

Abandonment in Arabia: Acknowledging Feline Experiences (*Felis silvestris catus*)

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Abstract

Cat (*Felis silvestris catus*) abandonment in Saudi Arabia is a widespread phenomenon. While studies in 'Western'¹ countries have identified factors contributing to companion-animal relinquishment, the phenomenon in Saudi Arabia has not previously been examined. This study aims to bridge this gap through interviews, questionnaires, and social media analysis, delving into the effects of abandonment on cats in the region, as well as uncovering the reasons behind relinquishment and the broader factors influencing cat abandonment. Using grounded theory techniques and utilising the framework of The Five Animal Welfare Needs relating to all domestic morethanhuman animals, the research offers a comprehensive perspective on the reported impact on the affected cats. Results indicate that the Animal Welfare Needs of cats on the streets of Saudi Arabia are not met.

Keywords

cats (*Felis silvestris catus*), felines, abandonment, morethanhuman animal, relinquishment, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

"There is not an animal on earth, nor a bird that flies on its wings, but they are communities like you..."
(*'Surah Al-An'am [6:38] - Al-Qur'an al-Kareem', n.d.*)

"When he was brought to me, my initial dismay at his mangled, stick-like legs and his emaciated body gave way to a reluctant acceptance. I was torn, not eager for the responsibility of yet another cat. Annoyance and frustration lingered, but the reality was clear: if I didn't care for him, he'd face the harsh streets as a paraplegic cat, and would certainly suffer. Two days later I was in love. We'd connected. Mikey, a victim of some unknown abuse or accident, disabled and incontinent, revealed his smart, forgiving, loving personality (Figure 1). Soon after Mikey's passing a few years later, Phoenix entered my life (Figure 2). Found in the rain, wandering the street emaciated, bearing the scars of his skin

¹ I acknowledge that the term 'Western' is a contested term. For example, see Browning – Lehti 2009.

scalded by another undetermined event. As he overcame his past experiences, began to feel safe, we reciprocated each other's efforts to form a deep connection. My first-hand experience of witnessing the daily suffering of cats and exposure to their suffering through social media and cat rescue activities reveal an unrelenting wave of abandoned and community cats in need in KSA (the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia). This issue remains relentless, overwhelming, and regrettably, under-addressed."

(The author)

Figure 1. Mikey



Source: Sarah Oxley Heaney, 2013.

Figure 2. Phoenix



Source: Sarah Oxley Heaney, 2019.

This research engages with anthrozoological literature to explore aspects related to cat abandonment. While this article deals with the effects of urban living on cats, Oxley Heaney (2023) investigates the reasons given for relinquishment and the underlying factors behind cat relinquishment in KSA. Through a critical analysis of academic literature and employing grounded theory techniques, this research aims to help weave a tapestry of knowledge and understanding regarding cat abandonment in Saudi Arabia. Establishing this foundation is crucial for effectively addressing the issue in KSA. Understanding cat abandonment is one of the initial and vital steps in planning effective cat management programs (Finkler – Terkel 2012). Therefore, this research strives to provide the groundwork for enhancing cat welfare in KSA. The ultimate aim is for this study to serve as a catalyst, paving the way for the development of a subsequent action plan aimed at improving the lives of urban-living cats in Saudi Arabia.

2. A Review of Literature: Centering the Cat

The global phenomenon of morethanhuman animal abandonment is predominately framed in anthropocentric terms: emphasising economic costs, and considering morethanhuman animals to be pests, trash, and nuisances (Hansen et al. 2018; Jarvis 1990; Robertson 2008). Studies tend to focus on collective numbers of cats posing problems to humans (Algar – Brazell 2008; Elizondo – Loss 2016; Flockhart et al. 2016). While research often focuses on identifying human motivations for, and the repercussions upon human stakeholders

abandoning or relinquishing their pets (Casey et al. 2009; Coe et al. 2014; DiGiacomo et al. 1998; Fatjó et al. 2015), it frequently neglects or overshadows the impact of relinquishment on the morethanhuman stakeholders.

Despite calls (for example, see Arluke – Sanders 2010) to “bring in the animal” (Wolch – Emel 1995: 115), a significant proportion of academic literature concerning relinquished companion animals focuses predominantly upon human-centred costs. Rarely is the question reversed to reflect upon the impact of human relinquishment-activity upon the morethanhuman animal. In anthrozoological literature addressing companion-animal abandonment, the emphasis often falls on population control (Ash et al. 2003; Kay et al. 2017; Lessa – Bergallo 2012; Robertson 2008; Schmidt et al. 2007; Short et al. 1997; Stoskopf – Nutter 2004); the consequences of abandoned morethanhuman animals on wildlife (Bloomer – Bester 1992; Kitts-Morgan 2015; Short – Turner 2005) or the effects on humans (Dabritz et al. 2006; Gunther et al. 2015). Additionally, studies may explore the perspectives of shelter workers (Anderson et al. 2013; Baker et al. 2007; Cohen 2007; Frommer – Arluke 1999; Reeve et al. 2005; Rohlf – Bennett 2005) or those relinquishing morethanhuman animals (Marder – Engel 2002; Patronek et al. 1996; Weng – Hart 2012). In such articles, cats and other companion animals are often treated as problems, described dispassionately simply as numbers to be controlled. Some articles do seek to comprehend the effect of shelter life on companion animals (Coppola, Enns, et al. 2006; Coppola, Grandin, et al. 2006; Gourkow – Fraser 2006; Kry – Casey 2007; Ottway – Hawkins 2003). However, studies such as those by Joshua Frank scrutinise the cost of euthanising 5.7 million morethanhuman animals in the USA every year, but not the effect on the morethanhuman animals themselves (2004: 108). Scant attention is given to the consequences of companion animal abandonment upon themselves. This research aims to shed light on the experiences of abandoned cats in KSA, presenting their stories to be witnessed (Dave 2014) and to give a voice to their experiences as the reasons for their abandonment are explored.

Cats are often labelled with various adjectives, based on factors such as ownership status or location, including terms like “street cats” (Jaroš 2018: 369), “urban” (Jarvis 1990: 169), “household” (Lowe – Bradshaw 2002: 69), “homeless” (Grimm 2009: 1489), “stray” (Algar – Burrows 2004: 131; Fatjó et al. 2015: 426), “free-ranging” (Ferreira et al. 2011: 25970), “free-roaming” (Finkler – Terkel 2011: 203), “colony” (Stoskopf – Nutter 2004: 1361), “community” (Levy et al. 2014: 269), “feral” (Griffiths et al. 2000, 59), “pet” (Levy – Crawford 2005: 1355) and “companion cats” (Stella – Croney 2016: 2). However, these classifications often lack flexibility, and the boundaries between them are porous. A ‘feral cat’, for example, is defined by some as “untamed and evasive” (Levy – Crawford 2004: 1354). However, this description could apply to abused pets, who have lost trust with humans. Julie K. Levy et al. define feral cats as those not having received human socialisation or having been abandoned and no longer trusting humans (Levy – Crawford 2004). It can be argued that even cats bred in or destined for homes still may not receive socialisation due to neglect, abuse, or being allowed to choose whether or not to socialise (Levy – Crawford 2004).

The connection between human adjective-labelling and the biography, history, and physical and psychological conditions of the cat is also obscured. Contemporary categorisation terminology does not define the experiences, personality, or psychological make-up of a cat. A cat bred under human control might, in fact, have a fearful personality with no desire to socialise with either humans or other cats. Conversely, a ‘street’ cat may have a confident and friendly personality actively seeking human contact. These categories and their inherent challenges may arise from the prevalent perception of morethanhuman

animals as a homogenous group (Derrida 2008), rather than adopting approaches that recognise them as individuals (Bear 2011).

Moreover, traditional categorisations rely on cat characteristics or ownership status, not on intrinsic value. Although there have been attempts to challenge this paradigm, such efforts still predominantly reflect the human perspective in the interspecies relationship, exemplified by terms like 'furbaby' or 'companion cats' (New Zealand Government 2018). Existing static definitions are centered on a state of human dependency; for instance, stray cats are described as "formerly owned cats that have been separated from their owners" (Clancy et al. 2003: 1541), categorising 'stray' and 'companion' cats human-dependent, while labelling feral cats as non-dependent (Farnworth et al. 2011) and implying being 'out of control' (Hill et al. 2022: 1). These definitions also lack consideration for dynamic change, ignoring the potential shift in cat-human relationships due to factors such as injury or disease, abandonment or even cat agency. It is essential to recognise that these definitions are not static but rather fluid and subject to change. Filip Jaroš characterises such changes as "Umwelt transition," signifying "a systematic change within the lifecycle ... from an individual, population or species perspective" (2018: 368).

3. "Umwelt Transition"

Considering Jakob von Uexküll's (2010) concept of "Umwelt,"² Morten Tønnessen (2009) posited that this notion presupposes a stable environment. He suggested that any life-changing events affecting an "individual, population or species" (Jaroš 2018: 368) would consequently bring a change in Umwelt. Tønnessen coined this an "Umwelt transition" (2009: 47). As discussed below, this concept forces us to think of the changes and potential challenges each cat faces when their Umwelt, or subjective lifeworld changes. They must attempt to adapt or transition to new surroundings and experiences which impact their physical and psychological states.

Each individual cat that moves acting on its own agency, or is being relocated from the relatively secure environment of a climate-controlled, resource-rich home to the challenging environment of the street must also face an "Umwelt transition". As illustrated in Figures 23 and 24 (presented in the research findings section), which capture reported perceptions of cats' emotional states and ability to cope with their Umwelt, it becomes evident that the transitions pose problems. As mentioned earlier, it is empirically challenging to discern whether a given cat was abandoned, lost, or born on the street. However, cats that appear healthy yet exhibit signs of confusion, cluelessness, and apparent helplessness may be assumed to be undergoing an "Umwelt transition," suggesting potential abandonment in their recent history.

Categorising street-living cats as either street-born, lost, or abandoned is not easy without a comprehensive understanding of the local cat community (Oxley Heaney 2021). Additionally, cats' reactions to humans are influenced by familiarity and trust rather than a human-constructed category solely based on time-static location. Hence, in the context of cats found in the streets in Saudi Arabia the author opts the term 'community cats' where these cats may be street-born, lost, or abandoned, but they are all considered ethically

² Uexküll used the term Umwelt to refer to the subjective experiences of living beings, as opposed to their environment. One organism's Umwelt may be different to another organism's despite residing in the same environment, due, in part, to their sensory abilities.

significant (EASE 2017) who have a “life worth living” (Mellor 2016a: 1). By reframing and centring morethanhuman animals as individuals, transcending collective labelling (Derrida 2008), and embracing the notion of them being “more than species” (Bear 2011: 299), we can truly acknowledge them for their unique personalities, needs, and desires, no longer confining them to the margins of research (Bear 2011: 299).

The research unveiled various representations of cats among participants, ranging from viewing them as objects, commodities, pests, trash, or disposable entities, to sources of entertainment, collectives, and income (Figure 3). However, cats were also acknowledged as victims, individuals, companions, family members, refugees, and survivors.³

Figure 2. Research participants’ perceptions of community cats as...



But “what’s in it for the animals?” asks Lynda Birke (2009: 1). What do the cat research participants stand to gain or lose from (unknowingly) participating in this research? This research attempts to give them a voice through expert (veterinarian interviewees) and non-expert (rescuers and individuals) witness testimonies. The goal is to challenge the prevalent practice of abandonment and raise awareness about the struggles these cats face to survive on the streets. As William Lynn points out, “animals cannot organise and challenge the practice for themselves: they require human interlocutors to speak and act in their interests” (1998: 285). Moreover, by recognising cats as individuals, a new, cosmopolitan, and compassionate humano-cat (Jaroš 2018) relationship may be nurtured. Thom van Dooren suggests that “knowing more draws us into new kinds of relationships and, as a result, new accountabilities to others” (2014: 9).

³ For more on people’s attitudes towards cats in Saudi Arabia, see Oxley Heaney 2021, which discusses how Islamic principles regarding morethanhuman animals guide communities to respect all living beings, but, as the research findings in this chapter show, these rules are often violated.

Shifting the focus onto cats as individuals with agency allows for the reframing of relinquishment, specifically abandonment, as problematic for cats at an individual level. This challenges the normalised view, where ‘uncontrolled’ cats are seen as problematic from an anthropocentric standpoint. Understanding cats as individuals necessitates considering the concept of agency, which involves freedom, free will and action, creativity, and originality (Barker 2003). Agency implies subjectivity, intention, and the ability to make choices (Steward 2009), applicable to both humans and morethanhuman animals in posthuman perspectives (Latour 1996; Coole 2013; Braidotti 2013).

Agency is also seen as the knotty, intertwined relationships between actors (Lindgren – Öhman 2018, Bennet 2010), whether human or morethanhuman animals. Furthermore, agency is also shaped and restricted by the “structure” of the “recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available” (Barker 2003: 448). Cats can thus possess agency as individuals, but their actions may be constrained by environmental, geographical, physical, psychological or even biopolitical situations within which their agency may be stifled.

4. The Five Animal Welfare Needs

The Five Freedoms paradigm, originating from a seminal 1965 report by Rogers Brambell (1965) has shaped morethanhuman animal welfare thinking since its inception (Mellor 2016a). Initially crafted to address the needs of farmed morethanhuman animals, this set of principles has had a profound impact on addressing domestic morethanhuman animal welfare needs. However, the broader dynamics on a wider multispecies community cannot be ignored (Ryan et al. 2019). While the Five Freedoms are conventionally applied to captive morethanhuman animal husbandry, Clare Palmer suggests that “domestication changes animals’ natures, making many of them dependent on human beings” (2012: 7). Consequently, it can be argued that humans bear a moral responsibility to ensure cat welfare standards align with these foundational Five Freedoms.

The evolution of these principles led to the adaption of The Five Freedoms into the Five Animal Welfare Needs (henceforth AWNs) applicable to all domestic morethanhuman animals (Ryan et al. 2019). The AWNs provide a valuable framework for comprehending the fundamental welfare requirements of morethanhuman domestic animals. The AWNs encompass the necessity for: a suitable environment; a suitable diet; the ability to exhibit normal behaviour patterns; appropriate housing with or without other morethanhuman animals; and the protection from pain, suffering, injury, and disease (Ryan et al. 2019). Notably, recent updates propose the inclusion of the “promotion of positive experiences and states” (Mellor 2016b: 1). The standards were intentionally designed to be accessible to non-specialist morethanhuman animal welfarists (Mellor 2016b), aligning well with the methods of this research. These research findings are framed by the AWNs and borrow from Mellor’s discussion on moving beyond the Five Freedoms (Mellor 2016a).⁴

⁴ I acknowledge the evolution of the animal welfare frameworks, through freedoms, domains, needs and provision and aims. The use of a mix of these frameworks provides the best lens for analysing the feline landscape in KSA at the time of writing.

5. Present Findings and Discussion

The figures within this report encapsulate the dynamics between research participants and their perceptions of how cats, especially abandoned cats, fare in the street environment. The perceived magnitude of these issues is conveyed via the frequency within which interviewees, questionnaire participants and social media posts reference them, offering a glimpse into the views of a limited sample of cat-welfare stakeholders within KSA (Oxley Heaney 2023). The effects are not articulated in medical terms but are presented as narrated by the participants and reflected in social media content. It is essential to note that more systematic reporting is required for enhanced research accuracy. This data presented is acknowledged as providing a snapshot of perceived concerns, with the aim of fostering a recognition for the necessity of further in-depth study.

5.1. *Effect of Street life on Cats Framed by the Five Animal Welfare Needs*

5.1.1. *The Need for a Suitable Environment*

The ability of cats to cope on the street, according to Jaroš (2018), may depend on whether the cat is accustomed to a street-cat culture, or a heavily human-dependant, humano-cat culture. Jaroš (*ibid*) describes pedigree cats as confined and selectively bred through human-controlled reproduction, framed through a Western context. In KSA, although people refer to their cats according to breed types, for example, Shirazi, Himalayan, American, Persian, Siberian, Siamese, and, recently, hypoallergenic, there is no formal pedigree system in place. Human-controlled cat breeding occurs where cats are often chosen based upon their appearance by sellers commodifying cat bodies, customers who want their cats to “marry” (a euphemism for sex), or by people who refuse sterilisation and become overwhelmed with cats (Oxley Heaney 2023). Many intentionally bred cats are medium or long-haired, fluffy, and many exhibit brachycephalic features (Figure 22). Notably, no cats for sale are sterilised.⁵ Consequently, when cats reach sexual maturity, some individuals feel compelled, either due to frustration or a perceived duty to the cat, to release the cat onto the street to fulfil their right to mate. Many intentionally bred cats are mated to obtain certain physical appearances (white, fluffy cats being very popular) and “breed” personalities expected to be conducive to easy handling. However, these traits do not equip cats for survival in an urban street environment.

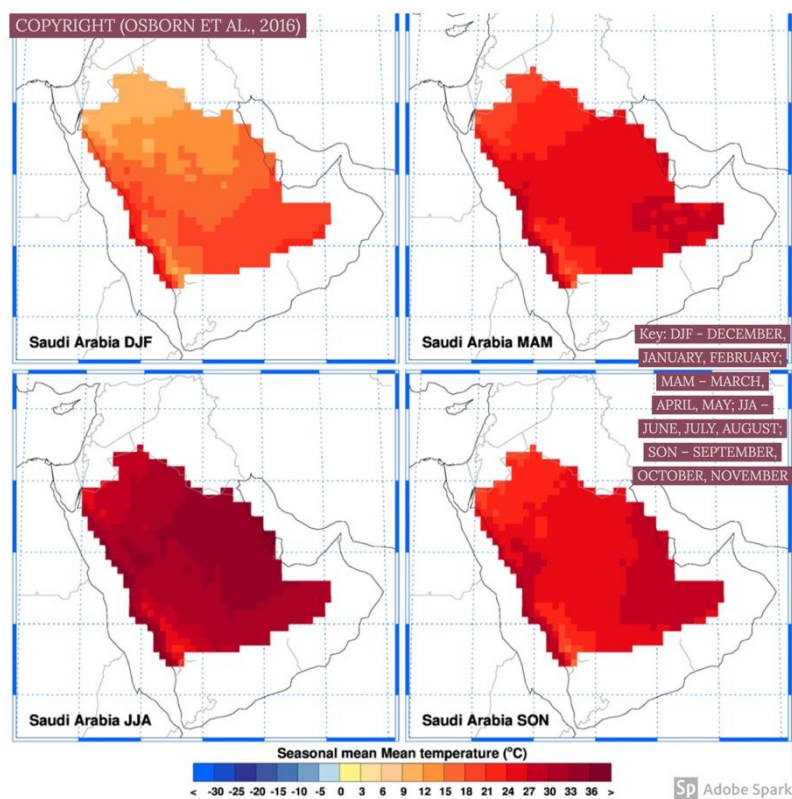
Abandonment locations are often chosen away from the cats’ homes to prevent their return, and are often placed in areas frequented by humans (Figure 7). The belief underlying this practise is that some abandoners attempt to mitigate the impact of abandonment on the cats by placing them where they may find food, shelter and/or water or hope that someone will pick up the cat. In these urban spaces, cats can find themselves in often hostile surroundings. Cats accustomed to kindness, food, and water must now contend with indifference or varying degrees of potential violent incidents. Whether seeking assistance or attention, expressing fear and attempting to physically or mentally dissociate from their new Umwelt, cats are exposed to danger.

⁵ Feline sterilisation is limited, often influenced by factors such as cost, accessibility, and societal views of cats’ ‘rights’ regarding parenthood/expression of sexual desire. For more on feline sterilisation, see Oxley Heaney 2023.

5.1.1.1. Saudi Arabian Climate

Geographically, KSA is predominantly desert, constituting 95% of its total land area (N.A.S.A. 2005). Arable and forested regions cover less than one percent of country's land area (Hopwood 2016). Figure 4 illustrates that mean temperatures were consistently in the high 30s (degree Celsius) from 1961 up to 1990. Jeddah experienced temperatures exceeding 52 degree Celsius in 2010 (Alawi 2019), and cities like Tabuk, Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah routinely witness temperatures exceeding 45 degree Celsius (pers. comms.). Very few places in the desert or urban spaces offer sanctuary from extreme temperatures. Cats are known to experience environmental stress and hyperthermia (Hanneman et al. 1977) and research participants report finding cats panting, in heat stress, unable to cope with the hot climate (Figure 5). Saudi Arabian cities also experience freezing winter temperatures (Al Arabiya 2017; Arab News 2016) and urban communities additionally face annual flooding (Figure 6), both of which, as the results show, jeopardise cats' welfare (Figure 5).

Figure 3. 1961 - 1990 average annual and seasonal mean temperature in Saudi Arabia



Source: (Osborn et al. 2016)

Figure 4.

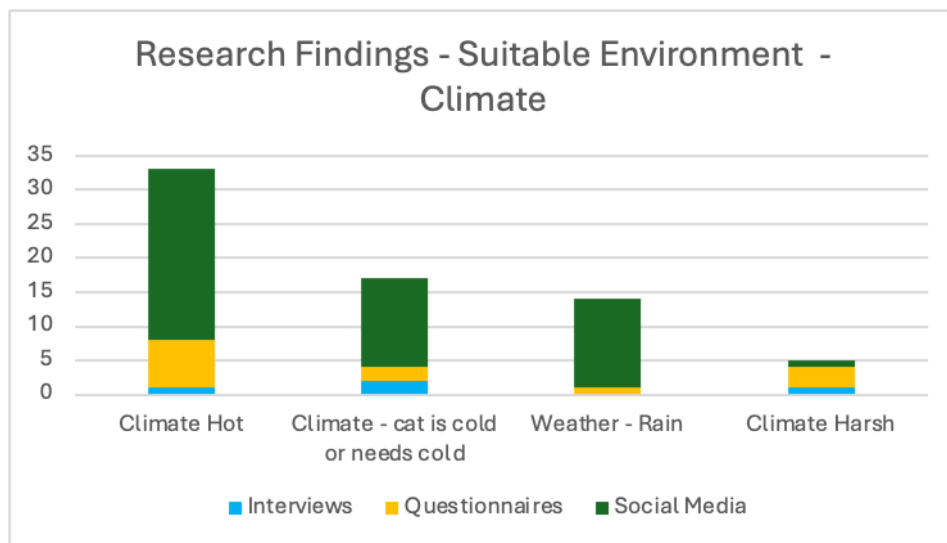


Figure 5. Flooding in Jeddah



Image Credit: Al Marsad

Sp Adobe Spark

Source: (Toumi 2017)

Flash flooding has become more frequent, with cities such as Riyadh (Nahiduzzaman et al. 2015; Rahman et al. 2016), Jeddah (Ameur 2016; Youssef et al. 2016), Makkah (Dawod et al. 2011) and Tabuk (Abdelkarim et al. 2019; Abushandi 2016) amongst some of the cities all at risk of annual flooding.

5.1.1.2. *Rescue and Abandonment Locations*

Rescue and abandonment locations as depicted in Figure 7 were reported as predominantly being outdoor spaces such as streets, car parks, outside shops and restaurants, souks, veterinary clinics, and rescuers' homes⁶ where cats were exposed to the high summer temperatures. Notably, manmade urban spaces often contribute to the urban heat island (UHI) effect, a phenomenon caused by anthropogenic heat resulting from solar irradiation on urban building materials (Mohajerani et al. 2017). To mitigate such exposure, abandoners resort to leaving their cats inside veterinary clinics, pet grooming salons and in boarding facilities where they do not return for their cats. Additional locations include parks (which contain irrigated foliage) or on compounds where there is known to be a managed cat colony. In their quest for shelter, cats often seek refuge in back yards⁷ or attempt to enter buildings where they are often found in the stairwells of apartment blocks. Figure 8 shows that the need for a suitable environment, one of the Five Welfare Needs (Ryan et al. 2019), "[b]y providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area" (Mellor 2016a: 3), is not being met.

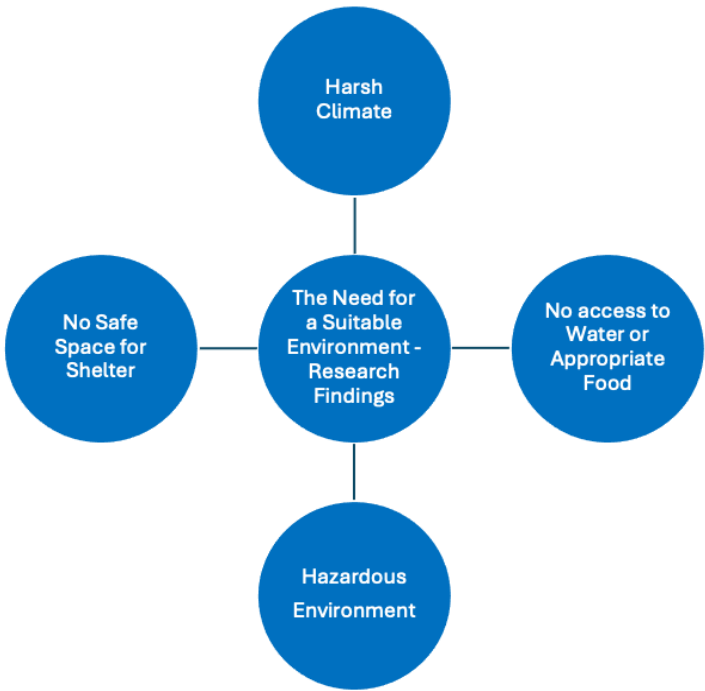
Figure 6. Research findings: Abandonment locations



⁶ Many rescuers refuse to reveal their location due to such actions.

⁷ Back yards of houses traditionally have high walls to prevent human intrusion but may have some type of watered garden area which provides shade.

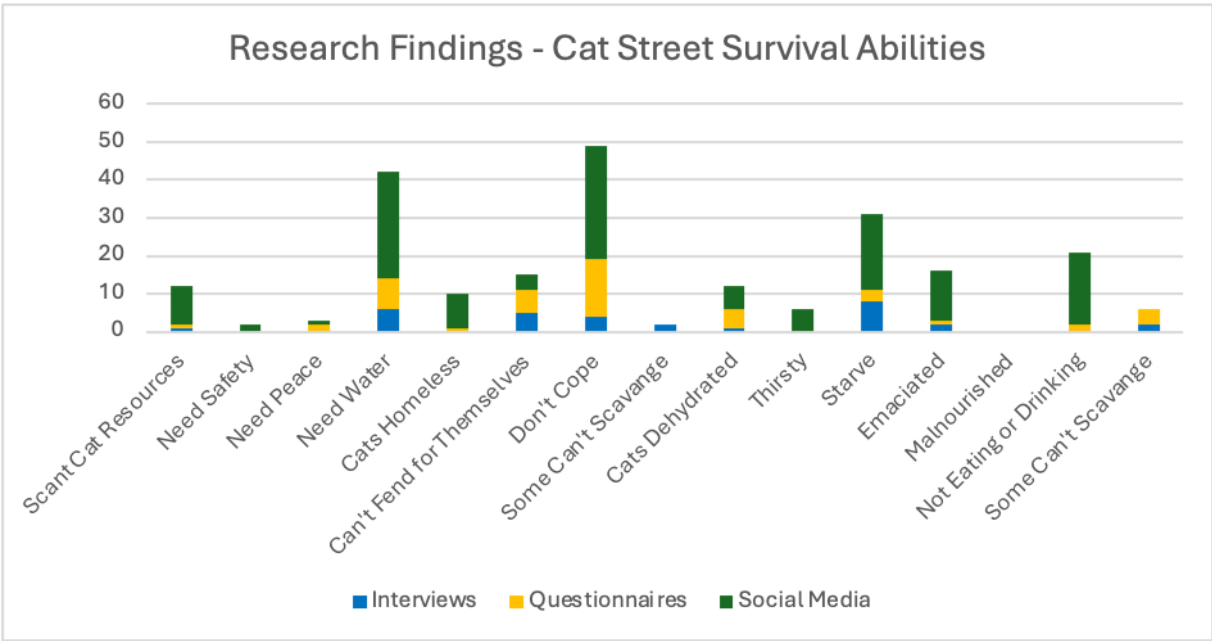
Figure 7. Research findings: The need for a suitable environment



5.1.2. The Need for a Suitable Diet

A suitable diet ensures freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition. The research results on cats’ abilities to locate adequate nutrition are presented in Figures 9, 10 and 11.

Figure 8.



5.1.2.1. Street Food Sources

The quest for food sources becomes another transitional challenge for cats on the street. In KSA, cats regardless of categorisation rely on human proximity as the desert surrounds all urban spaces. Some are able to catch rats, pigeons, even scorpions and camel spiders, though this poses risks of injury, especially from the venomous latter two groups. A significant portion of their sustenance comes from scavenging in garbage skips or food waste left on the street. Some human neighbours do leave food out for the community cats. While Saudi Arabian street-based community cats may not be able to communicate their biographies directly, there are clues. For example, tamis bread, a popular and inexpensive food available in many city locations, is a food sometimes eaten by cats. It is crucial to note that, as research interviewees pointed out, food obtained from garbage lacks adequate nourishment. Cats are described as thin, starving, emaciated and skeletal (Figure 10). In addition to the challenges of starvation and malnutrition, accessing water proves difficult, leading to dehydration, renal failure (Burkholder 2000), heart disease (Campbell – Kittleson 2007) and, ultimately, death.

Figure 9.

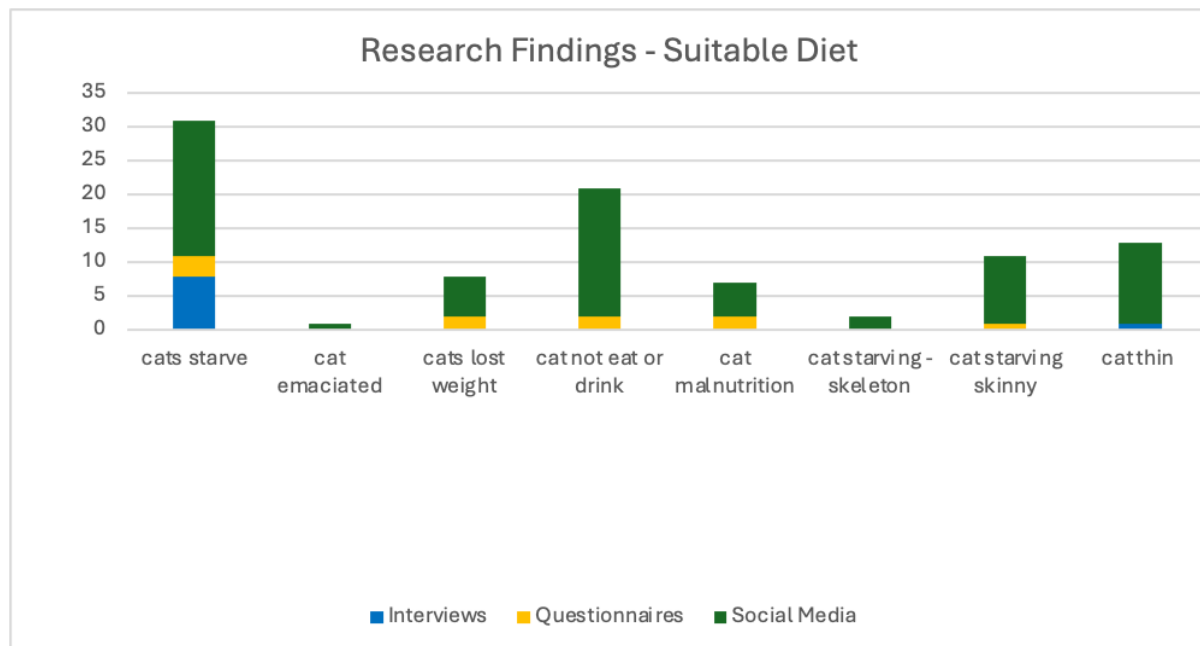


Figure 11 shows that the need for a suitable diet, one of the Five Welfare Needs (Ryan et al. 2019), by minimising “[b]y providing ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour” (Mellor 2016a: 2), is not being met.

Figure 10. Research findings: The need for a suitable diet



5.1.3. The Need for Protection from Pain, Suffering, Injury, and Disease

5.1.3.1. Diseases

Disease prevalence is high among unvaccinated cats (Slater 2007) and factors contributing to starvation and malnutrition extend beyond food scarcity to include the inability to eat. Domestic cats are hosts to several viruses (Pontier et al. 2009), and participants reported feline herpes virus (FHV), feline calicivirus (FCV), and feline parvovirus (FPV) as extremely common viruses which are efficiently transmitted diseases (Pontier et al. 2009). Images of cats frequently appear on social media where help is requested for cats, often exhibiting very severe symptoms. Research data from social media illustrate infected eyes (Figures 12 and 13), ranging from mild conjunctivitis, ocular discharge to bulging eyes leading to blindness. These diseases also cause upper respiratory tract infections and nasal discharges. FCV leads to painful mouth ulcers. Blindness, mouth ulcers, and breathing difficulties pose life-threatening risks for affected cats.

Figure 11. KSA 'street' cats with virus related issues



Feline panleukopenia (FPL) additionally induces severe hemorrhagic gastroenteritis, frequently resulting in dehydration and eventually, death. The high prevalence of FHV, FCV, and FPV amongst cat populations in KSA is likely to be comparable to studies on other cat populations (Hellard et al. 2011; Pavlova et al. 2015). Since a significant number of street-living community cats and many in homes lack vaccinations, they remain vulnerable to these viruses.

5.1.3.2. Injuries

Injuries are not consistently documented by any of the research participants. The data revealed 1,620 injuries (Figures 13, 14 and 15).⁸ Head injuries were the most frequently reported (349), 243 involving eye injuries. There were 305 instances described as cats having 'broken bodies', including 76 cases of paralysed cats, 91 instances where body parts were described as 'destroyed', and 86 reports of lost body parts. Leg injuries totalled 219, with 63 paw injuries and 36 radial nerve injuries; skin injuries amounted to 119, encompassing burns and degloved body parts. Other reported injuries included tail injuries (52), mouth injuries (74), bone breaks (34) and neck injuries (25).

⁸ The data analysed from these social media accounts covered a period of one year from only 3 of many KSA social media accounts.

Figure 12.

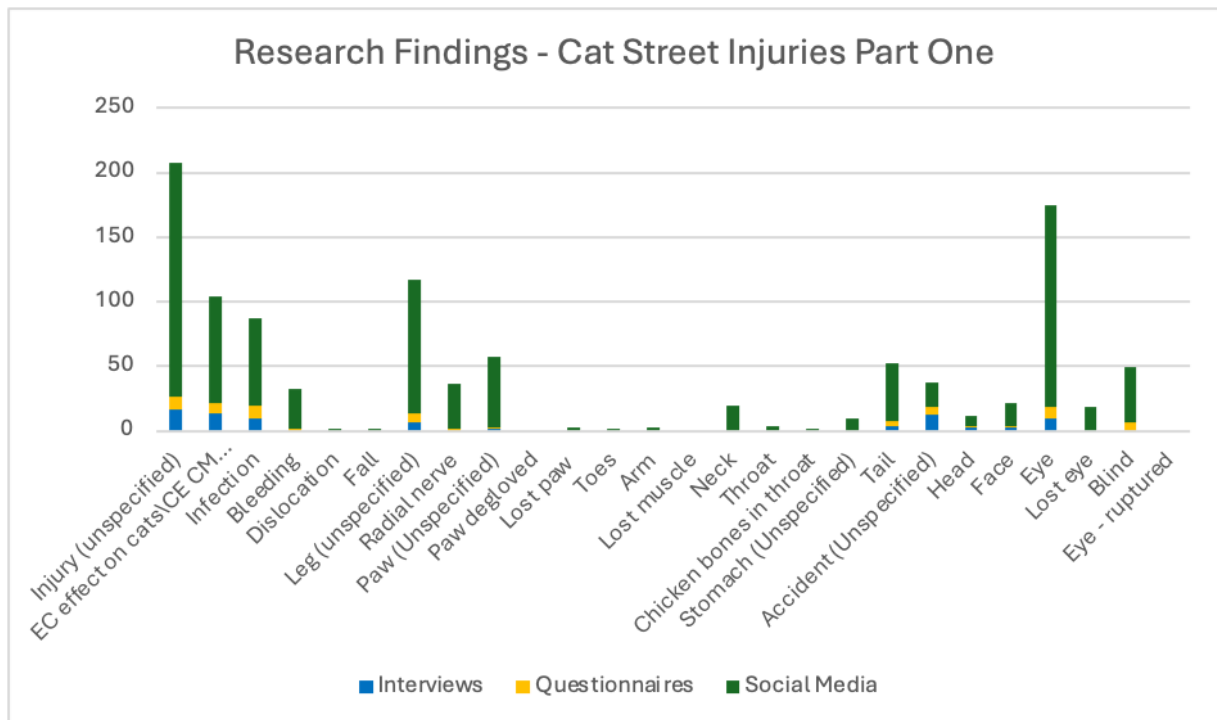


Figure 13.

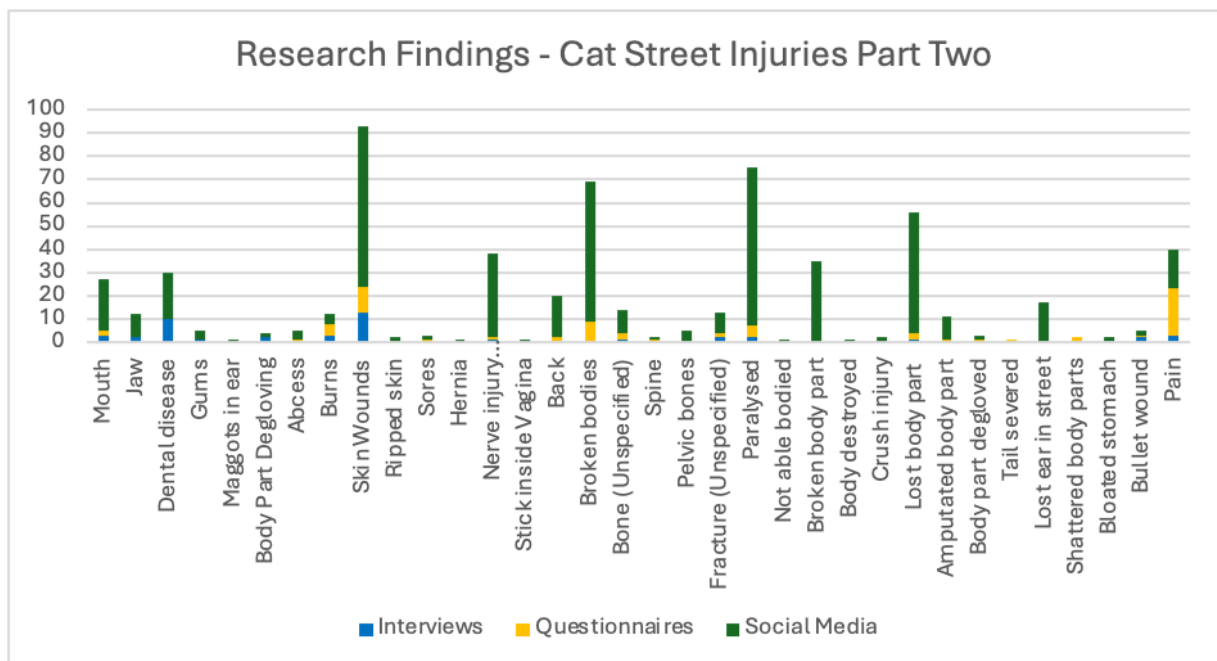


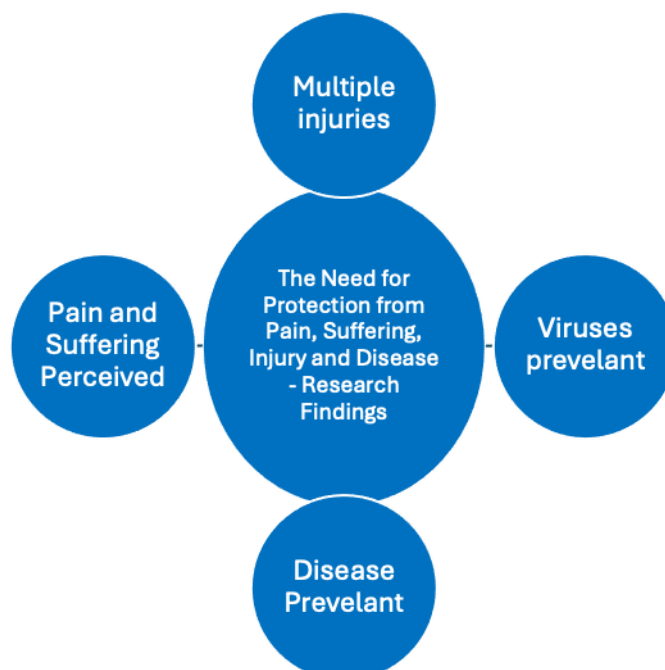
Figure 14. Cat injuries



Interviewee A remarked upon the resilience of cats, who recovered from injuries that, as a seasoned medical professional, they would anticipate cats to succumb to. This resilience, however, may indicate how untreated cats can endure, clinging to life despite pain. The severity of their injuries often determines their capacity to remain alive.

Figure 16 shows that the need for protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease, one of the Five Welfare Needs (Ryan et al. 2019), “[b]y prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment” (Mellor 2016a: 2), is not being met.

Figure 15. Research findings: The need for protection from pain, suffering, injury and disease



5.1.4. The Need to be Able to Exhibit Normal Behaviour Patterns by Ensuring Conditions and Treatment which Avoid Mental Suffering

5.1.4.1. Fear and Distress

Street hazards contribute significantly to fear and distress, as testified to in this research, including 114 instances of abuse (Figure 17), 109 cases of killing (Figure 18), climate-related challenges (69) (Figures 5, and 8), attacks by other cats (32) (Figures 24 and 27), being trapped (20) (Figure 18) and car accidents (13). Drawing on my autoethnographic voice, I can attest that car accidents are a frequent cause of fatal and incapacitating injuries.

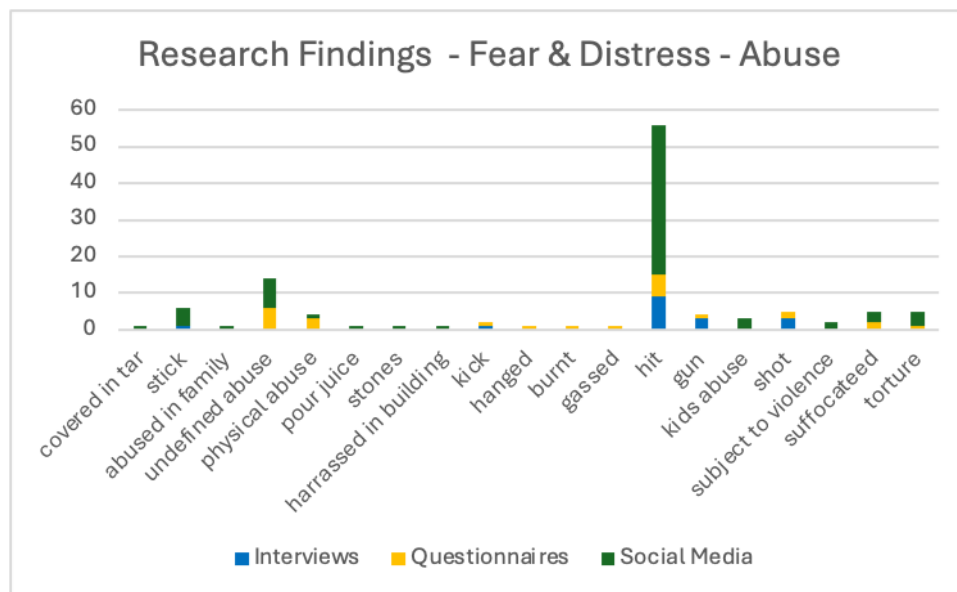
Nida Intarapanich et al. (2016) discuss the challenges in distinguishing motor vehicle accidents (MVAs) from non-accidental injuries (NAIs), emphasising the importance of attempting to record such distinctions to advance morethanhuman animal welfare. Witnessing accounts from participants describe cats subjected to deliberate physical abuse, including being hit, stoned, kicked, shot, hanged, burnt, and having juice and paint poured on their bodies (Figure 17).

Cookie, who was rescued as an abandoned kitten, has faced significant challenges. He was hospitalised twice; the first time was due to a road traffic “accident”,⁹ and the second he returned home after being missing for a few days with his tail no longer functional and his face and eye bruised on one side. According to the vet, Cookie had likely been swung by the tail with his head knocked into the ground. Cookie now chooses not to venture beyond the perimeter of his home. Unfortunately, not all cats are as fortunate. A spate of cat shootings resulted in many cats dead or suffering from injuries, with many succumbing (Al-Sulami – Fareed 2017; O’Connor 2017). This case highlights the impact of social media in Saudi Arabia. While many abuse cases may go unnoticed, viral hashtags, such as the one used in this case (#WeDemandThePunishmentOfCatsKiller), seem to have provoked action. In this instance, the perpetrator was arrested. However, casual abuse appears normalised, indicating the complex challenges faced by abandoned and other community cats in Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

⁹ Participants report motor vehicles being deliberately used to injure cats.

¹⁰ Of course, morethanhuman animal abuse is not uniquely Saudi. Harold Herzog and Arnold Arluke’s (2006) anthropology of cruelty has identified links between morethanhuman animal abuse and domestic violence (also see Ascione 1999; Ascione et al. 2007; Flynn 1999, 2000; Merz-Perez 2003; Shapiro – Henderson 2016).

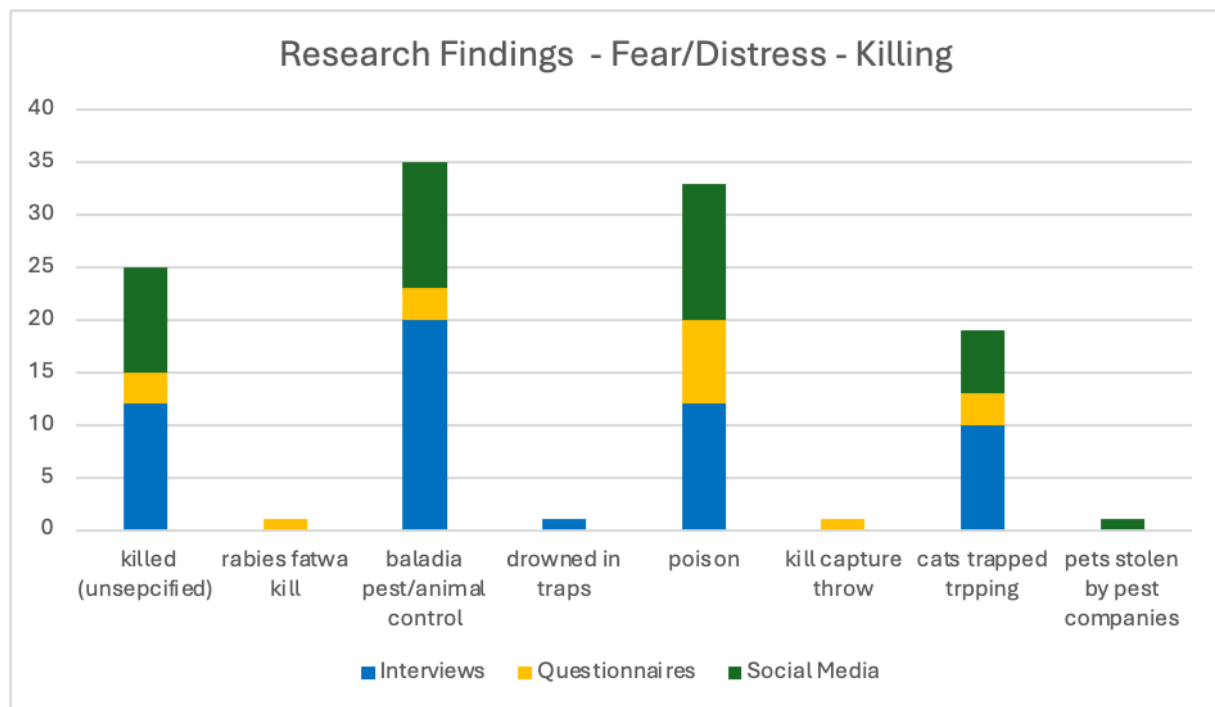
Figure 16.



"Mikey was discovered, left paralysed and incontinent, a victim of an MVA or a NAI. Despite his injuries, he demonstrated his agency by refusing to use his bespoke wheelchair, preferring to drag himself with his well-developed forearms. He chased insects, scooted across floors, and relished basking in the sun. He was given as much freedom as he wanted, except for venturing into the traffic-laden streets. Our bond was profound from my perspective, and I believe he reciprocated the sentiment, responding to his name, cherishing hugs, and sharing a form of eye-to-eye contact. We would exchange long blinks, and our eyes communicated deep affection. The thought of abandoning him on the street was inconceivable. To deconstruct our co-developed interspecies relationship by subjecting him to a long-distant remembered street cat culture and Umwelt, would have resulted in a traumatic Umwelt transition into a wretched attempt at existence."

(The author)

Figure 17.



5.1.4.2. Killing

Although killing is considered *haram*¹¹ in Saudi Arabia, with certain exceptions, such as morethanhuman animals used for food (Masri 2007), instances of cat killing still occur. Unlike in India, where 'street dogs' are protected by the law from killing (Srinivasan 2013), community cats and dogs in KSA have no such protection and are occasionally poisoned. Research participants reported some discrepancy regarding who authorises the (sometimes mass) poisoning of morethanhuman animals. Nonetheless, cats are reported to have been trapped and drowned (while still in the trap) and trapped then abandoned in the desert (sometimes still in traps) by the baladiya.¹² Any cat in the targeted trapping area, whether a companion animal with outdoor access, abandoned, lost, or residing in the vicinity was reported as taken without discrimination. Figure 18 presents research data on cats killed.

5.1.4.3. Cats' Condition

Even cats that avoid injury, hazards, and disease do not appear to fare well. Figure 19 highlights medical issues participants reported cats suffer including birthing difficulties, disabilities, disease, parasites, ear mites and fleas, and long-haired cats are frequently described as matted (71) and dirty (42). The research data does not distinguish between brachycephalic and non-brachycephalic cats. However, special mention is made here of the brachycephalic condition (Figures 20 and 22) as respondents agreed that a brachycephalic cat would be less successful at street survival than a non-brachycephalic cat, although all respondents believed that no cat 'type' thrived on the street and all faced insuperable challenges to longevity. Particular problems were fur matting, from mild to severe, where

¹¹ *Haram* means forbidden by Islamic law.

¹² The baladiya is the Saudi word for 'municipality'.

pelting or epilation occurs (Figure 21), specifically a problem for KSA-popular long-haired brachycephalic cats.

Figure 18.

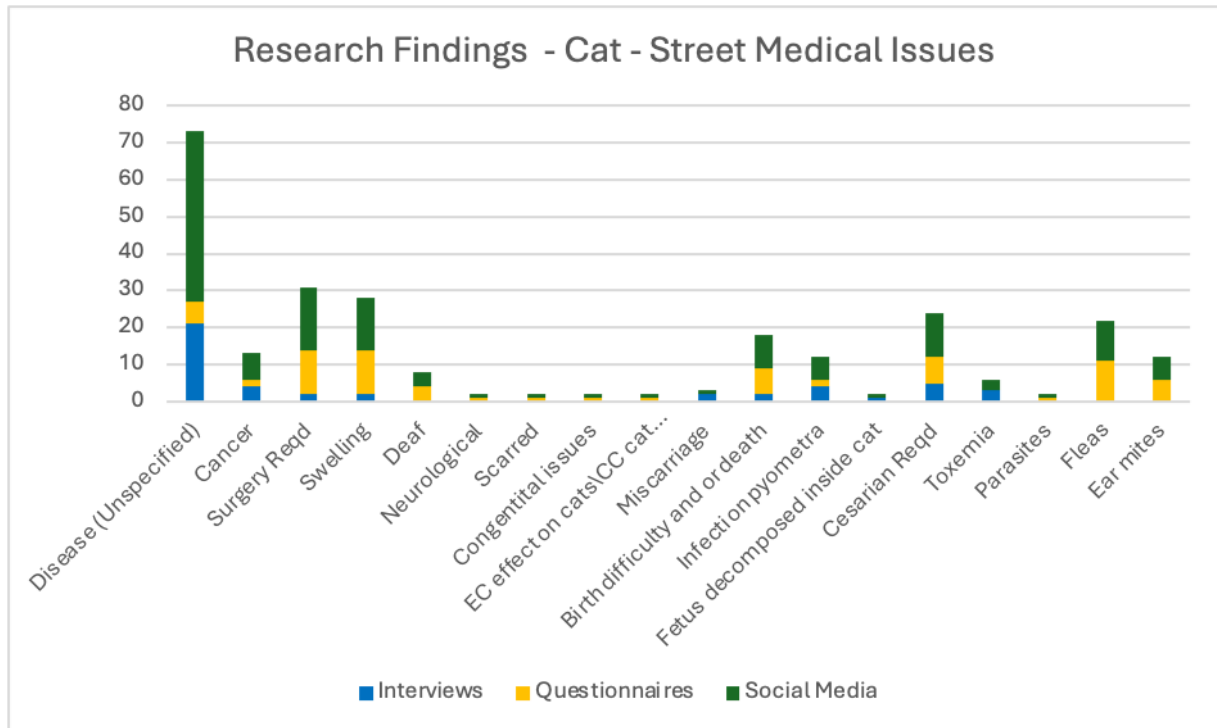


Figure 19. Phoenix, an abandoned brachycephalic cat

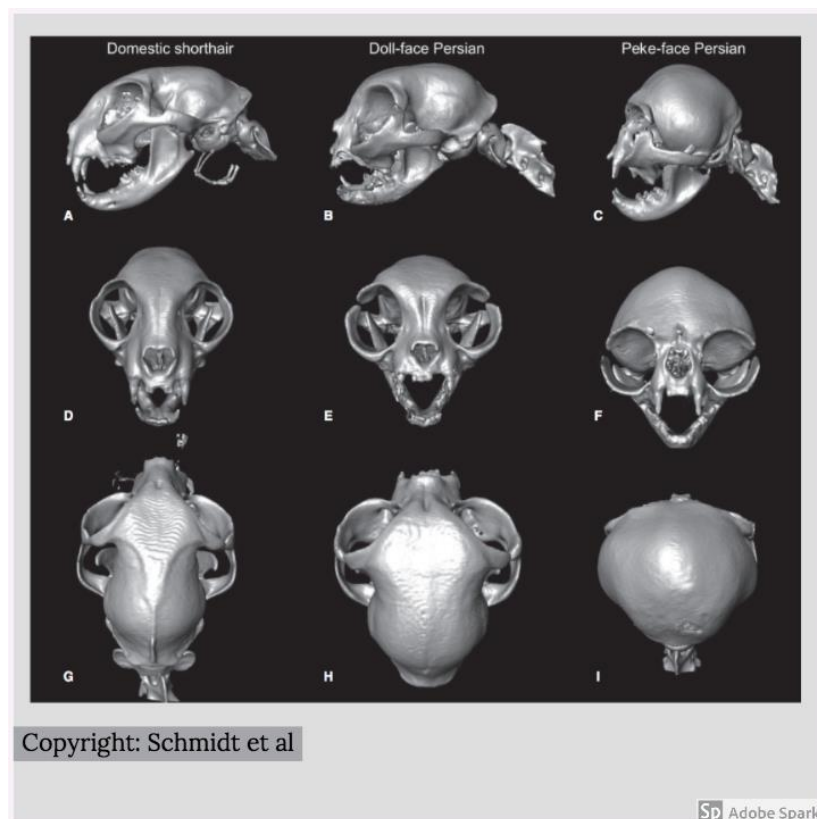


Source: Sarah Oxley Heaney, 2019.

Figure 21. Research findings: left - pelting; centre - pelting skin damage; right – epilation



Figure 20. Brachycephalic cat head morphologies



5.1.4.4. *Brachycephalic Head Morphology*

Figure 22 presents CT scans comparing a domestic shorthair with two brachycephalic typologies showcasing profound aberrations in the peke-faced cat (Schmidt et al. 2017). Brachycephalic syndrome is prevalent in brachycephalic breeds (Dupré et al. 2013) and is directly related to a specific head morphology where the shortening of the bones in the face and the surrounding areas alters the relationship with the surrounding soft tissue (Schlueter et al. 2009). This syndrome is associated with various health issues, depending upon the deformation, which range from mild I (*ibid*) or 'doll-face' (Schmidt et al. 2017: 1487), to severe IV (Schlueter et al. 2009) or 'peke-face' (Schmidt et al. 2017: 1487). In severe cases, the nose is pushed above the level of the lower eyelid (*ibid*). The syndrome presents "multilevel obstruction of the airways" (Mellema – Hoareau 2014: 104) and "secondary structural collapse" (*ibid*). Additional dysmorphologies include narrow nostrils, enlarged tonsils, laryngeal collapse (Mellema – Hoareau 2014), tracheal collapse (Dupré et al. 2013), eyelid dysfunction where eyelids are harder to close due to protruding eyes, resulting in increased risk of damage to the cornea (International Cat Care n.d.), persistent ocular discharge (*ibid*), dental crowding, mal-positioned teeth, dental disease (Mestrinho et al. 2018) and difficulty eating (Grannum 2024).

Cats that are generally bred and sold as commodities in KSA are reported as being predominantly long-haired and frequently brachycephalic. These "paedomorphic" (Serpell 2019: 58) and neotenic (Gazzano et al. 2015) features, exhibiting "infantile characteristics" (Estren 2012: 6) may be fundamentally alluring to humans (Serpell 2019). However, the desirability of such features comes at a cost to the morethanhuman animals that bear them (Serpell 2019). While the deliberate creation and breeding of brachycephalic cats may be considered "highly calculative and manipulative" (Tuan 2007: 149), research participants find the abandonment of cats with debilitated morphological survivability merciless.

Cats with severe brachycephaly face challenges breathing and eating, exacerbated by extreme temperatures and difficulties in finding appropriate food sources outside their home environment. These factors alone significantly diminish life expectancy and intensify the likelihood of suffering (Hale 2013). Fraser Hale advocates the banning of intentionally reproducing brachycephalic cats, akin to calls for the bans on declawing (Downing 2017) and dog tail docking (Lefebvre et al. 2007). Hale points out that not only "the animal effectively bites itself every time it closes its mouth" (Hale 2013: n. pag.) but the "entrapment of hair, food, and bacteria" (*ibid*) in the exaggerated folds of the palate cause chronic pain, and disease often hidden from the ill-informed 'owner'.

5.1.4.5. *Psychological Welfare*

Beyond brachycephalic cats, it is important to note that other cats suffer injury, starvation, hazards, abuse, distress and mental distress and suffering. Figure 23 illustrates a multitude of conditions which contribute towards mental suffering. These conditions include descriptions of cats as dirty (72), matted (19) or unable to cope with long hair (23), tired (28), motionless (9), collapsed (10), comatose (5), exhausted (3), lethargic (2), weak (31) and crawling (4). Additionally, Figure 24 also portrays a broader spectrum of conditions causing mental suffering. Among those not previously mentioned, almost 90 were reported as dead, 50 as dying, and 76 as suffering.

Figure 21.

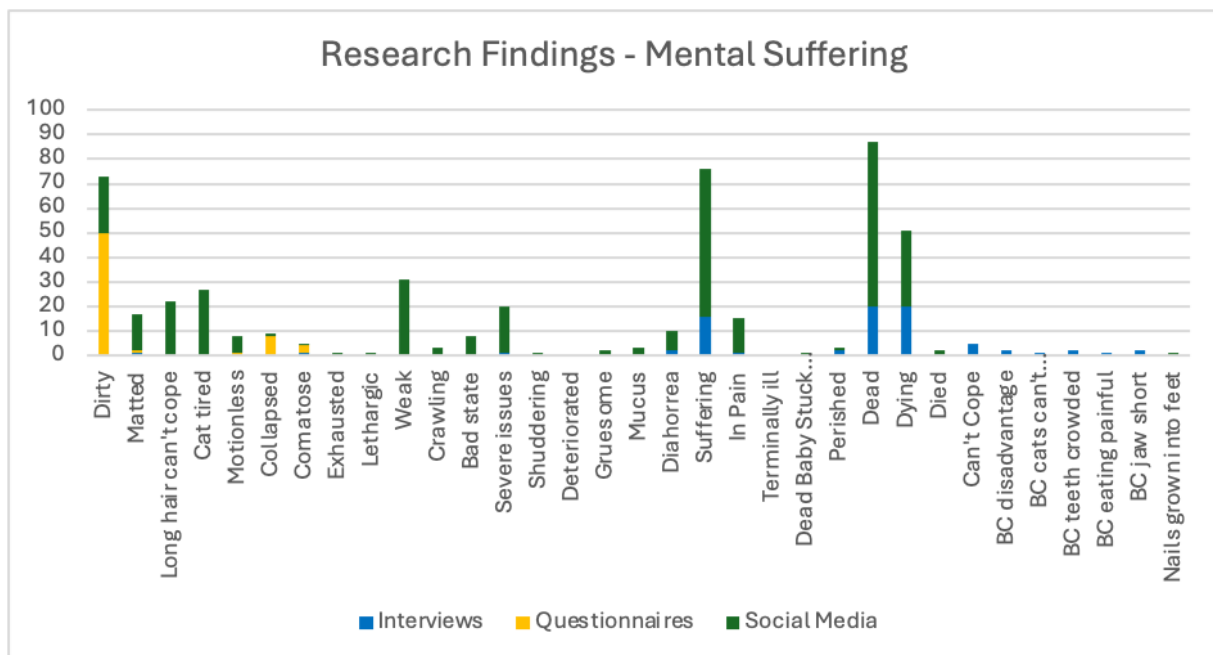
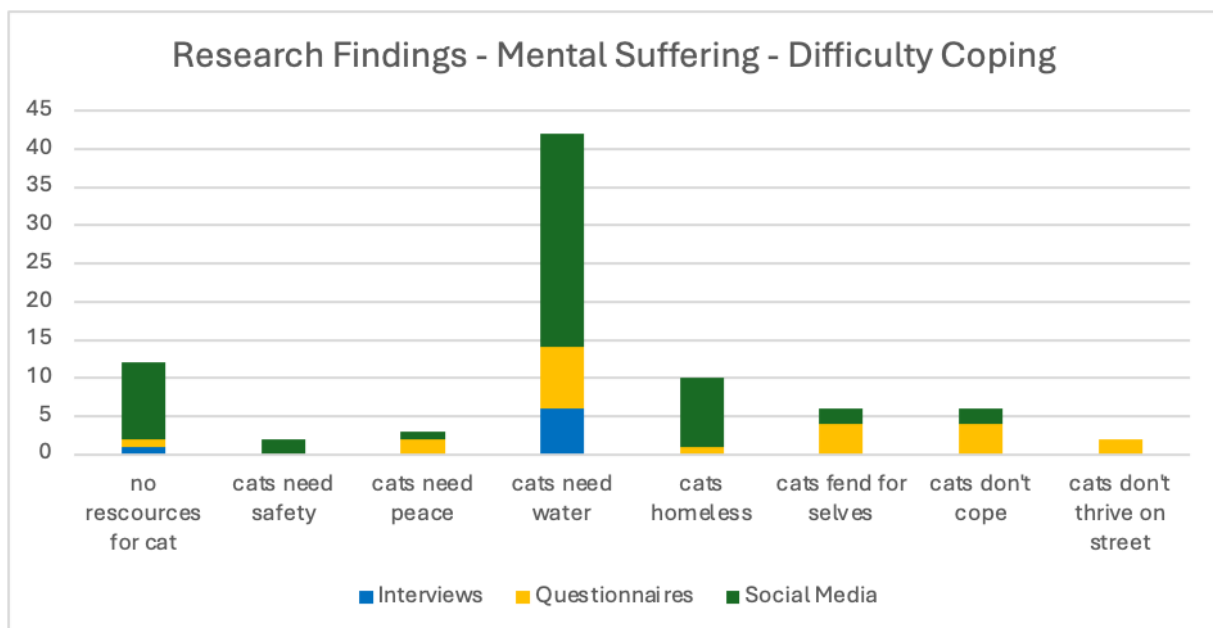


Figure 22.

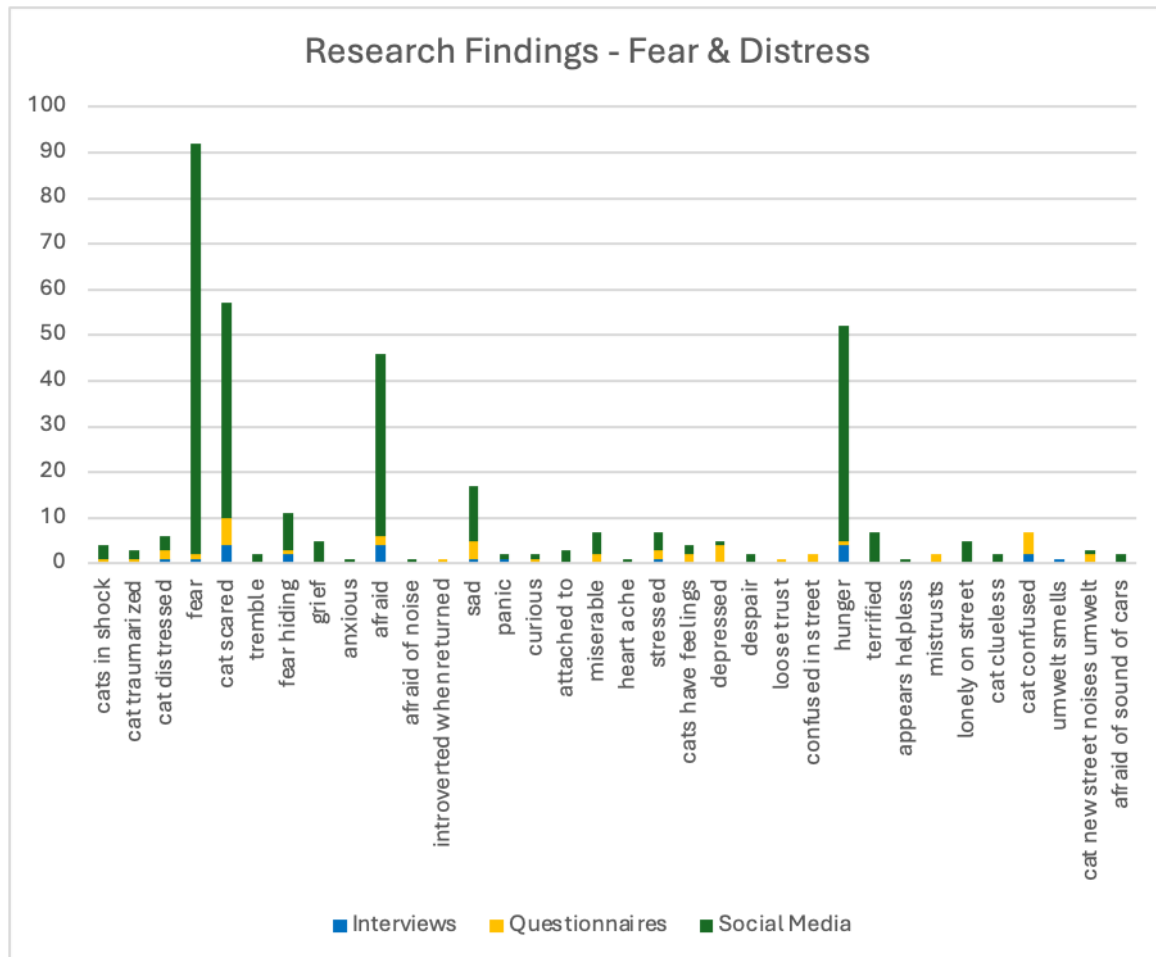


5.1.4.6. Emotions

Mental suffering often finds expression through emotions. While “defining ‘emotion’ is a notorious problem” (Scherer 2005: 698), emotional modalities include “expression, bodily symptoms and arousal, and subjective experience” (Scherer 2005: 698). According to Marc Bekoff (2008), the acknowledgement of emotional existence in more than human animals is widely accepted in the contemporary scientific community. Emotions are typically triggered

by “stimulus events” (Scherer 2005: 700). Street hazards, injuries, poor conditions, lack of resources and an unsuitable environment all contribute to stimulus events. Cats navigating the challenges of the street, throughout one, or a series of, Umwelt transitions are likely to be particularly susceptible. Indeed, emotional responses can vary in intensity and are subjective for each individual cat, depending on the nature of the stimulus event(s).

Figure 23.



Cats observed in the streets demonstrated emotions that align with mental and physical distress. Cats highlighted (Figure 25) are described as displaying fear (94), being scared (56) and afraid (46). A few are described as friendly, which concerns many social media participants, who perceive the friendliness as exposing the cats to abuse. Hunger, when experienced in a negative context, can be conceptualised as an emotion (MacCormack – Lindquist 2019), which can lead to a dysfunctional relationship between anxiety and emotional eating (Alexander – Siegel 2013). Such dysfunctions can render adopted cats vulnerable if adopters are unprepared for or unaware of such issues.

Studies show more than human animals can experience psychological stress and fear (Alworth – Buerkle 2013; Kry – Casey 2007; Moberg 1985; Tynes 2014) as well as environmental stress, hyperthermic stress (Hanneman et al. 1977), travel stress (Venable et al. 2016) and noise stress (Coppola, Enns, et al. 2006) including from anthropogenic noise

(Wright et al. 2007). Although there is no specific academic study on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in domestic cats, research on parrots (Yenkosky et al. 2010) and dogs (Dao 2011), has confirmed that these morethanhuman animals experience PTSD. Anxiety-related disorders have been recognised in elephants (Shannon et al. 2013) and chimpanzees (Ferdowsian et al. 2011). Participants in this study reported observing anxiety-related symptoms in community cats such as depression, anxiousness, refusal to eat and introversion (Figures 25 and 26). For example, Sasha, abandoned in the desert, witnessed her sibling being attacked and killed by dogs. It took a year for her to trust rescuers and display signs of affection. This shows that emotional stimuli, such as road traffic, encounters with unfriendly people, hunger, thirst and fear are likely to cause significant stress during Umwelt transitions for cats. Figure 26 shows that the need to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns, one of the Five Welfare Needs “by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering” (Mellor 2016a: 2), is not being met.

Figure 24. Research findings: Conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering



5.1.5. *The Need to be Housed With, or Apart From, Others*

5.1.5.1. *Multispecies Relationships and Families*

Old Lady, having endured a series of transitions, was initially discovered in an emaciated condition on a compound, likely abandoned. Consequently, she was transferred to a “sanctuary”,¹³ and subsequently fostered. After the foster left, Old Lady was housed alone for six weeks, a situation unbeknownst to her initial rescuers at the time, then adopted for another three weeks, until she developed diarrhoea. Consequently, she was returned to her initial rescuer. Unfortunately, Old Lady’s journey reflects the common plights of cats in the region, as research participants reveal a pattern where felines are seldom regarded as long-term household members.¹⁴ This predisposes them to numerous Umwelt transitions and multiple instances of abandonment. Each transition breaks bonds, attachments, and relationships that are crucial for a cat’s sense of well-being and understanding of his or her Umwelt, whether involving human-cat, cat-cat(s) or multispecies-cat relationships. Bekoff (2015) reports that broken bonds can cause distress. Separation anxiety has been identified in cats when separated from an attachment figure (Schwartz 2002, 2003) and attachment figures may include a range of species in multispecies households. Old Lady died a few days later, while lying in the shaded sun, mourned by one person, and arguably mourning her losses.

While cats may be resilient in recovering from physical injuries, when physical symptoms are gone, emotional trauma and mental suffering may remain (Steel et al. 2011). Extensive research exists on human trauma and anxiety, and some, as mentioned previously, on morethanhuman animal trauma. There is a notable dearth on emotional trauma in abandoned cats, particularly in the context of KSA. It is important to note that the impact of trauma is not exclusive to abandoned cats or vulnerable community cats. Participants also highlighted the distressing conditions in backyard breeding facilities in KSA.

Abandoned, lost or relocated cats face the challenge of integrating into established cat neighbourhoods, often resulting in physical conflicts as reported by participants (Figure 27). Abandoned cats must navigate an unfamiliar ‘cat-cat culture’ forcing them to reassess their agentic choices and adapt to the dynamics of new living spaces. The struggle to find acceptance adds an additional layer of stress and uncertainty to their already challenging circumstances.

¹³ A rented house for cats to have space to recover from physical and psychological injury and/or illness and interact with other cats.

¹⁴ For more on the concept of flexible personhood, see Shir-Vitesh 2012.

Figure 27.

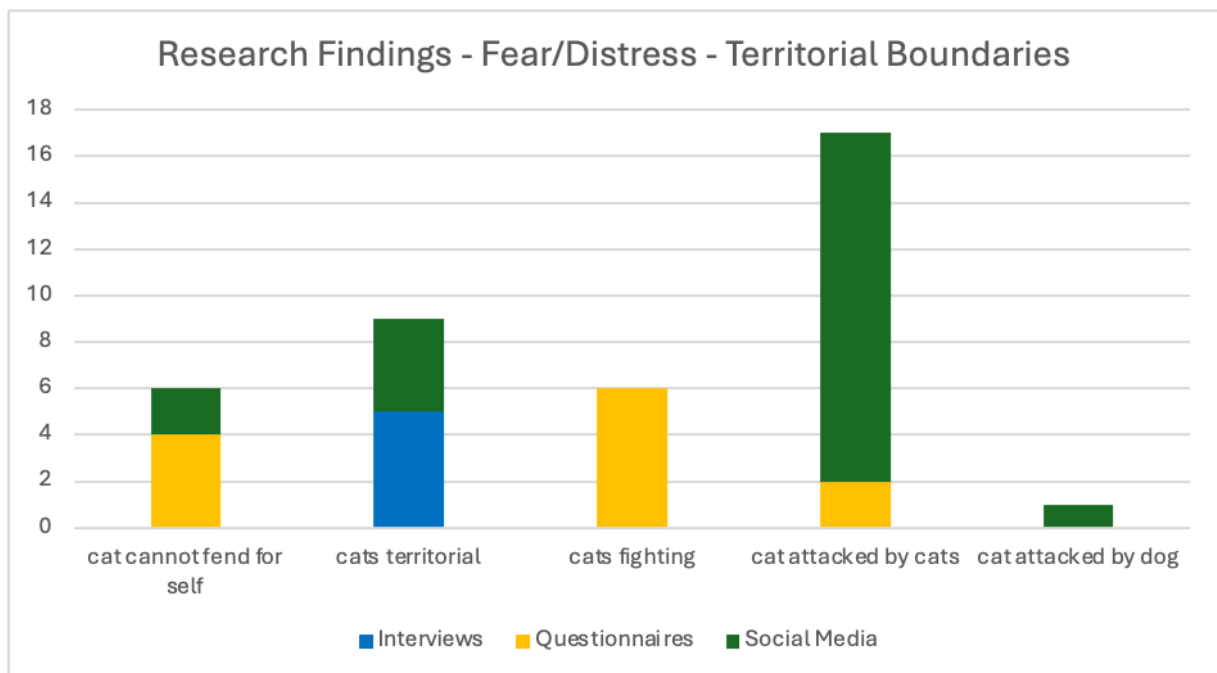
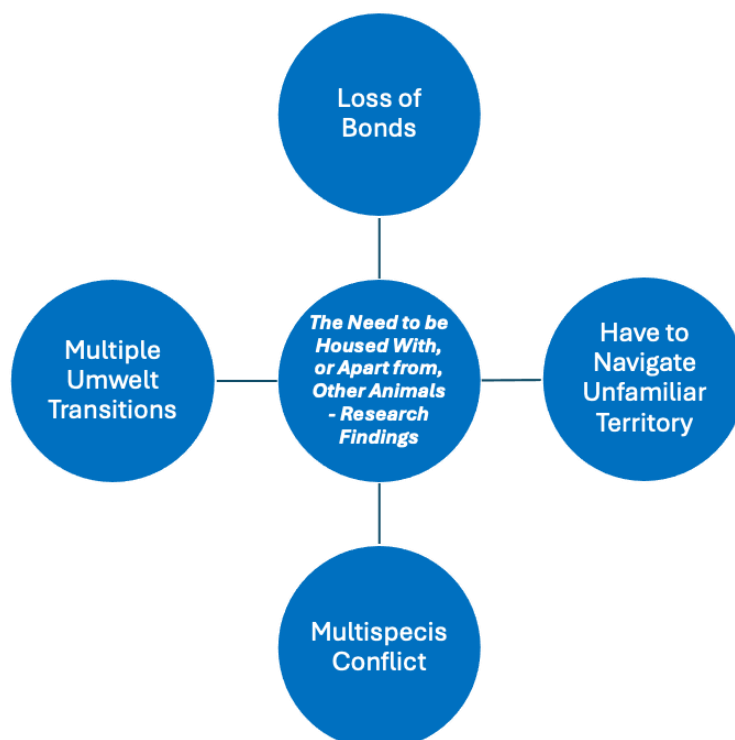


Figure 28 shows that the need to be housed with, or apart from, other more than human animals, one of the Five Welfare Needs, “[b]y providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal’s own kind” (Mellor 2016a: 2), is not being met.

Figure 25. Research findings: The need to be housed with, or apart from, other more than human animals



6. Summary

The research reveals that a proportion of community cats, including those abandoned, do not live in suboptimal conditions. These cats lack a suitable environment, a suitable diet, experience thirst, hunger, and malnutrition, lack protection from pain, suffering, injury, disease, and mental suffering and are not appropriately housed with other morethanhuman animals, falling short of the Five Animal Welfare Needs, a fundamental standard for domestic animal welfare.

The study employs virtual-witnessing, utilising rescuer testimonies to give voice to the suffering, allowing online observers to witness both the distress and actions of the activist movement. Despite potential concerns of the 'echo chamber' effect of social media, the research does not find any positive aspects of cat abandonment and presents a predominantly negative view of cats living in an urban street environment.

Huw Griffiths et al. studying 'feral' cats in the UK argue that solely-outdoor urban-living cats fare well, suggesting that calling for the rescue of 'feral cats' offers a "singular, negative view" and asserting that cats do not to be saved from "their feral misery" (2000: 59). Varied perspectives on the health of urban living cats is likely to stem from subjective judgements. James Serpell (2019) warns us that such judgements raise important issues as to what matters to morethanhuman animals and what is therefore important to their welfare.

To recap, this research explores the reasons and factors influencing cat abandonment in Saudi Arabia, shedding light on the complex issues surrounding this nationally under-addressed problem. Understanding cat abandonment serves as a crucial initial step in developing compassionate cat welfare strategies in KSA. This research aims to lay the groundwork and to become a catalyst for the development of a cat care framework to improve the lives of cats and their human counterparts in KSA communities.

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