

Can Better Photographs Raise Animal Adoption Rates?

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Author Note

This paper was prepared for UNIV 4995: Senior Project, taught by

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Abstract

The internet has changed pet adoption, but not for the better. Because of this new technology, the “*pet mug shot*” is now a death sentence for animals around the world. Much like an actual mug shot, this intake photo is shot upon a pet’s arrival at a shelter. The photos are far from flattering, because at this moment, the animals are scared to death. These “*pet mug shots*” were initially for record keeping purposes. They were not meant to be use for marketing. The *pet mug shot* often the only photo ever seen online. Both quantitative and qualitative research show better quality photographs raise animal adoption rates. To most people, *better photography* may seem like wishful thinking. How can shelters provide better photos when they have such limited resources? This article aims to explore new methodologies through empirical research.

Keywords: Professional Photography, Pet Photography, Subject, Composition, Post-Processing, Action Photos, Pet Portraits

Can Better Photographs Raise Animal Shelter Adoption Rates?

Photos are powerful. They can be the difference between life and death for shelter pets. The internet is powerful as well. It has disrupted and democratized entire industries. Recently, the internet has changed the landscape of media. Thus, photos have become vital. Photographers who once thought their industry died, can now find endless opportunities in new online markets.

As one navigates around online, photos are now modern day billboards. Photos just like billboards, all compete for your attention. A great photo must capture a viewer's attention and this is not easy. Even if a photo does capture your attention, it will be forgotten in seconds. Effective photos not only grab, but hold their viewer's attention. This is where marketing comes in. Best marketing practices combined principles of visual communication are key for effective photographs.

Literature Review

In a study titled *Reforging the bond—towards successful canine adoption*, Marston and Bennett (2003) examined reasons people adopted dogs. They examined factors that influenced a prospective adopter's choice. In this study, they also described how a shelter checked a dog's potential for adoption.

Weiss, Miller and Mohan-Gibbons (2012) examined five animal shelters in the United States in their study *Why did you choose this pet?* They described what information was important during the selection process. They also described the relative importance of seeing the animals' behavior in various contexts.

In 2013, Gazzano, Zilocchi, Massoni, and Mariti analyzed people's reactions to Pit Bulls and concluded people generally feared them.. This study included three puppies, seven normal adult dogs, and two adult pit bulls. These dogs were on the leash with twelve girl handlers. Passers-by were video recorded and then interviewed through an eight-item questionnaire.

A quantitative analysis titled *What's in a Name?* by Gunter, Barber and Wynne (2016) suggests the label of a dog breed influences an adopters' perception. In this study, they used pit bulls and pit bull "lookalikes." They then compared them with other dog breeds in the shelter. Through video recording, they measured the label of the dog along with perceived attractiveness. Through adoption data, they also measured the label of the dog with the length of stay.

Amanada Leonard (n.d.) wrote a paper titled *The plight of "Big black dogs" in American animal shelters*. She was a canine behavior specialist at the Washington Humane Society in 2007 and described a bias she called *Big Black Dog Syndrome*. She examined how this bias of dogs with black coats affected shelters across the United States. She also offered suggestions on how shelters could counter against BBD Syndrome.

An Evaluation of the Role the Internet Site Petfinder Plays in Cat Adoptions is a study by Workman and Hoffman (2015). This quantitative analysis explored a cat's online popularity on Petfinder with speed of adoption. Workman and Hoffman examined the adopters who visited Petfinder before they adopted a pet. They found the bias of black coats were present with cats as well.

In their quantitative analysis, Lampe and Witte (2015) analyzed the first images of 468 Labrador Retrievers online across America. They tested several factors to see if it would help speed up adoption rates. They suggested photo quality had the largest impact. Other factors were listed as well.

A quantitative analysis done by Estes and Neilson (2009) examined posts on social media. This analysis included posts on both Facebook and Twitter. Estes and Neilson most users only read the most recent posts online. They also suggest most users visit Facebook and Twitter at least once daily.

Pace (n.d.) tests the effectiveness and persuasiveness of different dog rescue advertisements in his study. He surveyed 120 participants. He compared text advertisements online with photo advertisements. Place found men are more likely than women to respond to pictures in advertisements. He also suggested the viewer must be already willing to adopt for the emotional part of the ad to work. He concluded that a mixture of both text and photographs in an online advertisement proved the most effective.

Discussion

Professional photography has always supported the marketing efforts of professional organizations. A company would not entertain using anything but professional photographs when marketing themselves. So how does one decide what professional photography is? This question may seem subjective, but certain measures help in determining this.

Unlike snapshots, professional photos take time and result from careful calculation. First, a professional photographer considers the subject. The *subject* is the central interest of the photo. The photographer will then consider the composition. The word *composition* refers to the whole picture. Finally, a photographer finishes the photo with post processing. *Post processing* is another term used instead of editing.

Pet photography is a genre of professional photography and it includes two sub categories. These categories are action photos and pet portraits. Both aim to capture a pet's

personality. An *action photo* is a photograph of a pet in action. A *pet portrait* is a photograph of a pet sitting still.

The Problem

Three million cats and dogs face euthanasia in shelters across America each year. Eighty percent of these are healthy and adoptable. This is per the Humane Society of the United States (2016). Often, the only marketing that goes into a pet's online photo is a picture snapped for record keeping. These intake photos show pets that are nervous, behind bars, and with red eyes. The animals are far from what one would envision as a family pet. These poor marketing efforts contribute to shelter overcrowding and pet euthanasia. Most shelters lack resources for better quality photos because they are government funded. Other rescues and organizations may lack basic marketing and photography knowledge altogether. Today, there are ways to counter against this. Through compelling photography and available social media tools, volunteers can help pet adoption.

Pet Adoption and Photography

These animals compete with thousands of others online looking for a home. With this type of marketing, most shelter pets do not stand a chance of being adopted. Shelter pets have only a few seconds to make an impression with only a single intake photo, so it is very crucial for the pet to “present” itself. Pet over-population will always stay a problem until this inefficient system is resolved. Also, with the high birth rates of cats and dogs here in the United States, over-population will continue to remain a problem until, as previously stated, this insufficient system is improved and resolved.

Why pets are important.

Most Americans are proud pet owners per The Humane Society of the United States. Pet ownership has tripled in the United States since the 1970's (Humane, 2016). History books suggest that pets date back to ancient Egypt. Archaeological discoveries suggest Egyptians held ceremonies for their pets when they buried them. So why are pets so popular? It may be because they helped us evolve. Per Shipman (2014), dogs were alive in prehistoric times and they were essential hunting partners. He suggests that dogs could read their owner's facial expressions. When in danger or hunting, dogs could silently communicate by following owner's gaze (Shipman, 2014). When it comes to cats, cats were originally assumed to have served as vermin hunters. However, cats wound up only serving the overall and original purpose of being companions, but have the perk of being hunters for their owners.

How photographs affect pet adoption.

Lampe and Witt (2014) compared different variables in pet adoption. Photo quality has the largest impact on speed of adoption. Direct eye contact with the camera help get dogs get adopted faster. Other factors which help speed up adoption were if the dog was photographed outside and if the dog was standing up. Appropriate sized photos and non-blurry images help too. Factors that do not help with the speed of adoption are dogs in cages or wearing a bandana.

Biases.

One notable bias is the *Pit Bull Bias*. Per Gazzano, Zilocchi, Massoni, and Mariti (2013), people often discriminate against Pit Bulls because they fear them. This discrimination is seen with dogs with Pit Bull like features This prejudice also spreads beyond visual discrimination.

Dogs with labels like Pit Bulls encounter this bias too (Gunter, Barber, and Wynne, 2016). An example of this would be a description that includes the word “Terrier.”

Another bias is the *Black Coat Bias*. This bias happens when people discriminate against animals with black coats (Leonard, 2001). In the dog world, this is known as *BBD Syndrome* or *Big Black Dog Syndrome*. This is partially due to societal associations of evil. It is also due to animals with black coats showing up in photos as “black blobs” because of poor lighting. (Leonard, 2011). This black coat bias is also seen in cats. Per Workman and Hoffman (2015), black cats have fewer clicks on Petfinder.

The Process

Most shelters are government funded. This means they have a limited budget. The Animal Welfare Act of 1999 requires a shelter to provide basic things for animals. These requirements include feeding, watering, sheltering, and ventilation (Zanowski, 2010). After these minimum requirements are met, shelters are not given a marketing allowance to help get the pet adopted. So how can the pets get better photos? Volunteer photographers can now easily connect and organize through social media. I organized a local group to help photograph animals at The Humane Society of Memphis and Memphis Animal Services. We photograph at both places regularly. Our group is not a nonprofit and it only cost \$15 to put it together. We have accomplished so much in only a year. Our photos have recently been added to both of their online directories. This means that our photos are the first photos seen when someone is looking for a pet in Memphis. Because of one person who shared their story, many lives were saved. We hope by sharing our story, many more lives will be spared in the future.

Volunteer Photography Group

Overview.

After watching Teresa Berg's (2011) [YouTube video](#), I wanted to help photograph shelter pets. I was so inspired, I posted this video on every Facebook photography group in Memphis. It became my mission to make this happen in my city. Many people responded to my posts and wanted to help. It was then that I decided to start a Meetup Group. To be honest, I expected us to meet once and never see each other again. We started out with a handful of people in February 2016. Our Meetup Group was initially named "Glamour Shots for Shelter Pets Volunteer Group." At present, we have 160 volunteer photographers. We are now known as "Pic Me Pets."

Starting out was challenging because each place seemed to have their own "red tape." Most places did allow individuals to come and photograph by themselves. This was due to either hectic daily operations or liability reasons. Others would allow groups to photograph but under strict rules. One rule required the pets to remain behind bars. We countered this by building a relationship with each one. We also tried to help them in whatever way we could.

Location of Photo Shoots.

Memphis Animal Services is our main target. This is because they are the main high kill shelter in Memphis. They allowed individuals to photograph only if they were a volunteer. To become a volunteer, one must attend a two and a half hour orientation, being far from glamorous. For two and a half hours, they go over the fact that they kill animals. They want to make sure everyone is clear on this. We have this orientation repeat as a Meetup every month. This is hardly the way we want anyone to start out with our group, but we do provide it as an option.

What we have learned from our Meetups, is that most people will not choose this option. The ones that do though are super committed and help long term.

The Memphis Humane Society is the second place where we photograph. They do not kill, so one may wonder why we photograph there. This is because they all come from the same pet pool. If we can free up a space there, then we allow space for a pet to transfer there from a high kill shelter. This a more welcoming environment for someone starting out. It is not as intense and takes a lot of pressure off. It is also great for someone who is sensitive such as myself. One can just show up and photograph here but must sign a waiver. What we noticed from our Meetups is that most people just want to help and have fun. This is the perfect option for that.

Frequency of Photographing.

Due to the Memphis Animal Services being a kill shelter, we photograph here the most. We have two regular photographers that shoot here every week. Once a week has proven to be the average shooting frequency here. If one shot here more than that, one could get burnt out. When shooting here, we must photograph during business hours. As a volunteer, we help people walking in first. Then we help other volunteers. It is not only until afterwards, can we photograph. When we do photograph, we walk the dogs as well. My photographers stay there on average for two hours. Depending on the dogs' behavior, they are lucky to get about seven dogs in. After editing, the time adds up. It does not seem like much compared to the dogs coming in. We are hoping to get more people photographing there. One of my photographers averaged twenty hours a week easy.

Due to The Memphis Humane Society being a non-kill shelter, we photograph here less. We have four regular photographers who shoot here every month. When photographing here, we

shoot after closing. We have several dog walkers and volunteers who help us. The dogs here have a closed play area to themselves. My photographers stay there on average for two hours. We can usually photograph all the cats and dogs in a few hours. This of course depends on how many photographers show up. People most often show up here once or twice just for fun. We are hoping to get more people photographing there on a regular basis.

Our group has overcome many obstacles but we still have plenty of future goals. We hope to photograph at other high kill shelters in the area. This is still challenging. As mentioned before, each shelter is busy with their own daily operations. We hope to build relationships with them and help them too. This will take time. We are currently building a website to feature our photos. This will be up and running shortly. We are happy to report that our photos are on The Humane Society's main pet directory now. The Memphis Animal Shelter has recently adopted our photos for their main directory too. Our photos will be the first photos seen when searching for a pet. They will soon completely erase all the initial intake photos.

The Photos

Even if organizations lack marketing and photography knowledge, there are ways around this too. We have shot with both professional photographers and with volunteers who have cell phones. Pet photography is just as hard for the experienced and inexperienced alike. It takes much time and discipline to perfect it. For this reason, we share our “professional” secrets, because knowing them means nothing. It is a repetitive discipline, and not divine knowledge. This is also true for marketing as well.

To officially become a member of our group, we require three things. First, you must be comfortable around animals. We cannot teach you this because it is a liability and this is something only the individual can teach themselves. Second, the animals must be comfortable

around you. Try to be patient and calm at all times. If animals are not fans of your camera, we do not hold that against you. Last, but not least, you must be passionate. Passionate people are limitless and will defy any odds against them. If one has the passion and drive to want to save a cat or dog's life, nothing will deter one from helping. Requiring anything else would be counterproductive. Allergies should be taken into consideration if one is to volunteer.

Photography and Marketing

Most people can help without being a skilled photographer or marketer. All it requires is effort and a love for animals. However, pet photography can be arduous and dangerous. One should only attempt to photograph shelter pets if they are comfortable with animals and trust themselves and the staff and crew there, as well as the cat or dog itself. Social media is an excellent way to allow someone to become comfortable towards animals since it allows everyone a space to practice. One can go at his/her own pace and grow their relationships with animals. Social media gives an amateur just as much right as any professional, so everyone can participate towards the cause.

Setup.

One should always consider the subject first before the composition. The setup will vary depending on if one's subject is a cat or a dog. Casteel (2016) has many "How to Videos" on how to set up and photograph at shelters. These videos are on his website [One Pic Saves](#). Hess (2015) has published a great all in one book for Pet Photography: *From Snapshots to Great Shots*. These are both great resources for getting started with your subject.

Casteel (2016) has many tips for photographing dogs outside. First he urges you to be respectful. This means that you do not get in the dog's face or give them a hug. He then suggests

you pick a good spot in the shade free of distractions in the background. This spot should also be in an enclosed space where they are free to run around without a leash. Next he suggests you photograph at eye level. You will need one assistant to help distract the dog. Any more than this would be too much of a distraction. Before photographing, he suggests you let the dogs run around for ten minutes so they will get tired enough to sit down. To help distract the dog, he suggests your assistant have treats and a squeak toy. You should only use this once though, and the time of the shot. Otherwise, the dog will get used to it and not look up when you use it. Lastly, he suggests you photograph small dogs and puppies on a table.

The setup for photographing cats and kittens is a little more complicated. We have tried to photograph cats with lighting and backdrops but this has not worked for us. The cats were uncomfortable outside their kennel. They would run everywhere. As suggested before, it is best to photograph them inside their kennel. You should be cautious when reaching inside their cages. If they hiss at you or begin to show discomfort, do not attempt to photograph them. If you are not using a specific kind of camera, you won't be able to blur the background. You can blur this out in editing though. You can use Photoshop to do this and there are many resources on the web to teach you how. If you do not have Photoshop, there are free options accessible through the internet, such as Photo Editor from Pixlr and Photo Psy, as well as a multitude of phone apps, such as Pixlr-O-Matic. Even though cats may seem harmless, they can be just as territorial as dogs.

Aesthetics.

There are several things one can do to counter against biases in the composition. Photographing inside contributes to the *Black Coat Bias*. This is due to the background being gray and drab (Leonard, 2011). One should only photograph dogs outside. One should only

photograph dogs inside if they have proper lighting and backdrops. Cats who are outside their cages get more attention (Workman & Hoffman, 2015). A photographer can usually trick the eye by blurring out the background. Photographers can also add a small backdrop in the back of the cage. Cats get more attention if they have toys (Workman & Hoffman, 2015). Thus, toys can help cats that need to be “featured.”

Marketing.

When posting the photographs on social media, there are some factors that help. Place (n.d) states that when one posts more than one photo, the empathy for the animal lessens. She does not say post one photo, but suggests one should know where to stop when posting many photos. She also suggests combining photos with text. This is more effective than posting photos without text. Estes, Schade and Nielsen (2009) suggest posting one time at the most a day to any social media site. They also suggest posting early around 6 am to reach the most people (Estes et al., 2009). These marketing strategies are temporary as the internet is constantly changing.

Conclusions and Future Study

The process of adoption has changed with the prevalence of the internet in the last decade. When choosing a pet a few years ago, potential adopters first looked at the appearance of the animal. They would then explore the social behavior and the personality of the pet (Weiss et al., 2012). Pets are now judged by their appearance alone. These pets must make an impression within seconds on a screen. If a pet is poorly photographed and marketed, this greatly reduces the chance for them to be adopted.

Most shelters lack the resources to hire a photographer. Other organizations may lack essential marketing and photography knowledge altogether. Today, there are ways to counter against this. Through social media and marketing, one can inspire and invite local volunteer photography participation. In the past, pets have helped humans survive and evolve. So, it is unbearable to think they cannot survive because we cannot evolve.

Overall, shelter animals are faced with the struggle of being adopted, and the best way to aide in the effort is first, to properly photograph the animals. With photos that truly show their personalities and happiness, the next step is efficient marketing. Through social media, advertising these cats and dogs will be easy with networking and the ability to share this information with millions of people, not just nationally, but internationally. How will the photography and advertising take place? Recruiting volunteers will be the solution. Volunteers will be able to photograph each pet, can advertise their cause through things such as social media, and have the capability to spread the word with an astronomical number of people. This will cost nothing and will benefit everyone. By educating the public about the struggles of adoption and the ugly truth about the high amounts of euthanizing, we will be able to save these innocent animals' lives as well as assist in improving shelters and rescue centers. With proper education and step-taking, we can make a difference and give these pets the lives that they deserve and the companionship that their future owners deserve.