Single vs multiple cat adoptions: A trade-off between longer adoption times and social bonding in shelter cats

L Engebrecht, T Smith and M Suchak*

Canisius College, Buffalo, NY 14208, USA
* Contact for correspondence: suchakm@canisius.edu

Abstract

Timely adoption is essential for shelters to prevent unnecessary illness or euthanasia in cats (Felis catus). Many studies have examined the role of individual cat characteristics and environmental factors in facilitating cat adoptions, but none have looked at the role of the number of cats being adopted in pairs. In this study, we examined whether or not adopting cats in pairs influences adoption times, in addition to commonly studied factors. We then collected video data on a small subset of cats to determine whether pairs that were adopted together differed behaviourally from pairs who were not. Our results demonstrate that cats who are adopted as part of a multi-cat outcome spend three days (42%) longer on the adoption floor than those adopted individually, independently of other factors such as age and coat colour. This difference increased to 13 days (185%) longer if the cat had a notification indicating they must be adopted together with another cat. While behavioural data show that these pairs of cats engage in significantly more affiliative behaviour with each other than cats who were adopted singly, there was a large discrepancy between which pairs the shelter classified as multi-outcome and those who would be classified that way based on behaviour alone. We suggest that decisions to place cats together should be made carefully given the potential adverse impacts of keeping cats in the shelter longer. Further, we suggest that guidance should be developed to help shelters accurately and consistently identify which cats merit a multi-outcome adoption.

Keywords: adoption, animal shelter, animal welfare, cat, Felis catus, social behaviour

Introduction

Around 3.2 million cats (Felis catus) are surrendered to shelters each year, with approximately half of them being adopted out to new homes (ASPCA undated). Over time, adoptions have increased, reducing the need for euthanisation (Weiss et al. 2013). Given that shelters have finite space and resources for caring for animals, a desire to increase adoption rates has led to a large emphasis on decreasing the time surrendered animals spend at the shelter (Janke et al. 2017; Wagner et al. 2018). A shorter stay not only benefits the population as a whole, but also individual animals; cats who are in the shelter longer are more likely to display behavioural or health issues (Dinnage et al. 2009; Gouveia et al. 2011).

There have been a number of studies examining factors that impact time to adoption. Janke et al. (2017) ranked different factors and found that a preference for a younger age was the most important factor (Zito et al. 2015), followed by a preference for non-black/brown coat colours (Lepper et al. 2002), and then by a preference for exotic breeds (Brown & Morgan 2015). Weiss et al. (2012) found that in addition to the cat’s appearance, the adopters’ reasons for selection were impacted by their social interaction with the cat, as well as the personality traits of the cat. Incorporating toys and other enrichment, including socialisation, can reduce fear behaviours and increase activity, which also increases adoption success (Gourkow & Fraser 2006; Fantuzzi et al. 2010). Some studies (eg Brown & Morgan 2015; Janke et al. 2017) have been able to directly tie adopter preferences to a decrease in length of stay for certain cats, particularly based on physical characteristics like breed or coat colour. Other studies have relied on adopter surveys to infer that cats that align with adopter preferences would have a shorter length of stay (eg Gourkow & Fraser 2006; Weiss et al. 2012).

The academic literature available is comprehensive in examining how the features and behaviour of the cat impact time to adoption, but there has been little research into how shelter management procedures, such as housing choices, impact adoption rates. In our previous research, we found that cats in single versus group housing had an overall similar live release rate and length of stay at the shelter, but group-housed cats spent more time available for adoption (Suchak & Lamica 2018). This occurred because singly housed cats were more often moved to housing off of the adoption floor out of public view. Thus, all things being equal, it appeared that singly housed cats were adopted faster, if given the same opportunity for public viewing. Although there are a number of reasons why singly housed cats may be easier to adopt than cats in group housing, one key issue may be that people...