

Social Media Pawprint: How Social Media Communicators at  
Animal Welfare Organizations in the United States Use Social Media

Erin L. Hunt

NYU School of Professional Studies

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the MS in Professional Writing

May 2018

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative research thesis project shows how social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations in the United States use social media. For the purposes of this study, participants are SMCs at animal welfare organizations who engage publics and publish information, on behalf of the organization, on social media platforms. A phenomenological study was designed to determine how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. Thematic analysis was conducted to better understand how these SMCs use social media. Findings indicate SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media to communicate missions and goals, reach and engage stakeholders, raise awareness of causes, inform and educate the public, increase fundraising and donations, and promote animal adoptions and fostering. Conclusions include the following sections: connection between findings and the problem statement, key and unexpected findings, implications, future applications, and recommendations. The goal of this project is to present animal welfare organizations in the U.S. strategies to better leverage social media to achieve organizational missions and goals – ultimately saving more animals' lives.

*Keywords: Animal welfare organizations, social media, social media communicators, social media managers*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
Problem Statement .....	1
Research Question .....	4
Purpose and Project Overview .....	5
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Introduction.....	8
Social Media Communicators.....	9
Background.....	9
Roles and Responsibilities .....	10
Importance .....	10
Studies.....	11
Social Media in Animal Welfare .....	13
Benefits .....	13
Drawbacks.....	15
Studies.....	16
Social Media Best Practices for Animal Welfare Organizations.....	18
Background.....	18
Leverage Full Potential of Social Media .....	19
Share Content Regularly .....	20
Monitor and Update Platforms.....	20
Develop and Implement a Social Media Plan.....	21
Create Engaging Content .....	21

Build Relationships with Audiences .....	22
Include Calls to Action .....	22
Inform and Educate the Public.....	23
Encourage Content and Sharing.....	23
Utilize Analytics Tools .....	23
Conclusion .....	24
METHODOLOGY .....	26
Research Design.....	26
Data Collection Procedure .....	27
Recruitment Process.....	28
Interview Protocol.....	30
Interview Process .....	31
Researcher Memos .....	32
Participants.....	33
Limitations .....	35
DATA ANALYSIS.....	37
Thematic Analysis of Interview Data .....	37
Participants' Use of Social Media.....	39
Communicating Missions and Goals .....	39
Discussion.....	40
Reaching and Engaging Stakeholders.....	42
Discussion.....	47
Raising Awareness of Causes .....	49

Discussion.....	50
Informing and Educating the Public .....	51
Discussion.....	52
Increasing Fundraising and Donations.....	52
Discussion.....	54
Promoting Adoptions and Fostering .....	56
Discussion.....	57
CONCLUSIONS.....	59
Connection Between Findings and Problem Statement.....	59
Key and Unexpected Findings .....	60
Practical Implications.....	60
Future Applications.....	61
Recommendations.....	62
REFERENCES .....	64
APPENDIX A: Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare Thesis Project Interview .....	71
APPENDIX B: Disclosure Statement: Interview Data Collection Protocol.....	72
APPENDIX C: Preliminary Demographic Information .....	75
APPENDIX D: Open-Response Interview Questions .....	76
APPENDIX E: Informed Consent Form.....	78
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	79

Social Media Pawprint: How Social Media Communicators at Animal Welfare Organizations  
in the United States Use Social Media to Achieve Missions and Goals

## INTRODUCTION

### **Problem Statement**

Animal welfare organizations are concerned with the health, safety, and psychological wellbeing of animals. Animal welfare organizations include large national organizations and local nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that rely heavily on individual donors and have no affiliation with a national organization (katetosi, 2014; Sisson, 2016). Nearly 18,000 animal-related NPOs, and an estimated 3,500 animal shelters, are operated in the United States (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015; Social Media for Animals, n.d.). Animal welfare organizations are challenged with finding homes for an overwhelming number of homeless animals every year.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (2018) reports that 6.5 million companion animals (3.3 million dogs, 3.2 million cats) enter shelters in the U.S. as strays, rescues from cruelty, or as owner surrenders each year. Approximately 3.2 million animals are adopted, and 1.5 million animals (670,00 dogs and 860,000 cats) are euthanized every year (The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [ASPCA], 2018). As animal welfare organizations attempt to solve the problem of animal homelessness, social media has become an increasingly popular and relevant tool to fulfill organizational missions and goals.

Social media connects animal welfare organizations to potential donors, adopters, fosterers, rescuers, and volunteers. In 2016, an estimated 185 million people used social media in the U.S., a figure predicted to exceed 200 million by 2020 (Statista, 2018). In 2017, 81% of the U.S. population had a social media profile, up from 24% in 2008 (Statista, 2018). Social media users totaled 1.96 billion and are expected to reach 2.5 billion worldwide by 2018 (Statista,

2018). Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social media platforms in the U.S. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Howard et al., 2014). Facebook dominates the market with 1.5 billion global registered users, comprising 44% of all social media site visits within the U.S. (Statista, 2018). In 2017, 65% of people used a social network, Facebook reached 81% of the U.S. digital population, and Twitter and Instagram reached 36% and 34%, respectively (Mobile Cause, 2017). Statistics indicate a consistent (and predicted) growth in social media platforms and emphasize the need for animal welfare organizations to have a social media presence to reach audiences.

By reaching a larger audience (local, national, or international), social media can help animal welfare organizations communicate missions and goals, reach and engage stakeholders, raise awareness of causes, inform and educate the public, increase fundraising and donations, promote adoptions and fostering, and – ultimately – save more animals' lives.

Animal welfare organizations have adopted social media to benefit their causes and gain additional support from the public (Shorter, 2012). Animal welfare organizations across the U.S. use social media to increase fundraising and donations, keep their doors open, utilize volunteers, attain much-needed food and supplies, help animals find homes, and save animals from being euthanized (Huff Post, 2011).

Social media offers a convenient outlet for publicizing stories about animals in need of homes. Countless stories relate how social media has saved animals' lives. Social media allows animal welfare organizations to reach new audiences, maintain an affordable and effective marketing strategy, and save lives in creative ways, “while simultaneously transforming the conversation surrounding pet adoption into something more positive” (Pearman, 2016, para. 2).

While it is known that social media is important and relevant to animal welfare organizations, little knowledge exists on how social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations use social media to achieve organizational missions and goals. For the purposes of this study, the SMC is a member of an animal welfare organization who represents the organization, engages publics, and publishes information on behalf of the organization on social media platforms. A comprehensive understanding of how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media is necessary to inform animal welfare organizations of ways to use social media to better meet missions and goals.

This thesis project examines how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. In the quest to understand this phenomenon, a phenomenological study was designed for this thesis project. Data collection and analysis identified patterns, highlighted successes, and pinpointed areas for improvement. Data from seven interview transcripts was collected from SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. and analyzed for patterns that emerged.

This qualitative research thesis project aims to help animal welfare organizations in the U.S. save more animals' lives by better leveraging social media to achieve missions and goals. This thesis project offers suggestions to facilitate efficient, effective use of social media, which can serve as a guide for animal welfare organizations across the U.S. By better understanding strategies and managing their use of social media, SMCs at animal welfare organizations can control their acquisition and distribution of resources to better achieve organizational missions and goals to save more animals' lives.

The next section introduces the primary research question of this thesis project used to better understand how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media.

## Research Question

Moving from a discussion of the problem under investigation in this thesis project, this section presents the research question (RQ) used to frame this thesis project. Focused RQs explain what the qualitative study of this thesis project aims to learn or understand (Maxwell, 2005). RQs form the basis of research and serve as the starting point from which the entire research design originates (Maxwell, 2005). RQs help to focus the study and guide the research design (especially the methodology and conceptual framework) (Maxwell, 2005). The RQ determined the methodology (phenomenological study) required of this thesis project.

The following RQ points to the information needed to understand how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media and guide the design of this thesis project:

1. How do social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations in the United States use social media to:
  - a) inform about missions and goals;
  - b) reach and engage stakeholders;
  - c) raise awareness of causes;
  - d) inform and educate the public;
  - e) increase fundraising and donations; and
  - f) promote animal adoption and fostering?

The above RQ helps accomplish the goals of this thesis project and develop practical recommendations on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations can better leverage social media to meet missions and goals.

The following section discusses the purpose of this thesis project and provides an overview of the project.

## **Purpose and Project Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative research thesis project is to increase the understanding of how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media. In the quest to understand this phenomenon, a phenomenological study was designed to determine how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media.

The goal of this thesis project is to establish how animal welfare organizations can strategically and effectively manage and leverage social media to fulfill missions and goals to save more animals' lives. Conclusions are drawn, and targeted solutions and strategies are recommended for SMCs at animal welfare organizations to leverage social media to better meet organizational needs.

The target audience of this thesis project comprises animal welfare organizations (i.e., animal protection groups, animal control agencies, shelters, humane societies, and rescues) and SMCs at animal welfare organizations across the U.S. With this target audience in mind, the following thesis project offers strategies for SMCs at animal welfare organizations to leverage social media to better meet organizational needs.

This research paper is divided into multiple sections. The literature review discusses SMCs, social media in animal welfare, and social media best practices for animal welfare organizations, all of which inform this thesis project. Additional sections discuss the methods and findings (immediately followed by discussion subheadings), and finally, conclusions are discussed. This research project sets an agenda on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations can use social media more effectively to meet organizational missions and goals.

A phenomenological study was designed to understand how SMCSs at animal welfare organizations use social media. Phenomenological studies seek to “explore, describe, and

analyze the meaning of individual lived experiences” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). This thesis project, focusing on the individual lived experiences of SMCs at animal welfare organizations, required an in-depth interview strategy to capture the meaning of the participants in their own words (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). More specifically, a phenomenological *interview* is meant to “understand the world from the subject’s point of view, to unfold meaning of people’s experiences” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1-2). Through an analysis of current practices, this thesis project helps to understand how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media to fulfill organizational missions and goals.

Before exploring the methodology used in this thesis project, the following section offers a review of the literature that served as a conceptual framework for the study’s research design. The literature review brings together the following topic areas: social media communicators (SMCs), social media in animal welfare, and social media best practices for animal welfare organizations. The literature on these topics informs readers how SMCs at animal welfare organizations might use social media.

After the literature review, this thesis project offers a robust methodology section that includes the following components: research design (phenomenological interview method); data collection procedure (i.e., recruitment, interview protocol, interview process, researcher memos); participants; and limitations of this thesis project.

Following the methodology section, the data analysis section describes thematic analysis, a common qualitative research technique, used to analyze the interview transcripts. Additionally, the data analysis section presents the findings of the phenomenological interview used in this thesis project. The findings answer the research question on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media. Discussion of findings of this thesis project

immediately follow the findings associated with each part of the research question. As such, no final discussion is included. Lastly, the conclusions section includes the following subcategories: connection between findings and problem statement, key and unexpected findings, practical implications, future applications, and recommendations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This literature review surveys research and authoritative resources directly related to social media communicators (SMCs), social media in animal welfare, and social media best practices for animal welfare organizations.

Few studies have investigated the relationship between social media and animal welfare organizations. Substantial literature discusses how nonprofit organizations (NPOs), in general, use social media. However, little knowledge exists about how animal welfare organizations, specifically, use social media. Currently, only two known studies have investigated social media and animal welfare organizations in some capacity. These studies examine 1) donors' perception and interaction with local animal welfare organizations' social media platforms and 2) a humane society's implementation of social media into its marketing and communications strategy. Neither study examines how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media, emphasizing the need for this research project to fill the gaps in research.

Well-known animal welfare organizations have published best practices for how the industry *should* use social media. However, no known studies have examined how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media, indicating a large gap in knowledge about this important communications topic. Scholarship is needed to understand how SMCs at animal welfare organizations *actually* use social media. The literature of this thesis project informs readers on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations might use social media. A thorough review of literature on SMCs, social media in animal welfare, and social media best practices for animal welfare organizations provided the conceptual framework that informed the design for this qualitative research-based thesis project.

## **Social Media Communicators**

This section of the literature review discusses social media communicators' (SMCs') background, roles and responsibilities of social media use, social media use, and value to organizations. This section also discusses gaps in the literature to justify the need for this thesis project. The literature enhances understanding of this unique position to better understand how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. The available literature does not focus on SMCs at animal welfare organizations, specifically. The lack of research on SMCs in animal welfare organizations indicates the need for this research project to augment the existing body of knowledge.

### *Background*

Curtis et al. (2009) found social media tools are beneficial methods of communication for public relations experts at NPOs. As social media use increases among NPOs, SMCs become more important in achieving organizational missions and goals (Howard et al., 2014; Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). Thus, organizations are hiring SMCs, sometimes known as content/social/digital media managers/workers/strategists (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016).

The SMC is a unique, newly developed position existing for both small and large for-profit businesses and NPOs. The position came into existence when organizations began recognizing social media as a critical component of communications efforts (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). "The [social media] communicator enters into different social streams contributing information related to an organization's goals, missions, and functions" (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016, p. 449).

### *Roles and Responsibilities*

The SMC uses social media to interact and collaborate with internal and external audiences, sharing information and raising awareness related to organizations' missions, goals, and functions (Howard et al., 2014; Raman, 2015; Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016).

Howard, Mangold & Johnston (2014) interviewed Dana Howard, the social media marketing manager for Murray State University, to learn how she manages the university's social campaign strategy using multiple social media tools. Howard et al. (2014) describe SMCs' roles and responsibilities which informs this thesis project. Howard's responsibilities span seven categories: monitoring multiple social media tools, engaging and interacting with audiences and constituents, creating and encouraging social media content, analyzing and reporting outcomes, governance, research, and crisis management (Howard et al., 2014). Howard attributes various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest, blogs, YouTube, and Storify) to helping achieve organizational missions and goals. Although this study does not focus on SMCs at animal welfare organizations specifically, the findings inform this research project by providing context on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations *may* use social media.

### *Importance*

Howard et al. (2014) and Carpenter & Lertpratchya (2016) stress the value of SMCs, as SMCs provide many important social media-related services to their organizations. Like Howard et al. (2014), Carpenter and Lertpratchya (2016) found that SMCs are critical to their organizations, because leadership and coworkers often fail to understand social media communication. Oftentimes, SMCs educate management and coworkers about social media best

practices and its impact; SMCs are invaluable to organizations for this reason (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016).

Digital strategists recommend that organizations hire an expert or paid-intern, or invest in training for key staff members, to utilize the most popular social media platforms in effective ways (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015; “Be selective,” 2016). NPOs’ hiring practices further indicate the value of SMCs. The Nonprofit Technology Network (2012) indicated that 42% of surveyed nonprofits planned to increase staffing for social networks, 55% would remain the same, and only 3% would decrease dedicated social media staff. Twenty-eight percent of NPOs had dedicated social media staff, which NPOs ranked as a primary reason for social media success in their organizations (Nonprofit Technology Network [NTEN], 2012). These studies suggest how significant SMCs are to NPOs and suggest how important SMCs are to the animal welfare organizations under investigation in this thesis project.

### *Studies*

Several researchers studied SMCs in the U.S. and abroad (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012; Carpenter and Lertpratchya, 2016). Obar, Zube, & Lampe (2012) surveyed social media directors and workers from advocacy organizations in the U.S. to understand SMCs’ perception of social media. All SMCs used social media to interact with audiences. Almost all of these SMCs believed social media enabled advocacy organizations to accomplish the following goals: strengthening outreach efforts; engaging feedback loops; strengthening collective action efforts through an increased speed of communication; and doing more for less money (Obar et. al., 2012). While this study focused on advocacy organizations

(not animal welfare organizations, exclusively), the same findings could be applied to SMCs at animal welfare organizations.

In another study, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) interviewed SMCs in Australasia and Europe to learn how they used social media, because significant gaps remain in the scholarship of how organizations use social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) found that social media, in organizational communication, is mostly experimental and conducted by trial-and-error, rather than undertaken with clear objectives measured with performance indicators. Carpenter & Lertpratchya (2016) also determined that using social media is mostly experimental.

Macnamara and Zerfass concluded that the lack of social media strategies, policies, guidelines, training, monitoring, and evaluation suggest that SMCs lack knowledge to leverage the full potential of social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) confirmed what Howard et al. (2014) and Schaefer and Hersey (2015) found: organizations need a social media strategy. Previous research implies that SMCs may not use social media effectively to meet organizational missions and goals, because they do not know how to use social media (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012).

In another study, Carpenter & Lertpratchya (2016) interviewed 10 SMCs, across a range of organizations (including NPOs), to determine whether SMCs experienced role stress (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity). Carpenter & Lertpratchya (2016) found that participants did not experience role conflict, but SMCs experienced role ambiguity: SMCs lacked clearly defined expectations of their roles and responsibilities.

To counteract role ambiguity, SMCs undertook the following professional development activities: 1) actively participated on social media platforms for personal reasons, 2) searched for

articles and resources for best practices, 3) followed posts from social media experts, 4) experimented with messaging strategies on social platforms, 5) used analytics tools to monitor interactions, 6) organized data to determine the effectiveness of their experiments, and 7) sought a deeper level of understanding of their social media practices through networking events, conferences, seminars, Webinars, or classes (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). Carpenter & Lertpratchya (2016) concluded that SMCs must continually learn from and share their expertise with outside social media experts to help each other manage role ambiguity.

Drawing upon evidence from these studies suggests that organizations may be failing to use social media to fulfill missions and goals, because 1) SMCs or related staff do not know how to use social media, 2) SMCs lack a social media strategy, or 3) SMCs experience role ambiguity.

The next section of the literature review discusses social media in animal welfare.

### **Social Media in Animal Welfare**

Moving from a review of literature on SMCs, this section of the literature review discusses social media in animal welfare. The literature includes discussion of the following topics: benefits and drawbacks of social media, studies on social media in animal welfare, and how animal welfare organizations use social media.

#### *Benefits*

Research reveals animals are the most popular cause discussed on social media at 41% (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2013). Today, all kinds of animal welfare organizations use social media (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015). Social media affords animal welfare organizations numerous

benefits (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015). “One of the best, most accessible tools modern animal advocates have at [their] disposal for outreach is social media” (Rose, 2013). Social media offers animal welfare organizations “a virtually free amplification of messages in ways simply unattainable through traditional paid mediums” (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015, page 148). Additionally, 41% of animal welfare organizations are succeeding at generating conversation among social media supporters – the highest success rate of any cause (katetosi, 2014).

Social media empowers and connects individuals and groups to share, cooperate, and take collective action; enhances outreach; and creates awareness for organizational messages, missions, goals, and strategies effectively and efficiently (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Obar et al., 2012; Howard et al., 2014; Raman, 2016). Kanter’s study found the following:

The Humane Society of the United States saw a number of intangible benefits of . . . social media . . . as it related to . . . animal welfare issues, including increased awareness, engaged participation, generated discussions, buy-in from the top, and recognition and media attention. (as cited in Schaefer & Hersey, 2015, p. 130)

Social media helps increase volunteerism, fundraising, donations, and international alliance (Raman, 2016). Accordingly, social media can help animal welfare organizations that depend on fundraising, donations, and volunteers to achieve missions and goals (Sisson, 2016).

Additionally, promoting animals available for adoption has proven highly effective compared to the pre-social media approach of waiting for people to visit brick-and-mortar locations (Gibson, 2014). Social media also allows animals to be adopted from faraway locales (Gibson, 2014). These facts support the value of social media to animal welfare organizations’ lifesaving efforts.

*Drawbacks*

Alternatively, social media can present problems for animal welfare organizations. Researchers note that social media is not very effective in terms of fundraising and volunteers (highly valuable metrics) (Ogden & Starita, 2009). Ogden and Starita found that typical quantitative goals (i.e., fundraising, volunteerism) are not currently achieved with social media. Ogden and Starita also found that NPOs had little success with social media: 74% raised less than \$100 (or did not know how much money was received), and 85% attracted less than 25 volunteers (or did not know how many volunteers were recruited) from social media efforts (Ogden & Starita, 2009). While this study is not specific to animal welfare organizations, the same findings could apply. These seemingly insignificant/unknown results cannot be ignored, because animal welfare organizations depend on fundraising, donations, and volunteers to achieve missions and goals (Sisson, 2016).

Other social media-related problems exist for animal welfare organizations (Heather, 2015; Moss, 2016). Some shelters report wasted time and resources spent sorting through useless comments from people unable to help or that mislead others to believe that animals are safe (Moss, 2016). Shelters with limited budgets and staff cannot handle the vast number of phone calls (in response to social media posts) from people who are unable to help. Calls about animal status, complaints about a situation, or demands to save animals hundreds of miles away deplete time and resources better spent caring for and saving animals (Moss, 2016).

Additionally, while animal welfare organizations' social media efforts can spur people to action, social media can also have the opposite effect: Users and rescuers often become overwhelmed by the seemingly never-ending onslaught of urgent posts requesting to save animals on death row (Heather, 2015; Moss, 2016). Rescuers feel helpless and avoid social

media altogether, unfollowing animal welfare organizations' Facebook pages, which decreases these organizations' social reach (Heather, 2015; Moss, 2016).

### *Studies*

Currently, only two studies examine animal welfare organizations and social media in some capacity. One study evaluated animal welfare organizations' donors' engagement and perception of social media. Another study followed Central Brevard Humane Society (CBHS), a mid-sized animal welfare organization in Florida, as it integrated social media (specifically Facebook) into the organizational marketing and communications strategy. Both studies are reviewed below.

Sisson (2016) surveyed five animal welfare organizations' donor publics to determine their perceptions and attitudes, level of social media engagement, and relationships with local animal welfare organization. Sixty-eight percent of donors liked or followed their local animal welfare organization on social media, while 32% did not. Facebook was a key platform that donors liked or followed at 62%. Sisson found that most donors consume content but do not contribute or create content on local animal welfare organization's social media platforms. This study returned significant findings: donors who liked/followed local animal welfare organizations on social media donated more, and were more likely to donate in the future, than donors who did not like/follow these organizations.

Donors were particularly satisfied with organizations' use of social media to disseminate information and communicate organizational needs but saw the need for improvement. One donor praised their local animal welfare organization's use of social media to highlight adoption successes. However, this donor believed the organization could better leverage social media to

increase adoptions by posting pictures of more animals in *need* of adoption rather than of animals that were *already* adopted. Another donor felt social media was a “wonderful platform” for their local organization to communicate with the public for any emergent or long-term animal needs (Sisson, 2016, p. 186). Another donor felt that if their local organization leveraged pre-existing relationships on social media by utilizing volunteers more, fundraising would increase. These results suggest the importance of animal welfare organizations to reach publics through social media, because these organizations depend on fundraising, donations, and volunteers to achieve missions and goals, as previously mentioned (Sisson, 2016).

A second study, by Schaefer and Hersey (2015), examined how Central Brevard Humane Society (CBHS) implemented social media into their marketing and communications strategy. CBHS found social media was better suited for connecting animals to new homes than for direct fund development. This study seems to support Ogden & Starita’s (2009) findings that social media is not very effective in terms of fundraising, as previously mentioned.

Analytics demonstrated that social media produced results for CBHS. Visual content encouraged users to take action, which provided CBHS with instantaneous success through increased animal adoption. Un-boosted (versus paid) posts featuring images of animals and calls to action for adoption and volunteers received the most user engagement.

While this case study encourages the use of social media for animal welfare organizations’ missions and goals, the findings may not reflect the experiences of other organizations of similar size. Therefore, continued analysis on how social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations use social media is necessary. The next section of the literature review discusses social media best practices for animal welfare organizations.

## **Social Media Best Practices for Animal Welfare Organizations**

Moving from a review of literature on social media in animal welfare, this section of the literature review specifies how animal welfare organizations *should* use social media according to industry best practices.

### *Background*

Best practices detail ways that animal welfare organizations *should* use social media. However, no studies have focused on how *SMCs* at animal welfare organizations *actually* use social media. The literature informs how participants in this thesis project may (and should) use social media according to recommended best practices.

Animal welfare organizations and their *SMCs* and social media teams require numerous social media skills to meet missions and goals. Animal welfare organizations stress the importance of employing *SMCs* (or volunteers) with strong written and communication skills and knowledge of organizational policies, missions, visions, goals, and programs (Auerbach, 2016; Falconer, 2017).

Major animal welfare organizations (i.e., The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), Best Friends Animal Society, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Maddie's Fund, and Petfinder) and social media communicators (*SMCs*) at animal welfare organizations published resources to help animal welfare organizations use social media to fulfill missions and goals.

Animal welfare organizations recommend the following best practices for social media activities: leverage the full potential of social media; share content regularly; monitor and update all platforms; develop and implement a social media plan; create engaging content; build

relationships with audiences to encourage involvement (i.e., donations, adoptions); include calls to actions on every post; educate and inform the public; encourage content creation and sharing; and utilize analytics tools and make adjustments.

### *Leverage Full Potential of Social Media*

Animal welfare organizations should know how to use each social media platform effectively and to diversify by using multiple tools for different purposes and audiences (Boglioli, 2011; Gibson, 2014; Maddie's Fund, 2018). The ASPCA (2015) recommends using three core social media channels: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Animal welfare social media experts recommend ways that these organizations can utilize the full potential of each platform (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Flickr and Pinterest YouTube, and blogs). Animal welfare organizations can use Facebook for storytelling and relationship building, Twitter to get information out quickly, and Instagram to tell a story and mission through visuals (ASPCA, 2015). Flickr and Pinterest are useful for sharing photos and encouraging sharing (ASPCA, 2015). YouTube channels highlight adoptable animals, provide educational and training videos, and allow organizations to showcase the work they do (ASPCA, 2015). Free blogs (i.e., Blogger, Tumblr, and WordPress.org) provide fast ways to develop articles about adoptable pets, special events, and initiatives (ASPCA, 2015). Trending hashtags, that search engines will recognize, can be used on all platforms (Swanson, 2018).

Animal welfare organizations should also utilize innovative tools/features on Facebook. The HSUS and Petfinder recommend using Facebook's 'Donate' button to ask for money and donations rather than redirecting users to websites (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012). Custom tabs can be created to share wish lists of items animal welfare organizations need (Harrell, 2012).

Facebook Pages showcase individual animals that have been at the shelter for a long time, have special needs, or require medical attention (Swanson, 2018). Public or private Facebook Groups about specific topics, or for exclusive audiences (i.e., staff, volunteers, adopters, fosterers, and rescuers), allow members to share information and tips (Falconer, 2017). Organizations can overcome the new Facebook algorithm and ensure that content appears in followers' news feeds by creating live video instead of recording videos and posting them afterward; engaging in and encouraging ongoing conversations (instead of likes and shares); and using paid promotions (Maddie's Fund, 2018).

### *Share Content Regularly*

In addition to understanding how to use and take advantage of each social media platform's features, animal welfare organizations should share content regularly to maintain a consistent presence on all social media channels (Auerbach, 2016). These organizations must also use a consistent voice in organizational messaging and campaigns across all mediums (Boglioli, 2011; Volin, 2015; Pearman, 2016). Messages should use appropriate language and tone for the intended audience (Cohen, 2014).

### *Monitor and Update Platforms*

Animal welfare organizations must also monitor and update all social media platforms' discussion threads and images and respond to comments and questions (Clark, 2014; Volin, 2015; Moss, 2016; Falconer, 2017, Fugate, 2017). Organizations should engage audiences by responding to comments and questions and monitor conversations by dealing with negative comments and trolls (Boglioli, 2011; Cohen, 2014; Best Friends Animal Society, 2015; Volin,

2015; Falconer, 2017). To reduce the number of negative comments and attacks, organizations should implement a social media policy that clearly outlines posting policies and protocol for staff and followers (Harrell, 2012; Cohen, 2014; ASPCA, 2015; Pearman, 2016; Falconer, 2017).

### *Develop and Implement a Social Media Plan*

In addition to a social media policy, animal welfare organizations should create and implement a social media plan to manage all social media activities (Cohen, 2014; Auerbach, 2016; Pearman, 2016; Falconer, 2017). The plan should include a weekly or monthly posting calendar and utilize time-saving tools to schedule posts in advance (ASPCA, 2015; Falconer, 2017; Pearman, 2017). The ASPCA (2015) also emphasizes the best times to post on each platform: weekdays between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. on Facebook; weekends between 1:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. on Twitter; and 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., and 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. on Instagram.

### *Create Engaging Content*

Once a social media plan is in place, animal welfare organizations should create engaging content that serves the organization's mission (Falconer, 2017). Content should be interesting so that followers will like and share it (Falconer, 2017). Posts should balance urgent requests for help with informative newsworthy content and positive success stories to avoid overwhelming audiences and creating donor fatigue (Volin, 2015; Auerbach, 2016; Moss, 2016; Falconer).

Animal welfare organizations can create engaging content by telling compelling stories about animals using high quality photos and heartwarming videos to engage audiences (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012; Cohen, 2014; Bogle, 2016; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018; Swanson,

2018). Posts using mixed media (i.e., text, links, photos, and videos) attract more attention and gain more engagement than plain text updates (Harrell, 2012). Captivating, professional photos and short videos capture each pets' personality and showcase their best traits to improve chances of getting adopted (Clark, 2014; Cohen, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Auerbach, 2016; Bogle, 2016; Falconer, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018).

### *Build Relationships with Audiences*

Additionally, animal welfare organizations must build relationships with audiences via storytelling to establish trust needed to ask for support (Boglioli, 2011; Volin, 2015). Engagement is key to reaching more people: greater reach frequently leads to increased support through donations and adoptions (Sara Brady Public Relations, n.d.). "Odds of pet adoption depend on the reach of a post, not the likes" (Clark, 2014, para. 4).

### *Include Calls to Action*

When asking for support, organizations should include calls to action on each post that directly ask followers to do something, such as adopt, foster, volunteer, donate, attend an event, or interact (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012; Gabrielson, 2014; Gibson, 2014; katetosi, 2014; Auerbach, 2016; Fugate, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018). Animal welfare organizations should also show supporters what the donated funds accomplish, which frequently leads to more financial support (Sara Brady Public Relations, n.d.). Organizations must also thank supporters to encourage future support (ASPCA, 2015; Auerbach, 2016; Fugate, 2017).

*Inform and Educate the Public*

In addition to encouraging audiences to take action, animal welfare organizations should inform and educate the public. Organizations should provide pet owners with information about pet-related issues. Informative content (i.e., veterinary information, and training tips) helps pet owners care for their pets (katetosi, 2014; Falconer, 2017).

*Encourage Content and Sharing*

Animal welfare organizations should also encourage engagement by asking audiences (i.e. followers, fans, donors, adopters, fosters, and volunteers, and other supporters) to create and share content (Boglioli, 2011; Falconer, 2017). Volunteers are valuable sources of content who can share stories, photos, and videos of animals (Auerbach, 2016; Pearman, 2016). Shared content can be repurposed or cross-posted to other social media channels (Auerbach, 2016; Pearman, 2016).

*Utilize Analytics Tools*

In addition to creating and encouraging content, animal welfare organizations should use analytics tools to measure engagement and other important data (ASPCA, 2015; Pearman, 2016; Fugate, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018). These organizations should monitor which posts get the best results (Cohen, 2014; Pearman, 2016, Falconer, 2017; Fugate, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018). Animal welfare organizations should adjust their social media plans and content based on what content returns the best results (Pearman, 2017). In addition to tracking what works for their own organization, animal welfare organizations should follow

similar organizations on social media to learn what social media strategies and content work best (Boglioli, 2011; Auerbach, 2016; Askanase, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

In closing, this research thesis project was undertaken within and informed by the literature about the following topics: social media communicators (SMCs), social media in animal welfare, and social media best practices for animal welfare organizations. It is important that readers of this thesis project understand how the main topics of this literature review came together to inform this project.

First, literature on SMCs provides background information on how this population subgroup uses social media within organizations. Second, literature on social media in animal welfare provides context about how the industry uses, and is affected by, social media. Finally, the literature on social media best practices explains, for readers, how animal welfare organizations should use social media. The literature review, in its entirety, informs readers and provides context about the research question of this thesis project.

This literature review helps readers better understand the population subgroup, under investigation in this thesis project, and how they use social media. This collection of literature also points to significant gaps in knowledge of how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. These gaps in research indicate the need for this research thesis project to contribute to the body of knowledge on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. Most importantly, the gaps in the literature lend themselves to the opportunity to provide animal welfare organizations with practical, real-world recommendations on how to leverage social media to save more animals' lives.

With the above conceptual framework in mind, this thesis project was designed to answer the previously mentioned research question. Knowing that SMCs and social media are important to animal welfare organizations' lifesaving efforts, and the ways that SMCs and animal welfare organizations *should* use social media, I wanted to learn how SMCs in animal welfare organizations *actually* use social media to save animals' lives. The next section of this research thesis project discusses the methods used to collect and analyze data to understand the lived experiences of SMCs at animal welfare organizations.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology section describes the research design, data collection procedure (i.e., recruitment, interview protocol, interview process, and researcher memos), participants, and limitations of this research thesis project.

### **Research Design**

The following thesis project was designed to answer the research question of this project. Qualitative data increases understanding of individuals' experiences (Bolderston, 2012). I wanted to understand how animal welfare organizations use social media to save animals' lives. To accomplish this goal, and to answer my research question, I examined the individuals responsible for the management and use of social media at animal welfare organizations—the social media communicators (SMC)s.

Increasing understanding of how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media is key to these organizations better leveraging social media to save more animals' lives. Little is known about how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. It is important to procure the participants' perspective when trying to understand how these individuals use social media.

A phenomenological study was necessary to establish a clearer picture of the phenomenon of the population subgroup (SMCs at animal welfare organizations) and to understand these individuals' lived experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Bolderston, 2012; Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). According to Schostak, phenomenological methods produce data that, when analyzed, provide deeper insight into participants' perceptions (as cited in Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016, p. 452). Furthermore, the phenomenological approach aims "to get as close as possible to precise descriptions of what

people have experienced” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 51). The goal of a phenomenological study is to create a clear picture of the issue or phenomenon for people other than the participants (Bolderston, 2012). As previously mentioned, the main objective of this thesis project is to inform animal welfare organizations across the U.S. how to better leverage social media to save more animals’ lives.

“A study focusing on individual lived experiences typically relies on an in-depth interview strategy” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 93). Phenomenological studies involve “. . . in-depth interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19). In-depth interviews “capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants’ own words” (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 93).

To capture participants’ experiences in their own words, I conducted remote interviews distributed via email, which served as the methodological research instrument. The interview method was appropriate for generating the necessary data needed to answer all parts of my research question (Maxwell, 2005). “. . . Research interviews have the purpose of producing knowledge (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I conducted structured interviews, meaning I did not probe deeper into areas of interest through follow-up questions.

I used thematic analysis (described in further detail below) using concepts from the conceptual framework of the literature review to recognize and categorize themes for data analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The following section describes the data collection procedure of this thesis project.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Moving from discussion on the research design, this section details the data collection procedure of this thesis project. I collected data for my research through interviews and

researcher memos to study the specific ‘phenomena’ of how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media. I gathered data from seven interviews supplemented with researcher memos. This section provides discussion on the following data collection procedures: recruitment process, interview protocol, interview process, and researcher memos.

### *Recruitment Process*

This section details the recruitment strategy used in this thesis project. The conceptual framework and research question of this thesis project guided the recruitment strategy (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Participants in this thesis project were recruited through sampling.

Purposive sampling is guided by the theoretical framework and concepts and is built into qualitative design (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Purposive sampling groups participants according to preselected criteria relevant to the primary research questions (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, & Namey, 2005). I specifically solicited SMCs at animal welfare organizations, because these individuals are representative of the population subgroup under evaluation and have firsthand experience using social media for these organizations. I chose these participants, because they possessed insight and understanding about my research topic.

Researchers argue that purposive samples are typically determined by theoretical saturation—the point in which data collection no longer returns new or additional insights to the research questions (Mack et al., 2005). “For a typical qualitative study, the total number may be around 10 participants” (Bolderston, 2012, p. 68). The tentative goal was to solicit four qualified participants; I recruited nine participants and interviewed seven.

The recruitment process will now be explained in detail. I requested admission into a closed Facebook group, *Animal Shelter Social Media*, a private group of SMCs at brick-and-

mortar animal welfare organizations in the U.S., comprising 342 members (to date). The *Animal Shelter Social Media* group's purpose is to provide a centralized location for SMCs to communicate about how they use social media (Animal Shelter Social Media, n.d.). Prospective members (SMCs at animal welfare organizations) must answer questions to be admitted into the group. Although I did not meet this prerequisite for entry, I completed the questionnaire by identifying myself as a graduate student, in New York University's School of Professional Studies Professional Writing program, conducting research for my master's thesis project on how animal welfare organizations use social media.

Upon admittance into the *Animal Shelter Social Media* Facebook group, I approached the group's gatekeepers with a call for participants. I posted the call to the group's page on March 2, 2018. The call included the following elements: who, what, when, where, and why, as well as what would be gained and what specifically I was requesting (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

At this point, purposive sampling was supplemented with *snowball sampling*, also known as chain referral sampling (Mack et. al., 2005). Snowball sampling lets participants use their social network to refer the researcher to other people who might be interested in participating in the study (Mack et al., 2005). Interested participants in the *Animal Shelter Social Media* group 'tagged' (named/listed) other potential study candidates in response to my initial call for participants. Nine total SMCs expressed interest in participating in this thesis project.

Interviews were distributed to nine members of the *Animal Shelter Social Media* group and to one non-member. The non-member is a shelter director in charge of social media at a mid-Michigan-based animal control/shelter with whom I had a pre-existing professional relationship. From the 10 interview protocols that were distributed via email, seven SMCs from the *Animal*

*Shelter Social Media* Facebook group responded to the interview across a four-week period. Once I recruited participants, I designed the interview protocol of this thesis project.

### *Interview Protocol*

Before submitting interviews to participants, I developed interview protocols using Google Forms, a digital tool that facilitates collection of information from users via personalized interviews. The ‘Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare Thesis Project Interview’ (see Appendix A) introduces this thesis project and each of the following components to participants: ‘Disclosure Statement/Interview Data Collection Protocol’ (see Appendix B); ‘Preliminary Demographic Information’ (see Appendix C); ‘Open-Response Interview Questions’ (see Appendix D); and Informed Consent Form’ (see Appendix E). The interview protocol (see Appendix B) outlines the purpose of the thesis project and the steps to be followed by participants (Bolderston, 2012).

The interview protocol for this research project was followed by 12 preliminary demographic questions. I collected preliminary demographic information (see Appendix C) about participants’ organizations, official professional titles, and educational backgrounds. Participants were also asked about the length of time employed in animal welfare, as SMCs, and at their current organizations.

Participants were then asked 10 open-response interview questions (see Appendix D) about their experiences using social media in their role as SMC within their respective animal welfare organizations. The interview questions were informed by the research question, literature review, and conceptual framework of this thesis project. The interview questions generated the data needed to answer the primary research question of this thesis project and to understand how

the participants use social media (Maxwell, 2005). Open-response interview questions allow participants to tell their story in their own words (Bolderston, 2012).

In addition to the interview protocol and interview questions, I collected consent from all participants via the 'Informed Consent Form' (see Appendix E). Formal informed consent is necessary for all qualitative research methods regardless of the sampling method used to identify potential study candidates and the strategies used to recruit them (Mack et al., 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The 'Informed Consent Form' (see Appendix E) clearly outlines the following items for study participants: that they are participating in research; the purpose of the research; the procedures of the research; the risk and benefits of research participation; the voluntary nature of the research participation; and the procedures used to protect confidentiality (Groenewald, 2004; Mack et al., 2005; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Bolderston (2012) stresses the importance of addressing privacy and consent when using email for research purposes. I informed participants that all personal, identifying information would be kept anonymous either by altering their real names to pseudonyms or by another coding method (i.e., SMC1, SMC2). Written consent was attained from participants acknowledging their receipt of a written form describing the research. As noted above, all seven study participants signed the written informed consent agreement.

### *Interview Process*

After developing the interview protocol and interview questions, I conducted remote interviews via email using Google Forms, which served as the methodological research instrument. The Internet, as a research tool, allows researchers to conduct and distribute asynchronous interviews via email (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). Asynchronous interviews

allow participants to respond on their own time, work around their professional and personal schedules, and allow for substantial reflection upon each interview question.

Bolderston (2012) confirms that the Internet has become an increasingly popular method of collecting qualitative data, and online interviews have similar advantages to telephone interviews due to their ability to reach remote participants, potentially reduce reactive bias, and reduce costs and time expenditures. Several studies indicate the quality of data collected electronically is comparable to that collected from traditional methods (Bolderston, 2012). A major advantage of text-based interviews is that they do not require transcription, because the data is already in the participant's own words and can be easily downloaded by the researcher to analyze (Bolderston, 2012).

Participants returned the interviews to me by the specified deadline, March 26, 2018, except for one participant whose responses were collected on April 4, 2018.

### *Researcher Memos*

In addition to the data collected from the seven interviews, data collection was augmented by researcher memos. Miles and Huberman describe 'memoing' as another important data source in qualitative research (as cited in Groenewald, 2004, p. 13). Memos are a form of in-process writing that provided a 'snapshot' of my analytic thinking while reading the interview transcripts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I did not complete formal memos for each individual interview, but I made notes as I coded the data into categories and subcategories as interview responses answered each part of my research question. I recorded memos to document my thoughts about the interview responses in their entirety. The memos captured my impressions,

reactions, and any questions that participants' responses raised. Ultimately, the memos clarified the participants' responses as I coded them.

Having explained the data collection procedure, the next section presents information about the participants of this thesis project.

## **Participants**

This section includes the following information about the study participants: type of animal welfare organizations at which participants work; educational background and professional experience; official professional titles; and organizational roles and responsibilities.

Participants include seven social media communicators (SMCs) at brick-and-mortar animal welfare organizations who are members of the private *Animal Shelter Social Media* Facebook group. All seven participants work for organizations located across all five regions of the U.S. Most participants work for larger animal shelters and/or humane societies that serve the entire community (i.e., city, county, region, or country) in which they are located. One participant works for both a large, national animal protection group *and* a small animal rescue group.

Some participants work for organizations that oversee the care of cats and dogs exclusively, while other organizations take in all animals including horses, barn animals, rabbits, reptiles, exotic pets, and wildlife. These animal welfare organizations offer a range of services including adoption, volunteer programs, foster care, transfer and rescue services, cruelty investigation, veterinary care, low-cost spay/neuter and vaccination clinics, humane euthanasia services, humane education and animal camps, behavioral training, wildlife rescue and rehabilitation, and advocacy for legislation and ordinances to enhance animal welfare.

Participants' educational background and length of experience working in animal welfare and as SMCs varied. Participants received training or held certifications or degrees in public relations, advertising, marketing, digital/social media, photography and/or animal welfare. One participant held a bachelor in environmental science and psychology. Participants averaged six years of experience working in animal welfare. Five participants had worked in animal welfare for 2-6 years, and two participants had worked in the industry for ten or more years. Respondents worked an average of 5.5 years as SMCs and an average of 4 years with their current animal welfare organization. Participants who had worked the longest in animal welfare had also worked the longest as SMCs and in their current positions at their organizations.

Participants' official professional titles included: Communications Coordinator, Digital Marketing Specialist, Social Media and Photography Coordinator, Marketing Programs Manager, Director of Community Outreach, and Director of Marketing & Communications. For simplification, participants will be referred to as SMC1, SMC2, SMC3, SMC4, SMC5, SMC6, and SMC7 within this thesis project.

All participants manage and/or use social media at their respective animal welfare organizations. Four participants are the sole SMC at their organization, and four participants make the final decisions regarding social media. One participant makes the final decisions regarding social media but reported sometimes considers the opinion of the Executive Director. Another participant manages all social media activity but coordinates with senior team members when in "crisis communication mode" (SMC2, interview March 8, 2018). One participant makes final decisions regarding content creation but makes recommendations to the development director when working with sponsors. One participant is the main content writer, and another participant uses content collected from staff and volunteers.

The rest of the participants are either part of a team or have a team working for them to manage all social media and digital communications. One participant reviews all social media content provided by the team and makes the final decision before content is posted for one organization and advises on content for the other organization.

The next section discusses the limitations of this research thesis project that present opportunities for future studies.

### **Limitations**

Following discussion of the participants, this section discusses the limitations of this thesis project. The scope of this research thesis project is limited to the research question identified. Findings of this thesis project are limited by the following factors: research instrument used; time and financial constraints; sample size; and size and resources of the animal welfare organizations under investigation.

One limitation of this research project involves the research instrument (i.e., Internet/email). A potential drawback to collecting data electronically is that distributing interviews via email does not allow the researcher to observe and analyze non-verbal cues and nuances of study participants as in face-to-face interviews (Bolderston, 2012). However, keyboards can also convey “strong opinion” through the use of capitals, various punctuation marks, and emoticons (Bolderston, 2012, p. 73).

Due to time constraints and lack of funding for this research thesis project, data was not collected until the topic was exhausted or saturated—the point at which participants provided no new insights on this topic (Groenewald, 2004).

Due to the lack of resources and time available, as well as the fact that I served as sole researcher of this thesis project, the sample was held to seven participants. The typical qualitative study has around ten participants (Bolderston, 2012). The responses of a small number of participants may not accurately or entirely reflect the experiences of *all* SMCs at *all* animal welfare organizations. Interviewing a larger sample population would likely facilitate saturation. Furthermore, time constraints did not afford the opportunity to ask follow-up questions to probe deeper into participants' interview responses.

The size of the animal welfare organizations under investigation in this thesis project may also limit the findings of this project. The data collected from the smaller animal welfare organization (animal rescue) may be skewed by factors including fewer resources (i.e., social media staff and time allotted for social media activities).

Due to these limitations, this research thesis project cannot be generalized to all animal welfare organizations. However, this thesis project *can* help animal welfare organizations in the U.S. learn how to better leverage social media to achieve missions and goals.

This thesis project adds to the current body of knowledge on how animal welfare organizations use (or should use) social media and establishes a foundation to develop further studies. Future studies can investigate a larger sample population and/or probe further into participants' responses with follow-up questions to collect data until saturation.

The next data analysis section presents the findings of the phenomenological study on how participants in this research project use social media.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The following section presents the findings that answer the research question of this thesis project. First, this section includes discussion on the data analysis method used in this thesis project. Second, the findings illustrate how participants in this thesis project use social media to communicate missions and goals, reach and engage stakeholders, raise awareness of causes, inform and educate the public, increase fundraising and donations, and promote animal adoption and fostering. The first section, below, describes the thematic analysis approach taken to examine the data and extrapolate themes from the participants' interview responses that answered the research question.

### **Thematic Analysis of Interview Data**

This section explains the data analysis method used in this research thesis project. Data analysis involves “reading, labeling, and breaking down (or decontextualizing) raw data and then reconstituting them into categories, patterns, themes, concepts, or propositions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 310). Data analysis is used for the following reasons: to make and validate research claims, to create exemplars that convey claims to readers, and to help readers understand the experiences of the group under investigation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). The ultimate goal of data analysis is to select, synthesize, and convey the data so that readers understand the lived experiences of the participants. Data analysis requires a balance of “explanation of analyzed data with illustrations that faithfully render” the participants' experiences (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 342).

“Data sorting and analysis can be done by hand using a proprietary word processing system to cut and paste the interview into relevant categories. . .” (Bolderstson, 2012, p. 75). Manual data analysis, via word processing programs, is appropriate for coding fewer than 100

pages of text data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2012). I used Microsoft Word to cut and paste data from the interviews into preestablished categories based on the research question, review of literature, and conceptual framework which informed this thesis project.

I conducted thematic analysis of the participants' interview transcripts to understand how the participants use social media. "Thematic analysis as an independent qualitative descriptive approach is mainly described as 'a method for identifying, analysing [*sic*] and reporting patterns (themes) within data'" (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). Thematic analysis examines narrative materials (i.e., interview transcripts) by breaking the text into smaller units of content and submitting them to descriptive treatment to provide a "rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data" (Vaismoradi, Turenen, & Bondas, 2013, p. 400). Thematic analysis facilitates an "investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole" (Hycner, 1999, p. 161).

Accordingly, I examined the transcripts as a whole and organized the data into categories, also known as *coding* (Bolderston, 2012). A *code* is the linkage between data and categories and a device to label, separate, compile, and organize data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). A *category* is a "covering term for an array of general phenomena: concepts, constructs, themes, types, and other meaningful 'bins' in which to put items that are related to each other" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I coded the transcripts based on the predetermined categories and collected data relevant to each code (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Next, I categorized the interview data into the major categories as they answered each part of the research question of this thesis project. I used the pile-sorting method to group my data into the predetermined categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). I isolated, cut, and pasted all statements, relevant to each category, into the Word document to highlight the research

phenomenon of how the participants use social media. I searched the data for excerpts that fit into each of my preestablished categories and selected vivid compelling extract examples (exemplars) and quotes from interviews to create an interesting narrative that answered the research question (Bolderston, 2012).

Finally, I produced the final written report of the analysis, relating back to the research question, literature review, and conceptual framework of this thesis project (Bolderston, 2012). The composite summary transformed the participants' everyday experiences as they related to and supported the research topic (Groenewald, 2004).

Having explained the thematic analysis method used to analyze the data, the following sections answer the research question of this thesis project and – ultimately – make sense of the participants' lived experiences.

### **Participants' Use of Social Media**

This section presents the findings of this thesis project immediately followed by a 'discussion' of findings that answer each part of the research question of this project. The research question sought to understand how participants of this thesis project use social media to communicate missions and goals, reach and engage stakeholders, raise awareness of causes, inform and educate the public, increase fundraising and donations, and promote adoption and fostering.

#### *Communicating Missions and Goals*

Participants use social media to communicate about missions and goals in several ways. Two participants use social media in ways that align or strive to align with their organization's mission, vision, and values. Several participants use social media to reach, inform, and engage

with the community of potential donors, adopters, volunteers, and other supporters to fulfill organizational missions and goals. SMC2 reported the following:

Social media is used to foster an engaged community of adopters and fellow animal-lovers. We do this by sharing information on currently-adoptable animals, promoting our programs & events, asking for feedback, sharing general information about the animal welfare industry, and more. (interview, March 6, 2018)

Another participant stated, “We mostly use social media to promote adoptions, raise awareness of programs and services, and encourage donations” (SMC5, interview, March 20, 2018).

Participants expressed the importance of using social media to reach and engage stakeholders for fulfilling missions and goals. SMC7 reported the following:

A key component of social media that I feel is not focused on enough is the need for organizations to engage with their supporters – both local and national groups need to do this more. Otherwise you are a voiceless brand, and that sets you up for drive by supporters. (SMC7, interview, April 4, 2018)

Another participant stated, “By building a loyal following, we then have another resource available when it comes to fundraising, community advocacy and for finding animals homes” (SMC3, interview, March 8, 2018). Similarly, SMC2 reported, “Social media was invaluable in keeping our audience informed, and social media ended up being key in our hurricane relief fundraising efforts” (interview, March 8, 2018).

**Discussion.** This section provides discussion on the findings of this research thesis project. This discussion answers the research question of this thesis project on how social media

communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to communicate missions and goals.

As previously mentioned, the social media communicator (SMC) “enters into different social streams contributing information related to an organization’s missions, goals, and functions” (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). Howard et al. (2014) attribute various social media platforms (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Instagram, Pinterest, blogs, YouTube, and Storify) to helping achieve organizational missions and goals. Participants of this thesis project use combinations of the following platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, Google Plus, Snapchat, and/or blogs to communicate missions and goals. “We mostly use Facebook, . . . Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest (in that order)” (SMC5, interview, March 20, 2018).

Not all participants in this thesis project mentioned using social media for ‘missions and goals,’ specifically. However, many of the participants’ statements indicate they use social media to communicate missions and goals in numerous ways. These participants use social media to raise awareness of programs and services, inform the public, promote programs and events, encourage fundraising and donations, and promote adoptions and fostering – all of which are tied to missions and goals.

Participants of this thesis project also use social media to communicate missions and goals in ways similar to other nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Findings from this thesis project substantiate previous research that NPOs use social media for organizational effectiveness, information dissemination, awareness, relationship building, missions, donations, fundraising, and volunteers (Waters et al., 2009; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Waters, 2010; Nah & Saxton, 2012; Schaefer & Hersey, 2015; Raman, 2016; Barnes, n.d.). The abovementioned ways that

NPOs use social media are true in animal welfare organizations' efforts to communicate missions and goals.

These findings also reinforce the literature on social media best practices that recommend animal welfare organizations use social media to serve the organization's mission (Falconer, 2017). Participants of this thesis project use social media, according to industry recommendations, for communicating missions and goals. Participants use social media to communicate missions and goals in ways that support a primary mission and goal of animal welfare organizations – caring for and finding new homes for homeless animals.

### *Reaching and Engaging Stakeholders*

The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) defines stakeholders as any individuals or groups that provide added value for the organization. Stakeholders include but are not limited to: “government, law enforcement, health, education, veterinary health, animal welfare, business, voluntary, service providers, religious leaders, landowners and dog and/or cat owners” (IFAW, n.d.). Many participants in this thesis project use social media to reach and engage the following stakeholders: animal lovers, potential adopters, volunteers, businesses, and other supporters. As mentioned previously, one participant states, “Social media is used to foster an engaged community of adopters and fellow animal-lovers” (SMC2, interview, March 8, 2018).

Engagement with stakeholders involves interacting with audiences, answering questions and building relationships with different audiences across different platforms, also known as being “involved in the conversation” (Howard et al., 2014, p. 661). SMC2 said, “Across all platforms, we like and engage with other users' content and engage in conversation. I spend at least 2 hours *actively* [emphasis added] on social media each workday, 1 hour on weekends”

(interview, March 8, 2018). SMC4 engages with audiences in a similar way: “We try to ‘like’ content from our followers as often as possible to engage with them” (interview, March 19, 2018). SMC5 encourages interaction by posting interactive games like “Did you know today is National Napping Day? Let’s see photos of your pets napping in celebration!” (interview, March 20, 2018).

Participants of this thesis project use social media to reach and engage target audiences. Participants decide what content works best with specific audiences, based on target market demographics. Many participants’ target audience on social media is skewed female. Participants reported women are most active on social media and most likely to adopt, foster, donate or advocate for the organization. SMC4 reported the following:

We choose where certain content goes based on the demographic that the content appears to. Our insights show that our Facebook content is usually popular with women between 24 and 46, etc. so we strategically choose content placement with those statistics in mind. Different content performs better on different platforms. The key is to know your audience. (interview, March 19, 2018)

SMC4 went on to explain, “We are far from perfect, but generally know which platform to post which content on and how to tailor our language so that it’s engaging to our intended audience (interview, March 19, 2018).

Participants also engage and interact with their audiences and constituents by posting strategically and frequently (i.e., daily, several times per day) to each social media platform used. Most participants post content several times a day to each platform. One participant posts adoptable pets to social media at strategic times for the greatest success. SMC7 expressed the following:

If I post a picture of a cute Terrier at 10am on Facebook and it starts to get a lot of shares, I know that the dog will most likely get adopted right after we open. . . . I have tried to work with our staff and locations on the right time to post when I know something will do really well. (interview, April 4, 2018)

SMC7 continued, “So if we have an adorable litter of puppies . . . I will not post them until either the night before they’re available (if they’ll be there when we open) or right as they get to the center” (interview, April 4, 2018).

One participant uses social media, specifically to partner with and reach new business stakeholders. SMC1 described a program, the ‘St. Pete Kitten Project,’ that partners businesses with newly adoptable kittens. Businesses sponsor a kitten’s adoption fee, and the shelter and businesses cross-promote each other on social media. SMC1 credits this program with reaching and attracting the interest of additional business stakeholders: “Every time we post about a new St. Pete kitten, we are getting inquiries from new businesses who want to be involved” (SMC1, interview, March 6, 2018). Similarly, another participant described a time that a social media strategy worked particularly well for engaging with restaurants for a major event. SMC4 reported the following:

During our last "Tables for Tails" event, we posted on our main Facebook page frequently leading up to the event, in the event itself, engaged with participating restaurants on Twitter and Instagram, and did live-streams with puppies at three of the participating restaurants on the day of the event to draw supporters out. (interview, March 18, 2018).

SMC 4 continued, “We saw a lot of success and engagement from this campaign, and it was our most successful ‘Tables for Tails’ to date” (SMC4, interview, March 18, 2018).

Participants strategically use social media to engage stakeholders by creating interesting content using mixed media (i.e., text, photos, and videos) to encourage involvement (i.e., donations, adoptions, volunteering). SMC1 reported the following:

Photography is so important in drawing people in. They stop scrolling when they see a good photo. Then the caption is next, capture their attention, try to get them to read more. Then get them onto your website . . . there will be donate buttons, and other ways for them to get involved. (interview, March 6, 2018)

SMC1 went on to explain, “We get most feedback and insight from our photos that are of a higher standard” (interview, March 6, 2018).

Some participants’ social media content has reached even more stakeholders by attracting the attention of the local and national media. One participant named a long-time resident cat after President Donald Trump’s infamous ‘covfefe’ Twitter post. The local newspaper saw the participant’s post on social media and ran the story on the frontpage. The cat was adopted within less than 24 hours after the post went up. Similarly, SMC6 expressed how sharing an abandoned, starving dog’s (Kia) story on social media gained the attention of a major television talk-show. SMC6 reported the following:

Three days after we shared her story, we received a call from *The Rachel Ray Show* . . . They flew myself and Kia out to New York and we were on the show with Rachel Ray and Regis. Kia was adopted out to her foster family. (interview, March 26, 2018)

These participants used social media to reach and engage stakeholders to great effect – saving animals’ lives.

In addition to gaining local and national media attention, social media can be used to reach *more* stakeholders when content goes viral. According to SMC6, Kia’s story

“. . . immediately went viral. We had people from all over the country and internationally who wanted to adopt her” (interview, March 26, 2018).

Participants reported using social media to reach and engage audiences presents the following challenges: ill-defined target markets, varying degree of engagement depending on the platform, low-level engagement, high-volume engagement, and negative feedback from stakeholders.

Several participants expressed the challenges of identifying the organization’s target market when trying to reach and engage stakeholders via social media. Participants made the following claims about target markets: target markets are difficult to gauge, no set target market exists, many target markets exist, or the target market depends on the social media platform and/or content.

Participants also stated different social media platforms facilitate better engagement and interaction with audiences over other platforms. SMC2 reported the following:

Facebook is our ‘cash cow.’ . . . It typically leads to the most event attendance, but individual post engagement is spotty. Instagram is our ‘rising star.’ We have great conversations with our followers and each post is highly engaged. (March 8, 2018)

SMC6 expressed similar sentiment for strategically using “. . . Twitter mainly to engage with the media and companies in the metro area . . .” (interview, March 26, 2018).

In addition to the challenges of using specific platforms to engage with different audiences, participants shared the challenges of low-level engagement. SMC3 stressed the importance of posting content regularly: “. . . We always see a significant dip in engagement when I go on vacation and no one posts” (March 8, 2018).

In contrast to the low-level engagement issue, participants expressed the challenges of high-volume engagement when using social media to reach and engage stakeholders. SMC7 described the challenge of handling the high level of audience engagement when sharing information during Hurricane Sandy. SMC7 reported the following:

It [sharing information] increased our engagement, however . . . it led to . . . frustration because supporters did not always understand we weren't overseeing every rescue or every area that had been hit. All we could do in some cases was share information and requests, but that frustrated them. (interview, April 4, 2018)

SMC went on to explain, "It [sharing information] also required 24/7 monitoring, and at the time it was only two of us on social [media], so it was a lot to manage and deal with" (interview, April 4, 2018).

In addition to managing high-volume engagement, another participant articulated the challenge of addressing stakeholder's negative comments. SMC5 reported, "It's also very important . . . to respond to everyone, even those that are unhappy with us. While we may never make that person happy, we know other people are reading our responses and learning from them. . . ." (interview, March 20, 2018). SMC5 continued, "We respond to all complaints. We only hide comments that are a.) spam, b.) personal attacks, . . . or c.) contain profanity" (interview, March 20, 2018).

**Discussion.** This section provides discussion on the findings related to the research question of this thesis project on how social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to reach and engage stakeholders.

Participants of this thesis project use social media to reach and engage stakeholders in many ways. Similar to Obar et al.'s (2012) study on SMCs at advocacy organizations, participants use social media to interact with audiences. As previously mentioned, social media is one of the best, most accessible tools available to modern animal welfare organizations for outreach (Rose, 2013). The findings of this thesis project validate previous research.

Participants use social media to build relationships with audiences to encourage involvement (i.e., donations, adoptions, event attendance) and encourage content and sharing in accordance with social media best practices described in the literature review.

Participants also follow social media best practices concerning audience comments and questions. Participants follow best practices that recommend that animal welfare organizations respond to comments and questions and monitor conversations by dealing with negative comments and trolls (Boglioli, 2011; Cohen, 2014; Best Friends Animal Society, 2015; Volin, 2015; Falconer, 2017).

Not only do participants use social media to reach and engage with current stakeholders, participants use social media to solicit *new* stakeholders (i.e., potential adopters, fosterers, volunteers, donors, and business partners). Interestingly, participants use social media to partner with businesses that can sponsor adoptable animals and promote organizational missions through cross-promotion.

Creating and promoting innovative content (i.e., the 'covfefe' cat) and programs (i.e., 'St. Pete Kitten Project') on social media has the potential to reach and engage even more stakeholders when the content goes viral or attracts local, national, or international media attention. Participants use social media according to the best practices that advise animal welfare organizations to create interesting content that followers will 'like' and 'share' (Falconer, 2017).

Participants' responses parallel the literature on social media best practices for animal welfare organizations. Participants tell compelling stories using high-quality photos and heartwarming videos to engage audiences as the animal welfare industry recommends (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012; Cohen, 2014; Bogle, 2016; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018). Participants also create posts using mixed media (i.e., text, links, photos, and videos) to attract attention and gain more engagement as recommended by Petfinder (Harrell, 2012). Interestingly, participants who used social media to tell captivating stories to reach and engage more stakeholders increased support either through adoptions or donations similar to the literature (Sara Brady Public Relations, n.d.).

### *Raising Awareness of Causes*

This section details the findings of the research project that answer the research question on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to raise awareness of causes. All participants reported using social media to raise awareness of causes and to highlight organizational needs, but with mixed results.

Social media was successful in raising awareness of several organizations' causes, especially during crisis situations. One participant said social media helped raise awareness for their shelter which was directly impacted by Hurricane Irma. This participant kept followers updated about the shelter's status using Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram before the hurricane. SMC2 coordinated a major transport of most of the shelter animals, from Florida to California, to escape the storm and broadcasted the transport on Facebook Live.

Another participant also used social media during Hurricane Irma with success. "We posted about the supplies we needed, and within hours, thousands of . . . residents order [*sic*]

supplies for us from Amazon and drove to our temporary facility to give donated items” (SMC4, interview, March 19). A third participant used social media during the 2017 hurricanes (i.e., Harvey, and Maria in Puerto Rico).

During Hurricane Harvey, SMC7 used Facebook to provide updates and videos of rescue missions to show donors how their funds were being used. SMC7 reported, “Quite a few people who had lived there and evacuated without their pets, saw on Facebook we were there, and began commenting with their locations . . . Several rescues were done as a result” (interview, April 4, 2018). SMC7 added, “Additionally, one elderly man saw us rescuing his dog via Facebook, and was able to be reunited with her” (interview, April 4, 2018).

**Discussion.** This section discusses the findings that answer the research question of this thesis project on how SMCs use social media to raise awareness of causes. The above findings coincide with Howard et al.’s (2014) study about the value and importance of using social media for crisis management. Participants received the intangible benefit of increased awareness from social media similar to The Humane Society of the U.S. (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015). This intangible benefit produced tangible benefits of increased support during a natural disaster. Crisis management is a critical component of a social media communicator’s job: SMCs must be responsive, inform people quickly, and create a plan of action (Howard et al., 2014).

However, the findings show, not all social media efforts are successful in raising awareness of causes. In one case, social media efforts to promote the organization’s *largest* event of the year was unsuccessful even though it was promoted for almost nine months. In another instance, a video series on Facebook and YouTube failed to receive any engagement or drive traffic to the organization’s website. These findings are in opposition to the literature that stated

social media creates awareness for organizational missions effectively and efficiently (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012; Obar et al., 2012; Howard et al., 2014; Raman, 2016).

These qualitative findings suggest that SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media to raise awareness for their causes and that social media is important for this purpose. Irrefutably, social media is very useful in raising awareness of causes during natural disasters. However, the mixed results reported by the participants in this thesis project indicate using social media to raise awareness does not always return the desired results. Furthermore, results vary from one organization to the next.

### *Informing and Educating the Public*

This section discusses the findings of this research thesis project that answer the research question on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media to inform and educate the public.

Participants reported using social media to inform and educate the public in various ways. Participants informed the public about the following topics: pet care, the animal welfare industry, the functions and work their shelters perform, and crisis situations. Furthermore, SMC1 uses social media to advise pet owners on low-cost spay/neuter clinics, what to do with stray animals, and how to get dog and cat food while on welfare (interview, March 6, 2018). SMC5 also uses paid ads on social media to inform the public about low-cost spay/neuter: “We didn’t spend much on it, and months later we still have a long wait list” (interview, March 20, 2018).

Additionally, participants use social media to inform and educate the public on the ways donor funds expedited rescue missions during the hurricanes.

SMC7 reported the following:

. . . [T]he strategy of providing updates on our work and what supporters are making possible . . . and even over communicating when we had more updates, really worked well . . . from an . . . info sharing perspective. (interview, April 4, 2018)

In summary, participants use social media to inform and educate the public in ways that benefit both animal welfare organizations and the public.

**Discussion.** This section discusses the findings of this thesis project that answer the research question on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to inform and educate the public. Participants inform and educate the public in numerous ways. Participants use social media to share information that educates pet owners, informs about organizational services and functions, and helps pet owners during crisis situations.

The ways participants use social media to inform and educate the public coincides with the literature. Participants use social media to share information related to organizational missions and goals (Howard et al., 2014; Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016; Raman, 2016). Participants inform and educate the public in ways that benefit both organizations and stakeholders.

### *Increasing Fundraising and Donations*

This section discusses the findings of this research thesis project that answer the research question on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media to increase fundraising and donations.

Participants reported using social media to encourage fundraising and donations by asking directly for money and supplies and asking for frequent donations. Participants also used social media tools like ‘donate’ buttons and links to ask for donations and supplies. SMC2 used social media to ask for funds and donations during Hurricane Irma. SMC2 stated the following:

We asked for donations and supplies - and an ask was sent out across all social platforms.

We received DOZENS of Amazon wishlist [*sic*] donations, countless bags of supplies, and *almost \$20,000* [emphasis added] in donations. (interview, March 8, 2018)

SMC2 added, “. . . Social media ended up being key in our hurricane relief fundraising efforts” (interview, March 8, 2018). Another participant also received donated supplies from thousands of residents who ordered supplies from Amazon and drove them to their temporary facility during the hurricanes (SMC4, interview, March 19, 2018).

SMC4 not only asks directly for donations on social media, but asks frequently: “We also ask for donations fairly frequently, and those donations come in from Facebook primarily, Instagram in second, and Twitter third” (SMC4, interview, March 19, 2018).

Some participants use ‘donate’ buttons and links on social media to increase fundraising and donations. SMC4 said, “We . . . usually try to add a post with a ‘donate’ button once a week” (interview, March 19, 2018). Participants also use social media donation buttons and links to raise funds for animals’ medical care. SMC6 described how they used a donation link to encourage funds and donations for a dog that had sustained “horrible abuse at the hands of his owner” (interview, March 26, 2018). SMC6 related the following:

We posted the picture with his story and a donation link for his medical care and the response was immediate. Every news station covered his story and we immediately had

donations pouring in. . . . We were able to raise *over \$100,000* [emphasis added] by telling his story (all through social media). (interview, March 26, 2018)

SMC7 also uses social media features to raise money for animals with medical needs: “If we’re posting a pet who needs medical treatment and I put a fundraising link on the post and donations come in, then I know that post was successful” (interview, April 4, 2018).

SMC6 also recently used social media in an annual campaign that partnered with Chipotle (an international fast-casual Mexican restaurant) in which 50% of diners’ meal proceeds went to the animal shelter. SMC6 reported “We posted an event page on our Facebook [page], which had a huge engagement. The reach was over 225,000 and over 14,000 RSVP’s [sic].” SMC6 added, “. . . It was a huge day for our pets with *thousands of dollars* [emphasis added] raised!” (interview, March 26, 2018).

SMC7 uses social media mainly for advocacy and fundraising but has transitioned to using it mostly for advocacy and awareness. Facebook has been SMC7’s most successful platform for fundraising. SMC7 stated, “Back in 09’ [sic] when I started, it was fantastic for fundraising, we raised *hundreds of thousands of dollars* [emphasis added] off of *Facebook* [emphasis added] alone” (interview, April 4, 2018).

**Discussion.** This section discusses the findings that answer the research question of this thesis project on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to increase fundraising and donations. Findings support Raman’s (2016) study that found social media helps organizations increase fundraising and donations. Findings also support Sisson’s (2016) study that found social media helps animal welfare organizations that depend on

fundraising and donations to achieve missions and goals. Findings suggest that social media (especially Facebook) increases fundraising and donations significantly.

Findings from this thesis project also reveal that participants use social media to increase fundraising and donations as recommended in social media best practices provided by The Humane Society of the United States and Petfinder. Participants use 'donate' buttons and wish lists to ask for money and donations on social media platforms instead of redirecting stakeholders to organization websites (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012).

Findings also reveal participants include calls to action on posts to directly ask followers to donate, as recommended in social media best practices (Boglioli, 2011; Harrell, 2012; Gabrielson, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Auerbach, 2016; Fugate, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018).

The findings of this thesis project contradict Ogden and Starita's (2009) study that found social media was not very effective in terms of fundraising. Ogden and Starita (2009) determined nonprofit organizations (NPOs) reported minimal success with social media for this highly valuable metric. NPOs typically raised less than \$100 or did not know the amount of money raised (Ogden & Starita, 2009).

However, findings from this thesis project indicate the opposite to be true: social media proves highly effective in increasing funds and donations. Participants reported exactly how much money social media efforts raised, and reported great success in fundraising, specifically for crisis situations and animals requiring medical care.

Findings from this thesis project also revealed that Facebook brings in the highest amount of funds and donations, likely due to high-volume reach and engagement. Organizations in this thesis project had high numbers of fans and followers on Facebook, which likely accounts for the

higher number of funds and donations received versus funds and donations raised on other platforms. These findings support the literature that stated greater reach frequently leads to increased support through donations (Sarah Brady Public Relations, n.d.). Similarly, Sisson's (2016) study on donor interaction found donors who 'liked' or 'followed' local animal welfare organizations on social media donated more and were more likely to donate in the future than donors who did not 'like' or 'follow' these organizations. Additionally, 62% of animal welfare donors 'liked' or 'followed' local animal welfare organizations on Facebook, a key platform (Sisson, 2016).

### *Promoting Adoptions and Fostering*

Participants reported using social media to promote animal adoption and fostering in various ways. Participants post information, stories, professional photos, and videos about animals available for adoption or in need of fostering on multiple social media platforms. SMC5 uses volunteers to take professional photos of animals looking for new homes and never uses stock photos. SMC5 reported, "If we need to put a dog in bunny ears for an Easter promotion, we do that." SMC5 continued, "We like to think that we're very creative in our promotions and it helps us get dogs adopted out faster" (interview, March 20, 2018).

Participants also use multiple platforms to encourage adoptions. SMC6 posts on Facebook and Instagram multiple times per day to share stories and photos of adoptable animals. SMC6 shared the following:

On Facebook . . . we'll start off the day showing an animal who is available for adoption.

On Instagram, we'll post multiple times per day and show a variety of cute pets looking for homes. During adoption specials, we'll often throw cute Instagram Stories together showing more pets available for adoption. (interview, March 26, 2018)

SMC5 also uses multiple platforms to promote adoptions. SMC5 reported the following:

We mostly use Facebook, . . . Instagram, Twitter, and Pinterest (in that order). But adoptions are happening more quickly than ever, and social media plays a big part in that. . . . Pets are adopted quickly after posting. (interview, March 20, 2018)

SMC5 added, “We track every pet we post and update the post when they are adopted. Facebook is the third most common way people hear about an adoptable pet . . .” (interview, March 20, 2018).

SMC7 uses social media to strategically promote end of year events, most recently by sharing the story of a young puppy (Fiona) whose owner could not afford to pay for the puppy’s surgery. Fiona was going to be euthanized, but sharing her story as it unfolded, on both the animal rescue’s social media page and a video on the *Today Show* page, helped ensure that Fiona was adopted. SMC7 reported, “. . . Her [Fiona’s] adopter actually saw it [the video] and . . . adopted her (three families applied!). So she was *saved and adopted* [emphasis added] through social media ☺ [sic]” (SMC7, interview, April 4, 2018).

Participants also use social media to connect people who foster animals: “We also use facebook [sic] groups to manage our foster program. . . . and they have decreased our workload exponentially, . . . because instead of constantly asking the coordinators [questions], fosters could ask eachother [sic] first” (SMC7, interview, April 4, 2018).

**Discussion.** Findings answer the research question of this thesis project on how SMCs at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media to promote adoptions and fostering. Participants use social media to promote adoptions and fostering in numerous ways.

Findings of this thesis project indicate sharing creative stories, original photos, and entertaining videos about animals in need of homes, on multiple platforms, helps animals get adopted or fostered, which supports previous studies. Captivating, professional photos and short videos capture adoptable animals' personalities and showcase their best traits to improve an animal's chance of getting adopted, as previously mentioned (Clark, 2014; Cohen, 2014; Gibson, 2014, Auerbach, 2016; Bogle, 2016; Falconer, 2017; Best Friends Animal Society, 2018).

Promoting adoptable animals on multiple social media platforms – particularly Facebook and Instagram – also helps organizations find new homes for animals. Facebook and Instagram allow participants to showcase adoptable animals due to the platforms' ability to feature stories, photos, and/or videos to attract potential adopters and fosters.

By using social media to promote adoptions and fostering, in this manner, animal welfare organizations help animals find homes quickly after posting. These findings coincide with studies that found promoting adoptable animals on social media is highly effective (Gibson, 2014; Schaefer & Hersey, 2015). Engaging content increases reach, which increases adoptions (Sara Brady Public Relations). Adoptions depend on the reach of a post, as previously mentioned (Clark, 2014).

Some participants of this thesis project use Facebook Groups according to social media best practices. Facebook Groups allow specific audiences (i.e., adopters and fosterers) to connect (Falconer, 2017). Facebook Groups can decrease social media communicators' workload significantly by allowing adopters and fosterers to communicate directly with each other.

The next section includes the conclusions drawn from the findings of this research thesis project.

## CONCLUSIONS

Moving from a discussion on data analysis and the findings of this research thesis project, this section provides discussion on the following topics: connection between findings and problem statement, key and unexpected findings, practical implications, future applications, and recommendations on how animal welfare organizations in the U.S. can leverage the full potential of social media to save more animals' lives.

### **Connection Between Findings and Problem Statement**

This section describes the connection between the findings and problem statement of this research thesis project. This thesis project addresses the larger societal issue of animal homelessness in the U.S. The findings of this thesis project provide potential solutions to the problem. As previously mentioned, approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter 18,000 animal welfare organizations in the U.S. each year (Schaefer & Hersey, 2015; Social Media for Animals, n.d.; ASPCA, 2018). Of those millions of dogs and cats, nearly 1.5 million are euthanized every year.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis project, social media use is expected to exceed 200 million Americans by 2020 (Statista, 2018). Those 200 million people are animal welfare organizations' potential donors, adopters, fosterers, and rescuers; all with the potential to save those 1.5 million dogs and cats, every year.

The next section presents the key and unexpected findings of this thesis project.

## **Key and Unexpected Findings**

Having presented the connection between the findings and the problem statement of this research thesis project, this section presents the key and unexpected findings of the thesis project.

One of the key findings of this thesis project revealed patterns in the ways the participants use social media to meet missions and goals. A logical pattern emerged: communication of missions raises awareness of causes that reach and engage stakeholders who increase fundraising, donations, adoptions, and fostering to save animals' lives.

Another interesting pattern emerged from the findings of this thesis project: fulfillment of missions and goals (i.e., fundraising, donations, and adoptions) originate with a single strategically-designed social media post. Posts created using mixed media (i.e., text, links, photos, and videos) that tell a compelling story reach and engage more stakeholders who are potential donors, adopters, fosterers, and rescuers. In other words, captivating content/posts using mixed media increases reach, awareness, fundraising, donations, adoptions, and fostering, to systematically save more animals' lives.

An unexpected finding of this thesis project relates to the irrefutable capacity of social media in raising awareness of causes and increasing fundraising and donations during crisis situations. The findings uncovered an important implication: social media has the power to raise *hundreds of thousands of dollars* for organizational missions and goals during natural disasters.

The next section discusses the practical implications of this research thesis project.

## **Practical Implications**

Moving from a discussion on the key findings of this research thesis project, this section explains the consequences and effects of the findings of this thesis project. This research thesis

project is significant, because it communicates to animal welfare organizations on ways to overcome the animal homelessness epidemic by better leveraging social media to fulfill missions and goals. This thesis project may be instrumental in helping animal welfare organizations use social media more effectively to save an additional 1.5 million animals' lives each year and resolve the larger societal problem of animal homelessness. If 1.5 million additional animals' lives are saved *every* year, the potential impact is exponential.

The potential impact of this thesis project could be substantial if animal welfare organizations learn from and apply the findings of this thesis project. If animal welfare organizations emulate the ways that the participants in this thesis project use social media, these organizations could reach and engage 200 million potential donors, adopters, fosterers, and rescuers needed to save 1.5 million more animals each year.

By understanding how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media, these organizations could potentially solve the animal homelessness epidemic and save the lives of 1.5 million more companion animals *every* year.

The next section discusses the future applications of this research thesis project.

### **Future Applications**

Having discussed the practical implications, this section presents the areas of future research associated with the findings of this research thesis project. This thesis project addresses several gaps in the research – primarily – by contributing to the body of knowledge necessary for animal welfare organizations to leverage the full potential of social media to save more animals' lives by better understanding how social media communicators (SMCs) at animal welfare organizations in the U.S. use social media.

The findings of this thesis project have unveiled further areas of possible exploration within the fields of digital communications and animal welfare. To delve further into how SMCs at animal welfare organizations use social media, future studies could examine the roles and responsibilities of these SMCs' use of social media, another gap in the existing literature.

Another potential area of study includes crisis communications in animal welfare to understand how animal welfare organizations leverage social media during crisis situations such as the natural disasters that are becoming more prevalent in the U.S. every year.

The next section presents recommendations for the ways animal welfare organizations can apply the findings of this research thesis project to better leverage social media to save more animals' lives.

## **Recommendations**

Moving from a discussion of the areas of future research stemming from this research thesis project, this section provides recommendations on the ways animal welfare organizations in the U.S. can better leverage social media to meet missions and goals to save more animals' lives. This thesis project contributes in numerous ways for animal welfare organizations in the U.S. to emulate.

Animal welfare organizations should use multiple social media platforms to reach different audiences. To use each platform effectively, these organizations must understand how to use each platform and leverage its full potential. Organizations must clearly identify target audiences and use platforms in ways that reach those stakeholders.

The findings from this thesis project indicate the power of Facebook, specifically, to meet missions and goals. Animal welfare organizations should have a presence on Facebook, which

reached 81% of the U.S. digital population in 2017, as previously mentioned (Mobile Cause, 2017). Facebook affords animal welfare organizations many innovative tools (i.e., ‘donate’ buttons, Facebook Groups, Facebook Pages) to help fulfill missions. The findings of this thesis project indicate Facebook is a key platform that outperforms other platforms in terms of reach, engagement, awareness, fundraising, donations, adoptions, and fosters. Findings revealed animal welfare organizations can utilize Facebook to gain high numbers of ‘fans’ and ‘followers’ to increase highly valuable metrics like fundraising and donations.

Animal welfare organizations should also use social media to build relationships with stakeholders which enables organizations to ask for donations, adoptions, event attendance, and other support. To build relationships and solicit new stakeholders, organizations should create interesting, viral content that gains the attention of local, national, and/or international media.

Increased exposure of missions and goals leads to increased stakeholder engagement that results in increased fundraising, donations, and adoptions. To ‘go viral’ and expand reach through media outlets, organizations should take advantage of the mixed media approach to content creation – using a balance of text, links, photos, and videos.

Finally, animal welfare organizations should learn from the findings of this research thesis project to determine what social media strategies and content work best, as well as what strategies and content fail to achieve optimal results, to prevent future lackluster results.

The potential consequences of animal welfare organizations’ failure to learn from the findings of this thesis project will result in 1.5 million homeless animals being euthanized each year, as is the current situation. To remedy the societal problem of animal homelessness, animal welfare organizations must use social media effectively and efficiently to ensure 1.5 million animals find their forever homes every year instead.

## REFERENCES

- American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. (2018). Animal homelessness: Shelter intake and surrender. Retrieved from <https://www.asPCA.org/animal-homelessness/shelter-intake-and-surrender>
- Animal Shelter Social Media. (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/groups/animalsheltersocialmedia/about/>
- Askanase, D. (2017). Advanced social media strategy. Retrieved from <https://www.nten.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/NTEN-social-media-workbook-2.pdf>
- Auerbach, K. (2016). #Awesome: Saving pets' lives by getting social media right. *Animal Sheltering*. Retrieved from <https://www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/awesome>
- Barnes, G. B. (n.d.). Social media usage now ubiquitous among US top charities, ahead of all other sectors. Retrieved from <https://www.umassd.edu/cmr/socialmediaresearch/socialmediatopcharities/>
- Be selective with social media platforms in bid to target millennials. (2016). *Nonprofit Business Advisor*, 2016(327), 5-8. doi:10.1002/nba.30258
- Best Friends Animal Society. (2018). Driving donations on Facebook. Retrieved from <https://nonprofits.fb.com/story/best-friends-animal-society/>
- Bogle, A. (2016). How social media helps bring shelter animals out of the shadows. Retrieved from <https://mashable.com/2016/08/10/social-media-shelter-animals/#gUWBBZiWmkqN>
- Boglioli, B. (2011). The humane society & social media: A nonprofit social success story. Retrieved from <http://www.socialtechnologyreview.com/articles/humane-society-social-media-non-profit-social-success-story>

- Bolderston, A. (2012). Directed reading article: Conducting a research interview. *Journal Of Medical Imaging And Radiation Sciences*, 43. 66-76. doi:10.1016/j.jmir.2011.12.002
- Braun V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qual. Res. Psych.* 3. 77–101.
- Carpenter, S., & Lertpratchya, A. P. (2016). A qualitative and quantitative study of social media communicators: An extension of role theory to digital media workers. *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 60(3), 448-464. doi:10.1080/08838151.2016.1203317
- Clark, B. (2014). Shelters use social media strategy to find homes for pets. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/digital/shelters-use-social-media-strategy-find-homes-pets/>
- Cohen, A. (2014). Putting your best Facebook forward. *Animal Sheltering*, 37-43.
- Curtis, L., Edwards, C., Fraser, K., Gudelsky, S., Holmquist, J., Thornton, K., & Sweetser, K. (2010). Adoption of social media for public relations by nonprofit organizations. *Public Relations Review*, 36(1), 90-92. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.10.003
- Falconer, J. (2017). Face(book) value: How you can learn to stop worrying and love your feed. *Animal Sheltering*. Retrieved from <https://www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/facebook-value>
- Gabrielson, L. I. (2014). How Facebook saved 700 dogs. *Washingtonian Magazine*, 49(8), 186.
- Gibson, R. (2014). The Star, P. Social media helps animal shelters expand reach. *Newspaper Source Plus*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 3, 2018).
- Grant Space (2018). Knowledge base. Retrieved from <http://grantspace.org/tools/knowledge-base/funding-research/statistics/number-of-nonprofits-in-the-u.s>

- Groenewald, T. (2004) A phenomenological research design illustrated. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3 (1). Retrieved from [http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3\\_1/pdf/groenewald.pdf](http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/groenewald.pdf)
- Harrell, J. (2012). Petfinder: Social media 101 for shelters and rescue groups. Retrieved from <https://www.petfinder.com/docs/admin/SocialMedia101JaneHarrell.pdf>
- Heather. (2014, May 15). The love/hate relationship of social media and rescue. Retrieved from <https://bourbondog.wordpress.com/2014/05/15/the-lovehate-relationship-of-social-media-and-rescue/>
- Howard, D., Mangold, W. G., & Johnston, T. (2014). Managing your social campaign strategy using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube & Pinterest: An interview with Dana Howard, social media marketing manager. *Business Horizons -Bloomington*, (5). 657.
- Huff Post. (2011). Animal shelters use social media to garner donations, find homes. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/17/animal-shelters-social-media\\_n\\_863051.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/05/17/animal-shelters-social-media_n_863051.html)
- Hycner, R. H. (1999). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. In A. Bryman & R. G. (Eds.), *Qualitative research* (Vol. 3, pp. 143-164). London: Sage.
- International Fund for Animal Welfare. (n.d.) Stakeholder engagement: Why is it important for humane and sustainable dog and cat management? Retrieved from <https://www.ifaw.org/united-states/resource-centre/stakeholder-engagement-why-it-important-humane-and-sustainable-dog-and-cat-managemen>
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media. *Business Horizons*, 5359-68.  
doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003

- katetosi. (2014, October 1). The presence of animal shelters on social media. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from <https://isys6621.com/2014/10/01/the-presence-of-animal-shelters-on-social-media/>
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009) *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. California: Sage Publications.
- Lindlof, T.R., & Taylor, B.C. (2019). *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. California: Sage Publications.
- Mack, N., Woodsong, C., MacQueen, K. M., & Namey, E. (2005). *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide*. Retrieved from <https://www.fhi360.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/Qualitative%20Research%20Methods%20-%20A%20Data%20Collector's%20Field%20Guide.pdf>
- Maddie's Fund. (2018). What animal organizations can do as Facebook makes changes. Retrieved from <http://chewonthis.maddiesfund.org/2018/02/fb-zero-2/#>
- Macnamara, J., & Zerfass, A. (2012). Social media communication in organizations: The challenges of balancing openness, strategy, and management. *International Journal Of Strategic Communication*, 6(4), 287-308. doi:10.1080/1553118X.2012.711402
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2011). *Designing Qualitative Research*. California: Sage Publications.
- Maxwell, J.A. (2005). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. California: Sage Publications.
- Mobile Cause. (2017). Social media strategy. In *The beginner's guide to online fundraising* (Chapter 5). Retrieved from <https://www.mobilecause.com/the-beginners-guide-to-online-fundraising/>

- Moss, L. (2016). Your social media activity can help and hurt animal rescues. Retrieved from <https://www.mnn.com/family/pets/stories/your-social-media-activity-can-help-hurt-animal-rescues>
- Nah, S., & Saxton, G. D. (2012). Modeling the adoption and use of social media by nonprofit organizations. doi:10.1177/1461444812452411
- Nonprofit Tech for Good. (2013, April 22). 12 must-know stats about social media, fundraising, and cause awareness. Retrieved from <http://www.nptechforgood.com/2013/04/22/12-must-know-stats-about-social-media-fundraising-and-cause-awareness/>
- Nonprofit Technology Network. (2012). 4th annual nonprofit social network benchmark report. Retrieved from [https://www.nten.org/NTEN\\_images/reports/2012\\_nonprofit\\_social\\_networking\\_benchmark\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.nten.org/NTEN_images/reports/2012_nonprofit_social_networking_benchmark_report_final.pdf)
- Obar, J. A., Zube, P., & Lampe, C. (2012). Advocacy 2.0: An analysis of how advocacy groups in the United States perceive and use social media as tools for facilitating civic engagement and collective action. *Journal Of Information Policy*, 1. doi:10.5325/jinfopoli.2.2012.0001
- Ogden, T., & Starita, L. (2009). Social networking and mid-size non-profits: What's the use? Retrieved from [http://philanthropyaction.com/documents/Social\\_Networks\\_and\\_Mid-Size\\_Non-Profits.pdf](http://philanthropyaction.com/documents/Social_Networks_and_Mid-Size_Non-Profits.pdf)
- Pearman, H. (2016, April 23). Tips for rocking social media on a tight schedule. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from <https://www.heartsspeak.org/tips-for-rocking-social-media-on-a-tight-schedule/>

- Raman, A. (2016). How do social media, mobility, analytics and cloud computing impact nonprofit organizations? A pluralistic study of information and communication technologies in Indian context. *Information Technology for Development*, 22(3), 400-421.
- Rose, M. 2013, April 22. Social networking against animal cruelty. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from <http://advocacy.britannica.com/blog/advocacy/2013/04/online-activism-against-animal-cruelty/>
- Sara Brady Public Relations. (n.d.) Moving animal welfare advocacy forward. Retrieved from <http://sarabradypur.com/moving-animal-welfare-advocacy-forward/>
- Schaefer, G., & Hersey, L. N. (2015). Cat videos for a cause: A nonprofit social media marketing case study of the Central Brevard Humane Society. In H. Asencio & R. Sun (Eds.), *Cases on strategic social media utilization in the nonprofit sector* (123-152). Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.proxy.library.nyu.edu>
- Shorter, J. E.R. (2012). The use of mass communication in animal rights fundraising campaigns. Retrieved from <http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/honors/80>
- Sisson, D.C. (2016). Control mutuality, social media, and organization-public relationships: A study of local animal welfare organizations' donors. *Public Relations Review*, 43, 179-189. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.007>
- Social Media for Animals. What is social media for animals? Retrieved from <https://socialmediaforanimals.com/animal-welfare-news/what-is-social-media-for-animals/>
- Statista. (2018). Percentage of U.S. population with a social media profile from 2008 to 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>

- Swanson, D. (2013). Shine a light. *Animal Sheltering*, 41. Retrieved from <https://www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/shine-light>
- T. Fugate. (2017, May 9). Tips: Taking risks to tell lifesaving stories. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from <https://socialmediaforanimals.com/resources-templates/tips-how-tos/taking-risks-lifesaving-stories/>
- The Humane Society of the United States. (2018). Community building with your supporters. Retrieved from <https://www.animalsheltering.org/page/community-building-your-supporters>
- Vaismoradi, M., Turenen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing and Health Sciences*, 15. 398-405.
- Volin, A. (2015). Rescue group best practices guide. Retrieved from <http://www.animalsheltering.org/sites/default/files/content/rescue-best-practice-guide.pdf>
- Waters, R. D. (2010). The use of social media by nonprofit organizations: An examination from the diffusion of innovations perspective. In S. Dasgupta, *Social computing: concepts, methodologies, tools, and applications*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global. Retrieved from [https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/igisc/the\\_use\\_of\\_social\\_media\\_by\\_nonprofit\\_organizations\\_an\\_examination\\_from\\_the\\_diffusion\\_of\\_innovations\\_perspective/0?institutionId=577](https://ezproxy.library.nyu.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/igisc/the_use_of_social_media_by_nonprofit_organizations_an_examination_from_the_diffusion_of_innovations_perspective/0?institutionId=577)
- Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A., & Lucas, J. (2009). Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, 35, 102-106. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.006

## APPENDIX A

**"Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare" Thesis Project Interview**

Welcome to the "Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare" Interview! You have been selected to participate based on your unique experience as a social media communicator working in animal welfare. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The following interview includes the following sections:

- 1) Disclosure Statement: Interview Data Collection Protocol;
- 2) Preliminary Demographic Information;
- 3) 10 Open-Response Interview Questions;
- 4) Informed Consent Form.

Please read through all sections carefully and sign the Informed Consent Form once you have read and completed all sections of the interview. Please provide your preferred valid email address below.

## APPENDIX B

**Disclosure Statement: Interview Data Collection Protocol**

Thesis Project: Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare Organizations

Interviewer Contact Information: Erin Hunt, elh370@nyu.edu

*Project Description*

My name is Erin Hunt, and I'm getting my Master of Science in Professional Writing at New York University. I am writing my thesis project, a traditional research paper focused on how social media communicators at animal welfare organizations use social media.

My interest in this project stems from my lifelong love, appreciation, and respect for the well-being of animals (both domestic and wild) and my desire to understand the role of social media communicators in their respective animal welfare organizations and how they use it to achieve their organization's missions and goals.

*Procedure*

The interviews will be distributed via Google Forms to the e-mail addresses provided by the participants. The interview replies will be analyzed, and the data and findings will be summarized in the final written report. Interview replies may be used for future applications at the researcher's discretion.

Interview replies will be anonymized by the researcher and may be shared in part in the final written thesis report. All interviewee data will also be anonymized, and all efforts will be made to keep interviewee identities confidential. No personal identifiers will be disclosed in the

final written report to ensure participants' anonymity. All participants' names, organizations, job titles, and any other personal identifying information will be altered in the final written report.

Please allow sufficient time to read through each question carefully and to provide a thorough answer in as much detail as possible.

The interview includes demographic information as well as 10 open-answer response questions. Interview responses should be completed and submitted to Erin Hunt by Monday, March 26, 2018.

It may be necessary to contact participants again to clarify information, ask follow-up questions, or perform member checking to solicit feedback from the respondents about my findings. Any additional questions will be distributed to participants via Google Forms or email.

The final research paper will not be published, as it will be submitted only for academic purposes and the fulfillment of the thesis project. There are no known risks associated with participation in this study.

### *Benefits*

It is hoped that the results of this study will benefit the researcher through providing greater insight into how social media communicators at animal welfare organizations use social media, as there is little available research or studies done on this important communications topic.

### *Cost Compensation*

Participation in this study will involve no costs or payments to participants.

*Confidentiality*

All information collected during the study period will be kept strictly confidential. The final written report from this project will not include identifying information on any participant.

If you have any questions re: this information, you can contact me directly at [elh370@nyu.edu](mailto:elh370@nyu.edu), and I will follow-up with answers.

## APPENDIX C

### **Preliminary Demographic Information**

- A. Organization Name
- B. Organization Location
- C. Type of Animal Welfare Organization
- D. Size of Organization (Include number of employees, size of community served, number of animals on-site)
- E. Your Name (This will not be shared with anyone but the primary researcher. Pseudonyms will be used in the final thesis project report).
- F. Your Current Position/Job Title
- G. Relevant Education and/or Training for Current Position
- H. Number of Years Working in Animal Welfare
- I. Number of Years Working as a Social Media Communicator
- J. Number of Years at Your Current
- K. Do you work as part of a team or are you the sole social media communicator for your organization? (Please clarify whether you are the only one responsible for creating and posting content or if there are other staff members or volunteers who contribute to creating or re-posting content).
- L. Do you make the final decisions regarding social media at your organization?

## APPENDIX D

**Open-Response Interview Questions**

Please set aside time to answer all questions thoroughly, providing as much detail as possible. Please use as much space as needed to answer each question thoughtfully and completely. All questions are required.

If you are unable to answer a question, please respond "Not applicable" or provide another explanation, as you will not be able to continue to the next section if a question is left blank. You may edit your responses after submitting them. You may withdraw from participation at any time. If you have any questions or need clarification, please contact me at [elh370@nyu.edu](mailto:elh370@nyu.edu).

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. Your participation is much appreciated, and your unique experience and insight into the world of social media in animal welfare will enhance my thesis project significantly. Interview responses should be completed and submitted to Erin Hunt by Monday, March 26, 2018.

1. Please tell me about your organization's a) background, b) mission, c) goals, and d) functions.
2. How is social media used (or not) to align with your organization's mission, goals, and functions?
3. What is your job title and what are your roles and responsibilities as they relate to social media communication for your organization in detail?
4. Please describe your social media strategies and plans. (Please include what platforms you use, how you manage those platforms, and how often you post either original content or re-posted content).

5. For your organization, what have been the most successful social media platforms, strategies, and content? How do you know?
6. Can you tell me about a time that a social media strategy worked very well?
7. Can you tell me about a time that a social media strategy didn't work well?
8. Who do you see as your target market? How have they responded/reacted to your social media content?
9. Do you track or measure your social media content? If so, how do you define a success?
10. Where do you go for additional/on-going training, professional support, or communities to support your social media growth/development?

## APPENDIX E

**Informed Consent Form**

Please fill out the Informed Consent Form once you have read and completed all sections of the interview. To complete the form, please type your NAME and DATE in the text area provided. By providing your name and date, you are consenting for the researcher to use your interview responses.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to be interviewed for the project entitled Social Media Pawprint in Animal Welfare Organizations which is being produced by [Erin Hunt] of [MS in Professional Writing program at NYU School of Professional Studies]. I certify that I have read the disclosure statement distributed for this project and understand the anonymity of my participation and that I have been given satisfactory answers to my inquiries concerning project procedures and other matters. I also understand that I can withdraw my participation at any time during the interview collection process. I agree to participate in one or more interviews (via Google Forms or email) for this project. I understand that such interviews and related materials will be kept completely anonymous, and that the results of this study will not be published but used strictly for academic purposes in the fulfillment of a master's thesis project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following people were instrumental to the completion of this research-based thesis project, a true labor of love.

First, I would like to thank my husband, David, for recognizing the talent within me and for encouraging me to pursue my dream of becoming a professional writer. Thank you for your unconditional love and support. We have made it through our individual journeys through graduate school – together – and I cannot wait to see what the future holds for us. I love you so dearly. “Forever and 10 days of marriage and love is my pledge to you, David Maynard Hunt.” You are my “Principal Star.” Love, Your “Writing Star.”

To Kristine Kerr, who served not just as my professor and advisor, but as a mentor and a critical friend. Thank you for guiding me through this process: it has truly been a pleasure to learn from you. Thank you, again, for your consideration during the passing of my grandfather, Gene “Mike” McCallon, with whom I shared a love of reading and thirst for knowledge. He bought me my first Roald Dahl book, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, for my 8<sup>th</sup> birthday, and I have not stopped reading ever since.