

Paws & Perception: The Influence of Marketing on Animal Rescue Behavior

Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Colorado State University

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Fall 2025

Abstract

This honors thesis examines how marketing can catalyze a renewed cultural shift toward animal rescue in the United States, with a specific focus on Gen Z consumers. Drawing on historical analysis, secondary data from national animal welfare organizations, and primary survey data from pet owners in the Denver Metro Area, the paper traces the evolution of the rescue movement from the 1970s—when an estimated 15 million animals were euthanized annually—to the present plateau of approximately 607,000 euthanasias per year. The study identifies key historical inflection points, including the Animal Welfare Act, early animal rights advocacy, and high-profile celebrity interventions such as Oprah Winfrey’s 2008 coverage of puppy mills, and contrasts these with current stagnation in progress. Quantitative analysis indicates that preventable euthanasia could be eliminated if only 27% of recent pet purchasers chose adoption instead, suggesting that a relatively modest behavioral shift could have an outsized impact. Survey findings further show that 60% of respondents who purchased from breeders asked about welfare-related practices, and half of those altered their purchasing decision, highlighting an existing ethical sensitivity to leverage. The thesis argues that the legacy slogan “Adopt, Don’t Shop” is increasingly perceived as accusatory and insufficiently nuanced for Gen Z, who seek authenticity, narrative depth, and a sense of belonging in social causes. It proposes that modern marketing strategies—particularly influencer partnerships, viral storytelling, and socially resonant messaging reframed as a positive, joinable movement (e.g., “Join the Rescue Revolution”)—offer a promising pathway to shift perceptions away from breeder purchases and toward rescue and adoption.

Introduction

The interest of this paper comes from the experience of the author of this paper and a puppy mill survivor, Lucy, a Bichon Frise who spent the first eight years of her life caged for the strict purpose of reproduction. Having over 16 litters of puppies in her eight short years, Lucy had been nothing more than a moneymaker for a puppy mill in Colorado. When she was no longer of use to these criminals, she was tossed into the trash and found by a Colorado animal welfare group and soon, adopted by a local family. Witnessing Lucy’s first time experiencing her first walk on a leash, her tiny paws touching grass, climbing stairs, seeing her shadow, and feeling loved, Lucy’s family became advocates for the education and importance of rescuing.

The trend of rescuing animals rather than buying from a breeder or pet store has rapidly decreased in significance in the United States, resulting in half a million animals being

euthanized yearly. While the euthanasia of animals saw a major decrease since the 1970s, the trend stopped in 2019. The purpose of this study is to examine what factors have historically increased pet adoption, identify current barriers halting progress, and theorize how modern marketing tools could shift perceptions and behaviors, especially among Gen Z.

This study is anchored by a central research question: In what ways can marketing contribute to a cultural shift toward increased animal rescue, specifically among Gen Z consumers? Supporting sub-questions include: (1) Which historical strategies have proven effective? (2) What factors currently inhibit further progress? (3) How do Gen Z's motivations differ from earlier cohorts? and (4) Which contemporary marketing approaches hold the most promise?

When observing the trends across the previous years and cross-referencing primary data collected in this study, it is evident that the societal push needed does not require every single individual to adopt. In fact, the additional adoptions needed to save half a million lives annually could come from 27% of those currently buying their pets changing their buying behavior. Within this, the campaign was initially designed for aging generations of Gen X and Baby Boomers, creating a need for remodeling for Gen Z and future generations in the social media era. Breeding and buying animals has become so normalized, that it takes a martyr, like Lucy, to truly make people realize the truth behind the industry. So, how can marketers create a movement that serves as a catalyst in bringing people into this movement?

Modern marketing tools—specifically influencer promotion, socially trending messaging, and storytelling—may effectively shift the remaining consumer perceptions and behaviors, with an emphasis on Gen Z, away from purchasing pets from breeders and catalyze a cultural shift toward animal rescue and adoption. While the primary focus of this paper is analytical,

uncovering the factors that have previously driven increases in pet adoption rates and identifying the current limitations halting progress, a secondary layer emerges: the research suggests that modern marketing tools may effectively re-educate audiences and reduce preconceived barriers to rescuing, creating a prescriptive close as we propose a potential shift.

Historical Success

When considering what could create a modern-day shift in culture towards rescuing pets, it's important to note what has previously been successful and the history of the movement, bringing forth the question: Which historical strategies have proven effective? Jumping back to the start of this new ideology, in 1970, a shocking number of 15 million animals were confirmed euthanized in that year (Shelter Animals Count). For reference, 607,000 animals were put down in the US in 2024 (ASPCA). This is 4% of the animals euthanized in 1970, with the first 50 years holding 91% of this progress, and a halt in the past six years.

The initial shift in culture is seen in a few historical landmarks of the movement, in part due to an overall new perception of modern society. As deciphered in *The History of Animal Welfare in the United States*, by Janet M. Davis, “the moral logic of animal protection derived not only from compassion but from ideas of civilization, reform, and modernity: kindness to animals became a marker of societal progress” (Davis). This reform in the United States was accompanied by the normalization and economic stability that led to an increase in household pets. This was shortly followed by the signing of the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) into law on August 24, 1966, which is a federal law that regulates the treatment of animals in research, teaching, testing, exhibition, transport, and by dealers (USDA). From 1970 to 1973, 2.5 million fewer animals were euthanized.

Another notable champion of animal welfare began with the work of Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (1975), which argued for equal consideration of suffering across species, a new layer to animal advocacy, deemed as “animal rights”. This was the original written belief that urged society to consider animals as organisms worthy of humane treatment. These noteworthy milestones catapulted a change in public mindset that, over the next 50 years, would decrease shelter animal euthanasia by 91%, from 15 million to 1.4 million. While tremendous progress has been made, research suggests the final stretch is still in reach.

A more recent example of historical success would be celebrity endorsements in the movement, which led to an uptick in adoption. For example, in 2008, Oprah Winfrey, a huge figure with notable influence through her magazine and television show, became the “voice for homeless pets” (O’Shaughnessy). She aired an episode entirely dedicated to the issues pets face in puppy mills and shelters throughout the United States, going as far as using hidden cameras to venture into puppy mills to reveal the horrific conditions that many of the nation’s puppies are born into each year. With Oprah’s audience consisting mainly of females, often with children, and in Generation X, currently 45 to 60 years old, or the Baby Boomer generation, 61 to 79 years old, a campaign like hers made a significant impact on public awareness in this demographic. Her advocacy became a shocking realization of the horrors behind the designer puppies that Baby Boomers and Gen X had previously been buying, and the cruelty these breeders put these animals through. An exhibition, such as Oprah’s, was impactful educationally, emotionally, and allowed for advocacy to be “trendy” and socially acceptable for this generation of women. Within the next three years, pet euthanasia will decrease by an additional 1.1 million (Shelter Animals Count). Many factors played into this deduction, including the shift to rescuing being socially relevant. This adds to the tremendous progress society has made in the movement and

became a cultural moment that was one of the most impactful animal rescue awareness events in the 21st century. With that said, understanding what caused the diminishing progress within the past 5 years is essential to moving forward and continuing the momentum to bring this suffering to an end.

Hitting a Wall

With the massive success demonstrated throughout the past several decades, at what point did the US hit a wall? What factors currently inhibit further progress? And more importantly, why? As referenced previously, the past 6 years consist of less than 4% of the total decrease in euthanasia. This may be due to marketing strategies lacking adjustments for a shift in the target audience.

Specifically, Gen Z, currently spanning individuals 13 to 28 years old, is the next generation beginning to make their first adult pet purchasing decisions. The movement is missing some key components of a successful marketing campaign to expand the demographic reach and catch the attention of Gen Z. “In 2024, 18.8 million Gen Z households owned a pet, a 43.5% increase from 2023. This generation is also more likely to own multiple pets, with 70% of Gen Z pet owners reporting they have two or more animals” (Clever). Since this is an essential demographic in the movement, it is an important group to pinpoint why the movement has seemed to halt. In turn, making it essential to understand the following question: How do Gen Z’s motivations differ from earlier cohorts?

Gen Z requires depth behind a movement, a story behind a slogan, and a sense of belonging they can join. As described by Stefan Pollack, on the Forbes Agency Council, “Don’t just try to hook them without follow-through—Gen Zers will see right through you if your

messages lack transparency and credibility” (Pollack). Strategic efforts to address younger audiences with marketing efforts will allow for intentional, impactful growth in the pet rescue movement.

Gen Z is also defined by being image-conscious, carefully curating an online presence, leading the generation to desire the “picture-perfect” breeder puppy that fits their aesthetic. This attitude needs to be shifted to allow the rescue dogs to further promote an image in the sense of moral expectations, trends, and social responsibility. In an interview with Lisa Petri, President of the Board of Directors of Colorado Animal Welfare League, Lisa asked the audience to consider, “Do you love the breed enough not to buy them?” (Petri). As an avid dog lover, she discussed her specific preferences for the dogs she raises and owns, noting large stature, long snouts, short hair, and other aesthetics she found attractive in dogs. She shared this to emphasize that having a preference for the dog you want is not innately wrong or immoral, but rather choosing to buy them rather than find a breed-specific rescue, or consider rescue dogs with said traits, was cruel to the breed they love so much. A message that powerful may open the eyes and hearts of Gen Z to understand that there are more humane options.

This campaign, largely known by the slogan, “Adopt, Don’t Shop” throughout the 2000s, may be outdated given the new shift in marketing needs of Gen Z, which is why progress has slowed in the last half-decade. There is a need to rethink how this demographic is approached, incorporating what has shown success in the past, but in a new, culturally responsive way with respect to social media, storytelling, and trend-creation.

Modernizing “Adopt, don’t Shop”

While the phrase “Adopt, Don’t Shop” showed major success in the early 2000s, the modern consumer requires more depth through storytelling and active movements. This shift, in combination with the phrase seeming accusatory or guilt-provoking, seems to have caused discourse, including from major players in the rescue field, regarding the current relevance of the phrase.

While the Adopt, Don't Shop slogan has hundreds of thousands of “stories” behind it of abuse and unjust death, it fails to portray the message powerfully. It can be perceived as only telling part of the story, implying it is only acceptable to adopt, no matter what. Haley Young, a rescue advocate, spoke out regarding her controversial take on the phrase, noting, “The ‘don’t’ in ‘adopt don’t shop’ vilifies anyone who chooses to shop, regardless of how they do it. The phrase advocates for one (absolutely important) option by inherently putting another (potentially valid alternative) down” (Young). While the research of this paper does not explore the benefits of ethical breeding, it is evident that not every single family purchasing a dog would need to change their behavior to create the final push needed. In fact, the following statistics show that it would take a surprisingly small shift in consumer behavior to eliminate preventable euthanasia. With 607,000 animals euthanized annually—and 9 out of 10 of them being fully adoptable—only 27% of people who purchased a pet in 2024 would have needed to adopt instead to save every viable life (ASPCA; AVMA). With that said, “Adopt, Don’t Shop” vilifying anyone who has made the choice to purchase from a breeder, even if done so with the proper care taken, alienates a group of people aiming to be ethical, and may be doing more harm than good in the modern environment. Through an anonymous online survey conducted on 22 to 67-year-old pet owners in the Denver Metro Area, 60% of those who purchased their pet from a breeder asked questions

related to the health of the mother, living conditions, or other breeding practices. Of those, half changed their decision of whether to purchase from that breeder. This highlights that enough people are moving forward with their buying decisions with an ethical lens to cause the final cultural shift towards rescuing.

While “Adopt, Don’t Shop” was effective in the age of bumper stickers due to its catchy nature, “Gen Zers tend to be more practical than previous generations and want to make a difference and have a purpose. They’re noted as being independent thinkers and don’t “drink the Kool-Aid” just because an institution has perceived authority” (Pollack). A slogan that contains a sense of judgment, without reason, may no longer be effective for this audience– it may even be causing more harm than good. To establish credibility, in the age of social media and viral trends, telling a story that encourages people to join a movement may show greater success. The practical nature of these individuals may lead to increased empathy for those who choose to buy from a breeder for practical reasons, but better understand the greater overall benefit of rescuing when given a bigger picture viewpoint. Rethinking the classic “Adopt, Don’t Shop” phrase into a more universal call to action, such as “Join the Rescue Revolution.”

The question then becomes, what is the most effective way to tell this story to a new generation and enter a new stage of the rescue movement?

Impact of Social Trends and Storytelling

Within modern-day successes, it is helpful to zoom out to get a visual of what has led to the adoption of other social trends for the good of society and the world, with the goal of mimicking these trends for the good of the shelter animals. So, which contemporary marketing approaches hold the most promise?

“Energized by the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s, animal protection evolved into two distinct but overlapping movements,” both of which massively launched animal welfare to the forefront of US culture (Davis).

The power of social trends can be seen in other successful movements as well, for example, the social trend in 2015 of eliminating plastic straws to save ocean wildlife. While plastic straws only account for “about .03 percent of the 8 million metric tons of plastics estimated to enter the oceans in a given year”, the trend still became all-consuming for companies and consumers (Minter). This demonstrates how impactful a social trend can be, especially on Gen Z, and when animal welfare is involved. Originating when a video of a turtle with a straw stuck in its nose went viral. The “shock factor” and simple, actionable call to join the movement caused businesses to shift to plastic straw alternatives, and the sale of metal straws to skyrocket. This single turtle became a representation of the bigger picture and told a story of what was happening in the oceans.

The power of virality and storytelling in today’s world is notable. The ASPCA has utilized pathos to tug at consumer heartstrings for nearly two decades. Gen Z grew up seeing the videos of starving, sad, and lonely puppies on the kill list, making the advertisements lose the “shock factor” and lack a clear, single storyline to represent the masses. As discussed previously, in order to grab their attention, the mission must be clear, joinable, and culturally relevant.

A New Stage of the Movement

To go “viral” today, and allow for rescuing to become a successful social trend, it is impactful to observe the big players making small steps towards increasing welfare and shifting the culture of the US, offering templates for what provides evidence of modern-day wins. To

reframe the movement and catalyze the final push to rescue, social media and utilizing large for-profit companies may be the route necessary.

Influencer and social media personality, Alix Earle, who rose to fame from her “Get Ready with Me” videos, has recently shared her journey of fostering a pitbull named True, saving him from a high-kill shelter, and finding him a forever home. This created a potential eight million followers watching True’s journey. These videos demonstrate that shelter dogs, even those who have not been adopted, breeds with negative stereotypes, and those on the kill list, are, in reality, sweet, loving animals in need of a home. These videos benefit the movement in a number of ways, including trending hashtags, influencing others to foster and even rescue, and destigmatizing rescue dogs.

Earle’s influence is profound, as can be seen in the numerous products that sold out across the country after she posted using them. While this can not be quantified into her impact on the rescue movement, the trust she has built with her Gen Z audience makes her an essential partner for many companies. This trust is essentially what’s been missing for Gen Z in the marketing tactics utilized by the current marketing scheme. Within this, viewers got to follow along on True’s journey each step of the way through engaging TikTok highlight videos. Viewers watched Alix Earle fall in love with this animal in real time, and got to fall in love with her too. True was the representation of the masses that allowed Gen Z to cling to and feel the importance of rescuing on a deeper, personal level. This is an example of the impact influencers potentially have in providing Gen Z with an authentic story– one that proves the importance of rescuing, while inferentially being far more effective than pathos alone, which plays into the need for an actionable and authentic movement they feel inclined to join (Pollack).

Another notable modern tactic could be utilizing companies with deep pockets to progress the movement, through their involvement with shelters and their marketing outreach & viewership scope. To exemplify what this may look like, we can observe the social work at Tito's Vodka. Specifically, regarding animal welfare, Tito's has supported over 2,500 animal well-being nonprofits in the last five years. Moreover, they have created their own campaign, "Vodka for Dog People," with strong branding and merchandise for purchase, with 100% of net proceeds benefiting nonprofits (Tito's Vodka).

Financial barriers have consistently resulted in barriers for any non-profit organization, and limited marketing capabilities greatly. By getting large brands involved in the movement, not only through financial support or donations, but capitalizing on big companies' marketing efforts and education of the public. Tito's Vodka and other companies largely benefit from involvement in social work, given their brand trust, consumer perceptions, and internal benefits for employees working towards a bigger mission.

Conclusion

While a significant cultural shift towards adoption continues to be a challenge that may not see vast movement in a matter of a few years, with new strategies and a shifting culture, the final stretch to limit euthanasia in overpopulated shelters is evident to be achievable. In order to inspire substantial progress in the efforts of the pet rescue movement, understanding Gen Z as the newest generation of pet owners and a uniquely conscious generation is essential. Within this understanding, utilizing storytelling, creating a culture where rescuing impacts social image, and analyzing past success, as done so in this paper, may provide a template for answers.

Similar to Oprah for Gen X, Alix Earle and other major influencers may be the key to grabbing Gen Z's attention and creating an expectation of rescuing as they continue to dominate the pet market. Viral trends led by stories, such as the turtle with a straw in its nose, create compelling motives and an arising social expectation that shift cultural behaviors. Using these key facts to alter the messaging of the movement, from "Adopt, Don't Shop" to something captivating with a call to action, such as "Join the Rescue Revolution," may prove to be more effective for the next generation of pet owners. While the progress society has made thus far in awareness and rescue efforts is tremendous, it is possible to achieve the final push to put these deserving animals into loving homes. By incorporating past success with relevant, innovative new styles, it is possible to make significant improvements to Gen Z awareness of this cause, leading to measurable change in the purchasing decisions of Gen Z. To do so, the capitalization of modern marketing tools that have shown recent success, specifically influencer promotion, socially trending messaging, and storytelling, is essential. The remaining consumer perceptions and behaviors may potentially shift away from purchasing pets from breeders and can catalyze a cultural shift toward animal rescue and adoption.

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