense of self within social expectations, roles and behaviors. The loosening of gender stereotypes has become a part of social conversations related to experiential identity and lifestyle options. The millennial generation has embraced a gender spectrum where gender fluidity might help individuals feel more authentic yet may cause confusion based on how interaction should occur. Parker (2016) suggests society should strive to honor diversity and individuality while avoiding bias, prejudice or violence.

This study contributes to the potential for higher survival rate among abandoned animals by exploring consumer response to television commercials promoting animal adoption. Personal identities related to gender, spirituality, political association and other key demographic variables were measured and tested as predictors of response to pet rescue commercial appeal.

Based on the literature that suggests a differentiation among how humans perceive their animal experience, the hypothesis of this study was that the demographic and psychographic differentiation among consumers will produce an effect on the attitude towards the "Lonely Man" pet rescue television commercial.

METHODS

Study Design & Participants

This study was conducted as part of a state university research course. Eighteen students participated as co-investigators. Each student attained accreditation from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) as part of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) research approval process. Data were collected over a 14-day period using the online survey software Qualtrics. Students identified potential respondents using convenience and judgmental sampling techniques, qualifying respondents who currently had a pet in the home or had cared for a pet in the past. After eliminating 39 cases with incomplete survey responses or a lack of informed consent, 335 participants were retained for the final sample. Demographics are reported in the results section.

Materials

Commercial Video. The animal rescue commercial featured in this study was created by agency Siltanen & Partners for client Coldwell Banker, a residential real estate franchise system. Coldwell Banker utilizes a strategy that frames emotion, rather than the transaction of home buying, in promoting its real estate brand (Stanley, 2017). The advertisement anchored a creative campaign that supports the firm's three-year partnership with Adopt-A-Pet.com. It was reported that the association between Coldwell Banker and Adopt-A-Pet.com facilitated more than 20,000 pet adoptions. The commercial is entitled "Somebody to Love." It depicted a sad, isolated man and a stray dog, initially rescued from an alleyway. The animal used in the commercial, named "Scout," was an actual shelter pup. At the time of this writing, the commercial had over 271 million views ("Coldwell Banker TV Commercial, 'Somebody to Love' - iSpot.tv," n.d.) (Table 1). The Adopt-a-Pet television campaign was supported by Coldwell Banker's 84,000 real estate agents, who facilitated pet adoptions through relationships in their local communities.

Table 1. Coldwell Banker TV Commercial

"Somebody to Love"	
National airings	729
First airing	26-Mar-17
Last airing	3-Feb-18
Estimated media investment	$4, 061,636
TV impressions	271,279,727
Estimated online views	2,147,768
Social media impressions	1,111,839
Sentiment analysis	93% positive

Note: Data reported through February 3, 2018

Attitude and Intent to Adopt. Responses to the "Somebody to Love" advertisement were assessed through the 10-item advertising scale developed by Spears and Singh (2004). Five items measured intention to purchase (adopt) and five items measured general attitudes toward the advertisement. All items used four-point semantic differential scales. For example, 1 was used to score "unappealing" and 4 was used to score "appealing." The scale held internal consistency in this sample (α = .92) and was used as a unidimensional dependent variable (Table 2).

Table 2. 10-item attitude and intent scale

Attitude measures (α = 0.94)	Intent to adopt measures (α = 0.95)
Unappealing/Appealing	
Bad/Good	
Unpleasant/Pleasant	
Unfavorable/Favorable	
Unlikeable/Likeable	
	Never take action/Take action
	Do not intend to act/Intend to act
	Low interest acquire/High interest acquire
	Not consider/Consider
	Not pursue/Pursue

Gender Identity. A single item semantic differential 10-point scale was used to measure gender identity. The item was anchored with "feminine" indicating 1 to "masculine" indicating 10. Participants were prompted with the following: "Please help us understand your gender, mark your identity on the scale below."

Spirituality. A single item semantic differential 10-point scale was used to measure participants' degrees of spirituality. The item was anchored with "atheist" indicating 1 to "highly spiritual" indicating 10. Participants were prompted with the following: "Religious affiliation can be important to consider in our study. The scale below is labeled from atheist to highly spiritual. Where would you place yourself on this scale?"

Political Affiliation. A single item semantic differential 10-point scale was used to measure political affiliation. The item was anchored with "alt-left" indicating 1 to "alt-right" indicating 10. Participants were prompted with the following: "The political scale below is labeled from Alt-left to Alt-right. Where would you place yourself on the scale?"

Work Status. Participants were prompted with a single item: "What's your current work status?" They chose from the following options in a drop-down menu: "Student don't work," "Student + work," "Business executive," "Business manager," "Administrative work," "Employee," "Teaching and instruction," "Military," "Self-employed," "Unemployed," "Stay at home parent," "Retired," and "Other." For data analysis, we created three categories: student, currently employed, and unemployed.

Income. Participants were prompted with: "Information about income is very important to understand. Would you please give your best guess? Please indicate the answer that includes your entire household income in (previous year) before taxes." Participants chose from the following drop-down menu options: "Less than $10,000," "$10,000 to $19,999," "$20,000 to $29,999," "$30,000 to $39,999," "$40,000 to $49,999," "$50,000 to $59,999," "$60,000 to $69,999," "$70,000 to $79,999," "$80,000 to $89,999," "$90,000 to $99,999," "$100,000 to $149,999," and "$150,000 or more." In the analysis, income was broken into four groups: up to $29,999, between $30,000 and $59,999, between $60,000 and $89,999, and $90,000 and above.

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Ethnicity: Participants were prompted with, "What is your racial or ethnic heritage?" The subsequent answer choice options were: "Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American," "Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American," "Latino or Hispanic American," "East Asian or Asian American," "South Asian or Indian American," "Middle Eastern or Arab American, "Native American or Alaskan Native," and "Other." Due to small numbers of non-white participants, we created two groups: white participants and all non-white participants.

Age. Participants were prompted with a single item: "Please share your age with us." They chose from the following drop-down menu options: "18-24," "24-34," "35-44," "45-54," "55-64," "65-74," and "75 years or older." For the analyses, age was grouped by 18-34; 35-54; and 55+.

Education. A single item, "What is the highest level of education you have completed?" prompted participants. The following choices appeared on a drop-down menu: "Less than High School," "High School/GED," "Some college," "2-year College Degree," "4-year College Degree," "Master's Degree," "Doctoral Degree," and "Professional Degree (JD, MD)." Education was analyzed at three levels: less than an associate's; associate's or bachelor's degree; and master's degree and above.

Relationship Status. The prompt: "What is your current relationship status?" was presented with the following answer choices: "Single," "Married," "Cohabiting," "Widowed," "Divorced," "Separated," and "Other." Relationship status was analyzed at three levels: single; married or cohabiting; and widowed, divorced, or separated. "Other" was excluded from the analysis.

Dog Ownership Status. To gauge whether participants have owned or currently own a dog, participants were prompted with: "I have a dog now, or had a dog in the past." They chose from response options "Yes" and "No" in a drop-down menu format.

Analytical Plan

Our primary research question was whether demographic variables were related to attitudes towards the commercial. Therefore, we first evaluated the characteristics of the sample on these key demographic variables, then tested for relationships between each demographic characteristic with the dependent variables using t-tests, ANOVAs, and correlations. Finally, we tested the combined predictive effect of gender, spirituality, politics, work status, income, ethnicity, age, education, relationship status and dog owner status that were significantly related to commercial attitudes using multiple regression.

RESULTS

Sample demographics are reported in Table 3. Ninety percent of the sample had owned a dog. The sample was mostly non-students on the lower end of income status. They were mostly white young adults with a college degree or less. The participants' average scores leaned towards feminine, religious, and conservative. A strong majority were dog owners.

Next, we tested using correlation analysis to determine if each demographic variable was independently related to attitudes about the commercial. The only demographic variable that was significantly related to attitudes about the commercial was gender, $r = -0.19$, $p < 0.001$. Participants identifying themselves as more feminine held more favorable attitudes towards the commercial, whereas participants identifying themselves as more masculine reported less favorable attitudes towards the commercial. Neither political affiliation nor spirituality were related to commercial attitudes.

Table 3. Sample Demographics

Variables	M	SD	n (%)
Work Status			
Student			52(15.5%)
Working			162(48.4%)
Non-working			121(36.1%)
Income			
Up to $29,999			116(34.6%)
$30,000 - $59,999			68(20.3%)
$60,000 - $89,999			58(17.3%)
$90,000 and up			91(27.2%)
Ethnicity			
White			300(89.6%)
Non-white			32(9.6%)
Age			
18-34			173(51.6%)
35-54			55(16.4%)
55+			107(31.9%)
Education			
Less than associate's degree			142(42.4%)
Associate's or bachelor's			145(43.3%)
Master's and above			48(14.3%)
Relationship Status			
Single			140(41.8%)
Married or Cohabiting			140(41.8%)
Widowed, Divorced, Separated			52(15.5%)
Gender	3.22	2.93	
Spirituality	5.39	2.29	
Politics	4.04	1.99	
Dog Ownership			
No			34(10.1%)
Yes			301(89.9%)

Table 4. Viewer correlation attitude towards ad

Lonely guy attitude ad	Pearson's r	*p*
Spirituality	0.060	0.279
Gender	-0.189	< 0.001
Political association	0.079	0.156

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess the relationships between categorical variables and attitudes towards the commercial. There were no significant differences in attitudes about the commercial for income level, age, education level, relationship status, or dog ownership. The ANOVA for work status was significant, $F(2) = 4.42$, $p = 0.013$. Post-hoc testing among categorical employment measures related to attitude toward the ad revealed that there was a significant difference between students' attitudes (M = 3.02, SD = 0.81) and non-workers' attitudes (M = 3.30, SD = .63), t = -2.45, $p = 0.015$, such that non-workers held more favorable attitudes towards the commercial than

did students. There was also a significant difference between workers' attitudes (M = 3.08, SD = .73) and non-workers' attitudes (M = 3.30, p = 0.632), t = -2.68, p = 0.008, such that non-workers held more favorable attitudes towards the commercial than did workers.

The ANOVA for ethnicity reached trend toward significance, F(1) = 3.32, p = 0.069, albeit having a small minority group sample (n = 32). White participants reported more favorable attitudes (M = 3.18, SD = 0.69), while participants identifying as any ethnicity other than white held less favorable attitudes towards the commercial (M = 2.93, SD = 0.87).

Finally, we tested for the combined utility of demographic variables in predicting attitudes scores. A multiple regression analysis revealed significant predictive power for the collection of independently significant or almost significant demographic variables of work status, ethnicity, and gender on attitudes towards the commercial, F(6) = 3.87, p = 0.001, with an R2 = 0.07. When all three demographic variables were included in the model, work status no longer predicted attitudes about the commercial: student versus non-worker, B = -0.42, p = 0.11; worker versus non-worker, B = -0.13, p = 0.62. On the other hand, both gender, B = -0.03, p = -0.01, and ethnicity were significant predictors, B = 0.29, p = 0.04.

DISCUSSION

The results in this study support the findings of Markovits and Queen (2009), where those identifying at feminine were more attracted to the commercial than those who identified as masculine. The response to the commercial content could be associated with social identity or social proof, where those with similar values and virtues assimilate together. It is interesting to note that this commercial deals with the alleviation of loneliness, which would support the Katz (2003) study stating that female attraction to pet rescue is based on feminine nurturing aspects, which are more compatible with dog rescue, as opposed to stereotypical male behavior which is purported to be aloof and disconnected from emotion. Related to attraction to dogs, one might consider the work of Amyx (2017) who stated cat lovers are individualistic, while dog lovers yearn for security and dependability. "Somebody to Love" in context provides the lonely man with both attributes and also promotes a greater connection with the community around the man and dog. The rescue dog – in an emotional sense – replaces a lost partner and stays at the man's side, indicating a consistent, dependable nature.

The practical nature of pet adoption may strongly affect perceptions of the commercial. Non-workers, those who may have flexibility and free time at home, were most attracted to the pet rescue scenario. Consideration could be based the margin of time, if resources are available to invest in the rescue animal. Students and those in the workplace may have been affected by the advertisement, but the practicality of their personal situations may have been reflected in their responses.

A bias exists, one that might explain the weak response from non-white respondents who viewed the commercial. The lead actor in the commercial is white. A photo displayed on the actor's bed stand indicates there was a white, female partner who is no longer in relationship with the assumed heterosexual "lonely man." The dog catcher depicted in the commercial is white, as are actors seen walking the street. One brown female is shown in the dog rescue shelter; however, she is placed in the background and is out of the field of focus.

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Grooms and Biddle (2018) suggest it is important to better understand the benefits of the canine-human relationship and to gain more knowledge related to that experiential bonding. This is a highly applicable advice related to context in pet rescue messaging. Understanding how humans and animals build relationships, within the purview of gender and ethnicity, can open a new frontier for media facilitated animal rescue. Creating association with rescue pets, while increasing support through gender identified community groups, is an advantage. Coldwell Banker and Adopt-A-Pet.com came together to present their plea to a national television audience, bolstered with local promotional efforts by area agents. The bond between like-believing individuals and their pets, was productive for both pet rescue and the real estate business.

Animal non-profit administrators, rescue shelter fundraisers and civic officials can apply findings from this research to develop targeted messaging, heighten interest in animal rescue, frame promotional campaigns and better connect with a diverse faction of animal-compassionate humans. Marketing strategies specific to social identities and ethnicity can complement current pet rescue initiatives. A specialized, sensitive approach to these constituencies may help engender a positive attitude that can heighten intent to adopt rescue animals. Identifying and targeting multiple personal identities and publics is essential if adoption groups and supporting sponsors wish to save the maximum number of rescue animals. Embracing segmentation of ideologies, values, acquired knowledge and perceived relationships can work towards creating a bond between consumer, adoption organization and rescue animal (Panoch & Pearson, 2017).

Recognition of alternate publics and consumer segments will lead to a more realistic human depiction of the bond between adopter and rescue animal. The challenge to advertisers is which identifiers to feature. What is the engagement opportunity for building content around gender framed within a specific relational model? Is there a possibility to target ethnicity and culture specific to geographic areas where adoption of abandoned animals is most critical? The context of home environment might also prove to be fertile for development of dog rescue commercials. Working students, many in off campus housing, live busy lives that incorporate pet ownership. That lifestyle tests as significantly different from those who identified as non-working or stay at home parents. The differentiation may be framed based on optimum care for pets based on available time.

Advertising for pet rescue that acknowledges a differentiated clustering of potential adopters might adapt well to strategy in finding a common, healing message among discordant groups. Society has become polarized through conflicted beliefs. Consumers exist in social media "silos" that have become part of our new social identity. Pfetsch (2018) states that although diversity of opinions are fundamental in pluralistic societies, politics are currently wrought with polarization, dissonance and eventually, disconnection from public spheres. Public segmentation among religious groups may also heighten dissonance. Lundy, Adebayo and Hayes (2018) suggest that for some, religion is perceived as a catalyst to peacebuilding. Others view religion as exacerbating vengeance, conflict and hostility among social factions.

Rescue animals have the potential to bring a commonality of love and compassion to discordant identity groups. Consider a commercial that presents a gender-feminine highly spiritual individual, finding common ground with a gender-masculine alt-right individual – through the conciliatory act of rescuing dogs through pet adoption. There are potential associations across political

views and gender identity, embraced through inclusive religious interpretation. While differences exist, the compassion and universal love for rescue animals can reign supreme.

Limitations

This study was conducted through a university classroom setting using convenience and judgmental sampling. The data collected is useful for testing in this pilot study; however, the demographics may not be representative of the general population. Analysis of variance was utilized to identify significant differences among consumer segments. This study is quantitative in nature and does not disclose what prompts those disassociations. This would best be addressed through focus groups, inclusive of members stratified for gender identity, ethnicity and work status. It should be noted human identities are multi-dimensional. Humanity is complex, as is each individual's personal relationship with their pet.

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