

# Arabian feline (*Felis silvestris catus*) lives: Insights into abandonment

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This paper explores feline (*Felis silvestris catus*) - human (*Homo sapiens*) relationships in Saudi Arabia through the lens of cat abandonment. Although sections of Saudi Arabian society care for, love, and accept cats as treasured family members, cats' lives are also commonly viewed as insignificant, freely traded as commodities. When the cat-human bond breaks, cats are often discarded onto the streets without consequences for the abandoner. "Street-living" cats, a ubiquitous presence, are comprised of those street-born, lost, and abandoned. Efforts to reduce the population of street-living cats is gaining traction. However, to improve the lived experiences and care framework of Saudi Arabian felines, the abandonment landscape must be first understood. Coded cat abandonment data collected from social media posts, questionnaires, and interviews show there are a range of reasons given and social factors affecting cat guardian relinquishment decisions and offer a unique insight and understanding into the landscape of cat abandonment in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** cat (*Felis silvestris catus*); abandonment; otherthanhuman animal - human relationships; relinquishment; Saudi Arabia

## Introduction

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



**Figure 1.** Mikey, paraplegic, abandoned 2018. Copyright Oxley Heaney



**Figure 2.** Phoenix, scalded back, abandoned 2019. Copyright Oxley Heaney

The latest post that broke my heart was a housekeeper begging for someone to take the cat her mistress no longer wanted. She had told the housekeeper to put the cat outside into the street and not to feed him. The posted video of Titus, paraplegic but abandoned despite his disabilities, showed him scared, confused, and alone and reported he hadn't been given food for three days. Another posted photo showed a cat clearly exhibiting severe brachycephalic features sitting atop a mound of soil, too scared to come close to the person trying to offer help. Many other posts showed cats with injuries, and in various states of confusion or fear, with many displaying compromised body conditions due to an inability to adequately care for themselves. Saudi Arabian social media pages and groups are full of people wanting to relinquish their cats and every year prior to the annual holidays, the situation worsens with hundreds of photos of abandoned cats flooding social media rescue sites in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (henceforth KSA), asking, begging, for people to take them in. This year it is 50 degrees Celsius outside.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The context***

*Felis silvestris catus* (hitherto referred to as 'cat' or 'cats') are ubiquitous in all urbanisations in the KSA. There is no nationwide, official support for their welfare and at first glance, there appears to be apathy and indifference to their lives on the streets. In contrast to KSA's Middle Eastern neighbour, Turkey, where laws exist requiring the support of street-living animals

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<sup>1</sup> Written in 2019. Cities are urban heat islands and Saudi Arabia's temperatures are increasing annually (Almazroui, 2020).

(Anadolu Agency, 2021), Saudi street-living cats simply try to exist, seeking shelter, food, and water from wherever they can find such resources (Heaney, 2019). Such cat care poverty mirrors unsupported street-living cats globally who survive but don't necessarily thrive (Slater, 2002). While their lives and deaths may have gone unnoticed and unseen, with the advent of social media, people are highlighting the suffering of street-living cats, photos of whom may show behavioural and physical signs of them having been abandoned, or in colloquial terms, "dumped".

While there is no official support system for street-living or "community" cats,<sup>2</sup> attempts by people to feed, provide water and shelter are frequently met by authorities removing the resources or, more often, removing the cats through relocation or, controversially, poisoning.<sup>3</sup> Where these cats are then placed is hotly debated, but social media posts report cats being "relocated" to the desert, other parts of town, and rubbish dumps. Considered pests by some and loved by others, these cats are stuck in liminal social spaces of apathetic acceptance, disdain, love, and pity. While many people in Saudi Arabia have joined the fight to request Trap Neuter Vaccinate Return (TNVR) programmes, sanctuaries, and government support, many people still "dump" their animals regardless of the cat's ability to survive in the streets.

As the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia opens its doors to tourism and social media provides a platform to traders, rescuers and relinquishers alike, the domestic cat landscape is receiving increased attention from various stakeholders. Immersed in the KSA rescue world for seventeen years and founding one of the first legal animal welfare charities there, has given the author unique insight into why cats are relinquished or abandoned.

According to Jaroš (2018) otherthanhuman animals (henceforth "animals") and human animals (henceforth "humans") co-shape and co-influence each other and their shared communities. Cats are believed to have begun co-habiting with humans 9,500 years ago (Vigne et al., 2004) with domestic cats descending from individuals in the Near Middle East, including Saudi Arabia (Driscoll et al., 2007). Zooarchaeological records point to a commensal cat-human relationship existing for thousands of years (Ottoni et al., 2017; van Neer et al., 2014; Zeder, 2012). Cat-human relationships have since expanded, with the

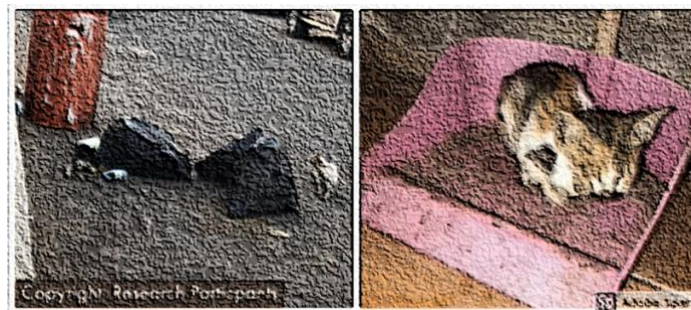
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<sup>2</sup> There is no support for any otherthanhuman street-living animal.

<sup>3</sup> Poisoning is illegal but is still used as a population control method.

domestic cat now being one of the most popular companion animal species; where an estimated 600 million individuals currently live amongst humans globally (Driscoll et al., 2009). However, these relationships are often fractured leading to both cats voluntarily leaving their human-offered homes and human cat guardians relinquishing their companions. Animal abandonment is a worldwide phenomenon (Coe et al., 2014; Finka et al., 2014; Lambert et al., 2015) but is not internationally defined. US law, for example, specifies abandonment as ‘leaving behind an animal alone or permitting the animal to be abandoned in circumstances which might cause harm to the animal’ (USLegal. Inc., nd, np). KSA, which has endorsed the Gulf Cooperation Council’s (GCC) Animal Welfare Act (Saudi Gazette, 2018), has no specific definition, but the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture’s (MEWA) Twitter account declares ‘[n]egligence of animals is represented by their owners’ lack of attention, malnutrition [of the pets] or leaving them without adequate food or food or failing to give them enough rest’ (Al Sherbini, 2020: np).

Coe et al.’s (2014) Scoping Review of Published Research on the Relinquishment of Companion Animals categorises relinquishment as including abandonment, surrender, and euthanasia. However, the ability to categorise street-living cats as either street-born, lost, or abandoned is not easy without understanding the local cat community. In addition, cats’ reactions to humans depend on familiarity and trust rather than a human-constructed category based on birth location. Hence, the author approaches the term for cats found in the streets of Saudi Arabia as “street-living” or “community cats”, that may be street-born, lost, or abandoned, but all of whom are considered ethically significant and who have a ‘life worth living’ (Mellor, 2016: 1).



**Figure 3.** Saudi Arabian ‘street-living’ cats. Copyright research participants.

The human-cat relationship in the KSA is complex. Cats are omnipresent in all urban environs and while some citizens and residents make great efforts to care for street-living

cats, cats are routinely found and reported as intentionally abandoned. KSA street-living cats are often regarded with ambivalence or disdain, even when obviously in a distressed state (Heaney, 2019). Some consider cats as nuisances, others as “wild” creatures whose natural habitat is the street where some believe cats possess an innate ability to survive. Yet the nascent emergence of KSA citizen and resident animal rescue groups and individuals reflects a sea change in the Saudi Arabian worldview of social responsibility towards domestic cats. This change has been catapulted by social media, in a shifting, once closed, now opening, society.<sup>4</sup> Rescuers, consisting of visitor and tourist expatriates and Saudi citizens, represent the changing landscape and emerging perception that the street is an unsuitable environment for cats, especially if unsupported. Social media provides a platform for witnessing cat suffering and street deaths which are considered not ‘good deaths’ (Cottrell and Duggleby, 2016; Meier et al., 2016), catalysing a desire for a paradigm shift in the treatment of cats.

A World Society for the Protection of Animals (Batson, 2008) report estimated that 58% of the global cat population, or 19.2 million, are “feral”<sup>5</sup> or “stray cats”. However, these contested terms of “feral” (Hill et al., 2022) and “stray”, which imply cats are “pests”, unwanted or a nuisance, are all tainted with beliefs that these animals are ‘out of control’ (Wilson et al., 2018: 97), unsocialised, and fearful. Not only does this again pigeonhole cats into homogeneous categories upon which anthropocentric “solutions” can be applied, without consideration of the individual cat biographies and experiences, but it also delineates cats and humans into “problems” and “problem-solvers”. However, Lestel et al. (2006: 157) suggest that “humano-cat” society should be studied with reference to the idea that humans and cats both constitute parts of a multispecies city with communal spaces. Indeed, the author and many rescue groups in KSA feel strongly that cats are part of Saudi communities, having shared spaces for millennia, and are deserving of treatment as ethically significant beings. This worldview upholds Islamic teachings, anthrozoological multispecies and transspecies worldviews (Haraway, 2008; Hurn, 2015; Kirksey et al., 2014; Kohn, 2007; Kopnina, 2017; Nordstrom et al., 2020; Wolch et al., 1995), and contemporary companion animal welfare guidelines (Furber, 2015; Haque et al., 2011; Masri, 1987; Masri, 2007; Min et al., 2016).

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<sup>4</sup> Vision 2030 (<https://vision2030.gov.sa/en>).

<sup>5</sup> See Hill et al. (2022) for how humans wield the term ‘feral’.

This current article asks what reasons are given for, and what factors affect, cat abandonment in KSA. The paper attempts to spotlight the multiple issues surrounding cat abandonment in KSA, which constitutes a substantial, grave, and nationally unaddressed issue that would benefit from further research. Furthermore, understanding cat abandonment is one of the first, vital steps in planning cat management programs (Finkler and Terkel, 2012). Therefore, this research attempts to offer a foundation for improving cat welfare in KSA 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.

### **A review of literature**

In their Scoping Review of Published Research on the Relinquishment of Companion Animals, Coe et al. (2014: 260) examined 192 articles on the topic of companion animal relinquishment. Of these, 68.2% originated from the United States, 18.2% from Europe, 7.3% from Australia, 3.6% from Canada, and 9.4% from Taiwan, Brazil, New Zealand, South Korea, the Bahamas, and Israel combined. Since 2014 a further seven articles concerning cat relinquishment have been published (Fatjó et al., 2015; Fukimoto et al., 2019; Kogan et al., 2019; Mohan-Gibbons and Weiss, 2015; Phillips et al., 2018; Wassink-van der Schot et al., 2016; Weiss et al., 2015). While these studies extend research to the Republic of Serbia (Stojanović, 2011), Spain (Fatjó et al., 2015), and the USA (Clancy et al., 2003:), none have focused on the Middle East. The only one to refer to the Middle East (Seimenis and Tabbaa, 2014) researched “stray” populations, not relinquishment or abandonment.

The scoping review combined articles on dogs (*Canis familiaris*) (89.1%), cats (63.5%) (122 primary research articles and commentaries), and small mammals (9.4%). 87.8% of the primary research data concerned dogs and only 52.2% researched cats (60 primary research articles). The percentages of reasons for cat relinquishment are as follows: aggression (51%) followed by disobedience and other behavioural issues (46%); destruction and being over-active and noisy (39.9%); soiling in the house (44%); fearfulness and escape (33%); unfriendliness (33%); the individual animal’s characteristics (28.8%); health and illness (28.8%); and separation anxiety (2%).

Further studies concluded the following as the most significant reasons for relinquishment: animal behaviour issues (Arkow and Dow, 1984; Spencer, 1993); lifestyle changes such as moving (Arkow and Dow, 1984); animal behaviour, allergies, moving house and landlord issues (Patronek et al., 1996); animal behaviour (soiling, disharmony with other companion species) and ‘human lifestyle’ (including moving house) (Salman et al., 1998:); allergies, a new baby (Scarlett et al., 2005); and failed human-cat relationships (Luke, 1996). These studies demonstrated multi-dimensional reasons for relinquishment.



**Figure 4.** Multidimensional reasons for relinquishment - Previous studies

These studies were conducted in countries with established animal welfare infrastructures. However, even in countries with developed animal welfare systems, relinquishment and abandonment still occur. Millions of relinquished cats are euthanised each year, for example, in Sweden (Eriksson et al., 2009:), the USA (Salman et al., 1998; Zawistowski et al., 1998), and Australia (Chua et al., 2017), despite peoples’ attempts to address relinquishment factors (Salman et al., 1998). Relinquishment terms such as

'disobedience' offered by Coe et al. (2014: 12) are problematic, as the term veils the expectations and the personalities of both actors. One study showed over 58% of cat guardians thought cats 'misbehave out of spite' (Salman et al., 1998: 215). This problematically applies anthropomorphic or egomorphic (Milton, 2005) misinterpretations of cats' attempts to express their personality and agency (Maran, 2016), thereby risking expulsion. Furthermore, while humans often embrace multispecies homes (Hurn, 2012; Irvine, 2004; Ritvo, 1987), Irvine explains 'living an animal-inclusive life requires compromising the hegemonic view of the home as a showplace' (2008: 126), while Tuan further points out that a pet must become 'as unobtrusive as a piece of furniture' (1984a: 107).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative data collection was used in this research.<sup>6</sup> Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with two veterinarians who are involved in cat rescue within KSA. A qualitatively coded thematic analysis was conducted of rescue groups' social media posts on Instagram and Facebook, and online questionnaires were distributed to familiar English-speaking rescue groups and individuals. All participants were involved with cat rescue in KSA, and all data concerned cat rescue only within KSA. The author's own autoethnographic and researcher voice as a long-time cat rescuer is interjected throughout this research, to add reflexivity and embodied knowledge of the situation. The interviews and questionnaires included a series of questions regarding experiences of cat relinquishment and abandonment in KSA, including reasons given for relinquishment and rescuers' perceptions on issues surrounding relinquishment and abandonment. To preserve participant anonymity this report reveals no identifying features.

The results from an unpublished report created by a rescue group in 2019 were additionally included to both add to data and to triangulate reasons. This unpublished report assembles data from 639 adoption applications. Each adoption application asks questions concerning why an adopter may relinquish a cat post-adoption. The report highlights numerous factors resulting in post-adoption relinquishment, despite the analysed applications being filtered to only include applicants who declare they agree to a commitment

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<sup>6</sup> Ethics approval was granted by the University of Exeter's College of Social Science and International Studies (SSIS) Ethics Committee 1st April 2019. Reference number 21819-125.

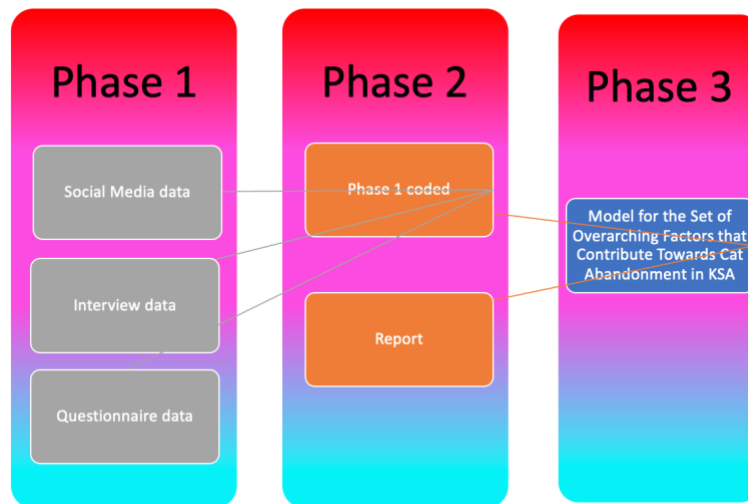


to keep an adopted cat for an expected 15-year timespan. This juxtaposition demonstrated how intended commitments can easily be fractured or demonstrates no actual long-term commitment to keeping a cat, despite claiming this was so. This latter finding was also reflected in the research participants' perspectives. Hence, these report findings were included as they offered prelude-to-abandonment factors.

Permission was obtained from the administrators of 25 social media Instagram or Facebook accounts. However, because many of the accounts did not contain the type and style of data useful to the aims of this research, only three accounts, open Facebook groups or unrestricted Instagram accounts, which provided the greatest volume of published content, were analysed. Two accounts included direct and shared posts from both individual and rescue group origins. The three social media accounts advertised a wide range of cats that were posted as either vulnerable to relinquishment; injured, diseased, or street-living cats unable to care for themselves; or sought help with lost or injured cats that had been rescued but needed rehoming. The data analysed from these social media accounts covered the period from March 2018 - March 2019.

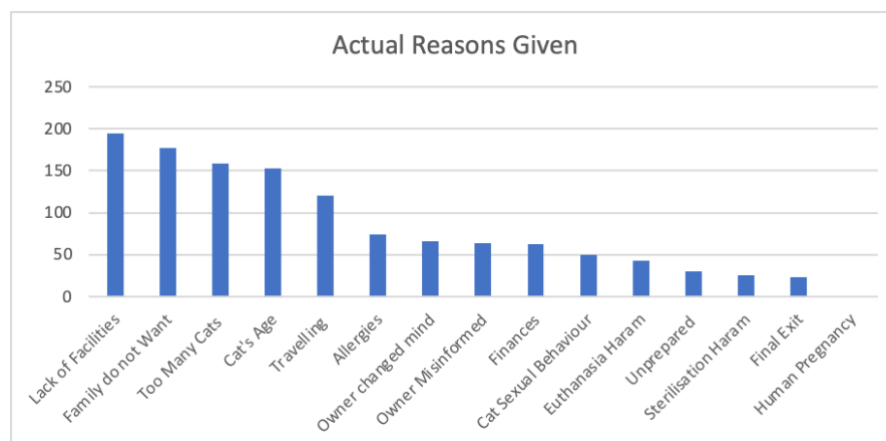
Techniques from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory were chosen in an attempt to mitigate researcher bias, as grounded theory techniques identify factors contributing to abandonment that are grounded in data. Grounded theory uses coding as its central process, wherein data is analysed, sections are attributed a code, then, through an iterative and comparative process, codes both merge and fracture to eventually create 'conceptual abstraction of data' (Holton, 2010: np). 'Coding is a way of indexing or categorising the text in order to establish a framework of thematic ideas about it' (Gibbs, 2012: 2) whereby concepts are identified and relationships established. The emergent theme findings from the grounded theory process are presented below.

## Pathways to abandonment results

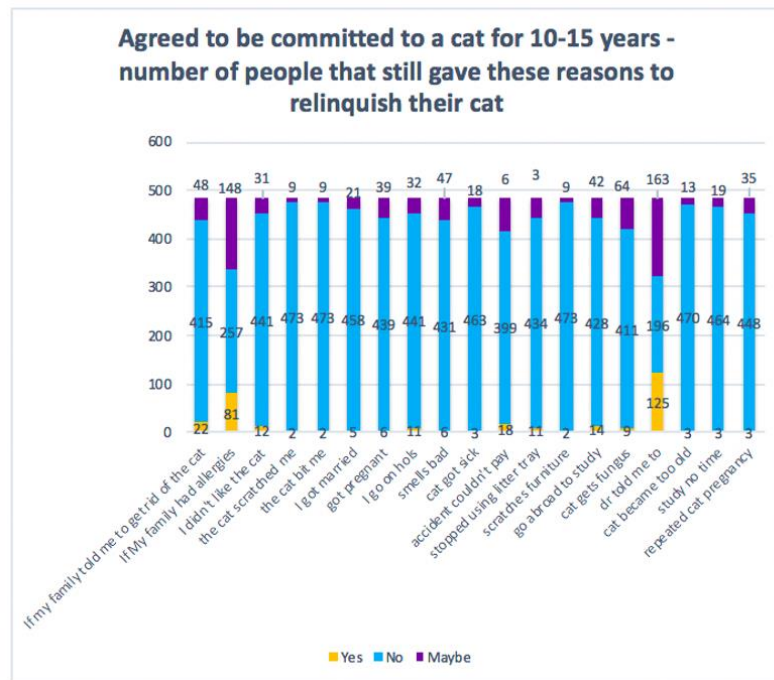


**Figure 5.** Coding and distillation methodological process

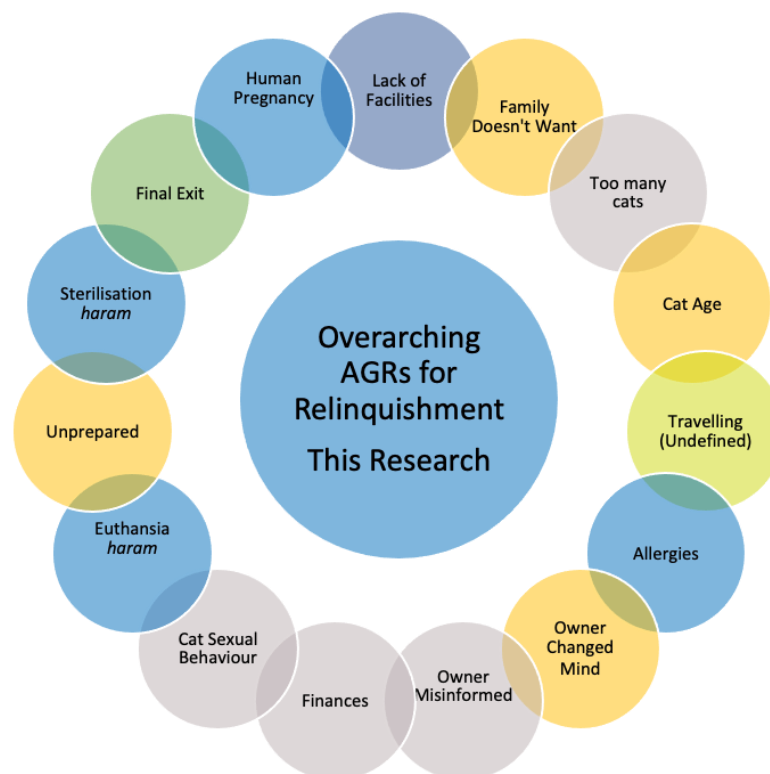
Figure 5 shows the methodological process. Phase 1 employed grounded theory distillation for both given and perceived reasons for abandonment (Figure 6). These results were then aggregated with the reasons for relinquishment from the unpublished report created by a rescue group in 2019 (Figure 7) to give results in Figure 8. These phase 2 findings were then further consolidated in phase 3, with the participants' perceived factors contributing to relinquishment and abandonment to form a Model for the Set of Overarching Factors that Contribute Towards Cat Abandonment in KSA, presented in Figure 9.



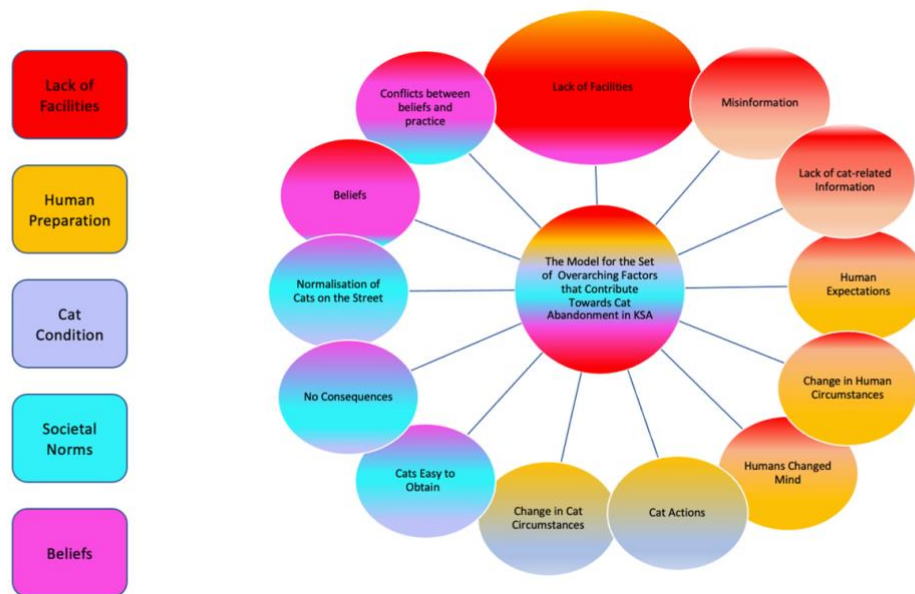
**Figure 6.** Research coding results from social media, interviews, questionnaires



**Figure 7.** 2019 Unpublished report research results



**Figure 8.** Combined research findings - Overarching AGRs for relinquishment



**Figure 9.** Model for the Set of Overarching Factors that Contribute Towards Cat Abandonment in KSA

The Model for the Set of Overarching Factors that Contribute Towards Cat Abandonment in KSA shows 13 distinguishable, but intersecting determinants reported as overlapping, contributants that impact and influence cat relinquishment and abandonment in KSA. The predominant categories for abandonment are:

- a dearth of affordable, accessible, modern animal-supporting **facilities** across KSA
- being unprepared for cat guardianship due, in part, to the lack of nationwide contemporary feline-related education/information and a plethora of circulating misinformation
- **societal norms** resulting in the ability to easily acquire cats (often at a very young age, for example two months) which leads to:
  - changes in **cat actions** precipitated by, for example, changes in health (e.g. sexual maturity, pregnancy, injury or illness) often causing the cat guardian to change their mind about retaining cats
- **changes in cat guardian circumstances** often cause a cat guardian to change their mind or find themselves under pressure to relinquish a cat

- a prevailing **normalised belief** that cats can survive on the street, which, combined with the lack of facilities and information to help cat retention and the absence of consequences for abandonment further lead to cats being abandoned in the streets
- penultimately, a prevailing set of **beliefs** concerning what is *haram*<sup>7</sup> or natural and actions that invite divine condemnation, further attract a pathway to abandonment
- although KSA laws warn of fines for abandonment, in reality there **are no consequences or mechanisms** in place to discourage abandonment.

The 13 emergent themes are filled with nuanced reasons for relinquishment and abandonment, and some of these nuances are unpacked below.

### ***The lack of national facilities***

Multiple emergent consequences from a lack of national facilities stands out as the primary component affecting the faceted reasons for relinquishment and abandonment. Nationwide facility affordability, accessibility, credibility, and an omission of cat care education stifles genuine attempts for cat guardians to reach and maintain high cat care standards. Only the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah, Tabuk, and Dammam/Khobar house a handful of suitably equipped and trusted vet clinics.

Consequently, many cat guardians reported not having access to veterinary care. Where private veterinary care is available, costs are high and vary in contemporary care facilities and knowledge levels. Rescue-focused facilities<sup>8</sup> are overwhelmed leaving vast gaps in cat care availability across KSA. Where cat sterilisation is sought in attempts to reduce the population of “unwanted” cats, in either homes or communities, it is often either not available, or out of financial reach. This situation often overwhelms cat guardians, who then feel they have no choice but to either “gift”<sup>9</sup> cats, try to find adopters, or to abandon cats. Furthermore, a lack of proficient, affordable sterilisation facilities prevents rescue groups carrying out Trap Neuter Vaccinate Return (TNVR) in large numbers, thereby only being able

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<sup>7</sup> Forbidden (‘Haram - Oxford Islamic Studies Online’, n.d.)

<sup>8</sup> All unofficial, bar two facilities in 2019 and five facilities in 2022, however, the situation remains insufficient.

<sup>9</sup> The practice of giving cats to friends and family, who often do not want them. This further results in cat abandonment.

to reduce populations in closed spaces, such as compounds, and even then, only if compound managers allow.<sup>10</sup>

All cities covered in this research were reported as having only a handful of veterinary clinics that house both up-to-date equipment and staff trained to practise veterinary medical care that meet recognised international standards. In fact, inadequately qualified staff were considered a major problem. Animals were reported being routinely killed or maimed by unqualified or unsuitably trained staff, who are not brought to account.<sup>11</sup> Vets who see such practices are unwilling to report other vets due to the fear of their own position being threatened by people in authority or those with *wasta*,<sup>12</sup> or being disparaged in revenge. Furthermore, the current complaints system requires that clinics be immediately closed pending investigation, which vets wish to avoid.

Participants reported cat guardians being exposed to vet impersonators and therefore receiving inappropriate, questionable treatment. Unsuspecting cat guardians found their cats received inappropriate treatment, ineffective at best, deadly at worst. This poor practice, and violent veterinary care, when identified, is encouraged to be reported. However, although there is a Ministerial system<sup>13</sup> for the public to report concerns of cruelty and malpractice to officials, the procedure is difficult for non-Arabic speakers<sup>14</sup> to use; findings are not available to the general public and action is rarely visibly taken which results in no apparent improvement in the general care for companion animals, therefore breeding a lack of trust in the obfuscated reporting system.

Similar to many other countries, there are no government facilities for street-born, lost, or abandoned animals. Only two official, private companion animal shelters (who intake relinquished and rescued animals) exist across KSA. However, it is not illegal for private individuals to help cats, nor is it illegal to shelter them, as some people do in large numbers. Yet, to legally raise funds in order to provide basic, necessary cat care (food, shelter, and medical care) one must be a legal charity (Arab News, 2016b; Habib, 2018; Samir, 2020; تأسيس جمعية أهلية | Ministry of Human Resource and Social Development, n.d.). The steps to become a legal charity are burdensome and only open to Saudi citizens. This prevents a large potential

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<sup>10</sup> Even when TNVR is agreed, new compound managers may decide to expel a sterilised, managed colony.

<sup>11</sup> As they remain in practice.

<sup>12</sup> *Wasta* means the use of social connections to obtain special privileges.

<sup>13</sup> A telephone number and an email address.

<sup>14</sup> [30% of the population are expatriates](#).

reservoir of voluntary rescue labour, being unable to successfully cross the bureaucratic challenges of charity creation. Therefore, many rescuers are limited in their ability to raise funds and thereby implement cat population reduction strategies, intake cats threatened with relinquishment, or provide assistance to street-living cats. Furthermore, setting up large-scale sanctuaries or shelters is beyond the reach of many people without funds or *wasta*. A recently constructed legal animal shelter was filled with hundreds of cats within a few weeks of opening and experiences cats being abandoned daily outside the facility.

Boarding facilities are provided by some veterinary practices, which offered caged boarding. Smaller, home-environment “shelters” and boarding facilities are provided by an increasing number of private individuals and groups but are insufficient in number to meet either cat relinquishment requests or boarding demand and are beyond the financial reach of those with multiple cats and/or low incomes. Participants report cats abandoned in alarming numbers every holiday season. Abandonment locations include veterinary clinics, pet shops, boarding facilities, parks, corniches, and “simply” being put into the street outside the home. This list is not exhaustive. Furthermore, coercive techniques are often applied by abandoners, for example a cat may be deposited for boarding with no intention of future collection.

Intentional cat breeding is unregulated, and participants describe dirty, unregulated facilities which produce cats sold as commodities, unvaccinated against disease and then sold to an uninformed public. In contrast, many rescue volunteers attempt to rehome cats that are pre-sterilised and pre-vaccinated in efforts to reduce abandonment related factors. In addition to breeding spaces, pet shops and grooming parlours are described as loci for disease, particularly ringworm.<sup>15</sup> Often, uninformed cat purchasers are then overwhelmed, cannot find appropriate medical help, and cannot return the cat to the breeder or shop. Breeders are generally considered to conduct unethical behaviour regarding breeding environments, cat welfare standards, and a unidirectional cat selling process. Breeders were reported as having been seen openly abandoning unwanted cats. Pet shops, which also breed and provide breeding services,<sup>16</sup> abandon cats with undesirable characteristics, such as behaviour (not friendly enough), age (too old at six months), or physical characteristics (injury-related or considered not cute enough), behind their shops.

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<sup>15</sup> Colloquially called ‘fungus’.

<sup>16</sup> Where female cats can be taken and locked in cages with male cats kept by pet shops as breeding studs (until too ‘old’).

The chasm of companion animal support facilities creates cat care poverty and hinders attempts for cat guardians to act responsibly. While some may recognise their cat as a loved and loving sentient being, it is not always possible to maintain the relationship or to relinquish them responsibly. Additionally, these issues egregiously allow poor companion animal health standards to perpetuate nationally, exacerbating cat guardians to be inclined or forced to intentionally (and illegally) abandon their cats. Furthermore, such barriers hinder Saudi Arabia's efforts to promote the One Health framework (G20, 2020).

### ***Inadequate preparedness for cat guardianship***

There is a paucity of national cat welfare campaigns. This gap is filled by dedicated rescuers who have created social media cyberspaces to try to assist potential cat guardians with preparatory and relationship supportive information. However, well-intentioned but out-of-date misinformation harmfully floats in cyber social spaces. Inadequate and often conflicting veterinary advice, plus reliance upon outdated medical websites, social media, and persistent myths regarding cat care and welfare has also led to the spread of misinformation. This, in turn, was reported as a major factor in peoples' unpreparedness for cat guardianship prior to acquisition and prevented the expectations of cat guardianship meeting reality. Such unpreparedness prompts cat guardians to change their minds.

### ***Change in cat guardianship circumstances***

Cat guardians relinquish cats due to reported changes in their own circumstances. Family pressure carries great weight in KSA. Cat guardianship appears to be confined to one or two family members. Patriarchal power<sup>17</sup> encompasses family members who live outside the immediate household, and the deep-rooted, hospitality traditions demand that any family member not wanting a cat in a household, whether a temporary visitor, or someone with a controlling influence, may request or demand a cat to be expelled. Ordinarily, if such a demand is made, the fate of the cat and the feelings of the cat guardian are reported to be of little concern. Following any failed negotiations, the cat guardian then may try to hide the cat, to seek an alternative home for the cat, or to submit to the decree and expel the cat into the

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<sup>17</sup> Patriarchal power changed as this research was conducted (see Al Arabiya, 2019 for more information).



street. Many cat guardians become distraught, often begging and pleading for help online. Often concerned with the fate of the cat rather than their own loss, but with no official shelters and suffering family pressure, they are often forced to abandon the cat in the street.

When family members develop any allergy, cats may be immediately incriminated without any allergy testing being performed. However, manipulative strategies engaged to justify irresponsibility were perceived by participants. When solutions to seemingly solvable issues in cat-keeping decision-making were presented, relinquishers reportedly offered disingenuous but incontestable excuses. Examples given included allergies said to suddenly occur after years of cat guardianship. Furthermore, although allergies can be mitigated, giving this as a relinquishment reason is often considered immutable by relinquishers due to the authority of a medical doctor's voice. Participants recounted relinquishers' use of such reasons as they will be unlikely to be challenged. In addition, medical fear also provokes relinquishment. Participants revealed many cat guardians whose doctors had recommended cats be put on the street in cases of human pregnancy. Participants reported patients were regularly told that cats *will* cause miscarriages or foetal deformities. Again, although the cat guardian may wish to arrange safeguards rather than choose cat relinquishment, they may be forced into precautionary relinquishment by family members.

### ***Cat actions***

Unwanted physical or emotional changes in cats may rupture the cat-human bond. Cat characteristics are reportedly compared on social media, family social gatherings, and even at weddings. Characteristics such as looks, age, and behaviour can soon become unfashionable. It is the social norm to buy kittens as entertainment for children. In such cases, when cats express any agency of self-defence, they are deemed aggressive and ejected from the family. Furthermore, aging beyond the perceived age of usefulness for entertainment, usually kittenhood, invokes cat rejection.

Encouraging or compelling cats to have sex and to produce kittens is noted as a societal norm with a belief that the actions are the cats' right to perform and enjoy. Also, a desire to luxuriate with cats in motherhood and to produce cute kittens is considered an entitlement. However, these practices result in being overwhelmed with cats, often with

more than are willingly accommodated. As mentioned previously, the relocation of “unwanted” cats becomes problematic. If gifting or adoption is not possible, the “superfluous” cats are simply abandoned. However, not only does the household overproduction cycle continue, but both the mother cat and the kittens may be at risk of expulsion. Accordingly, further unsterilised cats are not only exposed to a multiplicity of street dangers, but the latent ability to produce more “unwanted” street-living cats prevails. When cats become ‘parents-in-the-making’ (Haraway, 2008: 66) through human controlled reproduction, their status as ‘nonkin’ (Haraway, 2008: 66) is solidified when they are discarded but the babies kept. Furthermore, cats and kittens are also treated as ‘lively capital’ (Haraway, 2008: 52) or ‘emotional commodities’ (Shir-Vertesh, 2012: 420).

Kittens born with deformities, cats who become injured, or cats whose health is compromised, especially older cats, are at higher risk of eviction. Reasons can be a mix of unsightliness, an inability to care for the cats due to a lack of facilities or inexperience, and inconvenience. However, participants reported many abandoners believe that if a cat dies in their care, they are spiritually accountable. Moreover, if the cat were put on the street, the accountability dissolves and the cat’s fate is declared by divine authority. Participants question whether this reason also camouflages strategies to avoid inconvenient cat guardianship.

The sexual behaviour of cats may become highly problematic. As mentioned, most cats are traded without being sterilised. Both sexes may emit loud sexual vocalisations and become territorial which can involve fighting and hormonal marking. These behaviours can be simultaneously irritating and interpreted as their right to mate, or to “marry”.<sup>18</sup> If cats are not evicted due to this behaviour, they may be encouraged to wander outside the home to find a mate. Cats become lost, or return pregnant or injured placing their altered, transgressing condition at risk of destabilising the human-cat bond. Many participants felt cats were not seen as lifelong companions but rather having ‘flexible personhood’ (Shir-Vertesh, 2012: 421).

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<sup>18</sup> A euphemism in cat breeding parlance meaning ‘sex’.

### ***Easy to acquire, easy to abandon***

Ease of cat acquisition coupled with no regulatory framework concerning the sale of cats results in their being bred and traded in places where disease prevention is uncontrolled. Not only does this result in poor cat health, but also creates friction and tension when cat guardians are unprepared.

A pervasive belief exists within KSA that cats belong “naturally” in the street, where they can and do live healthy, free lives without care or worry. Participants report a belief that air inside the home is “dirty” and cats (even if sick) benefit greatly from being put outside to “get fresh air”.<sup>19</sup> This institutionalised belief is deeply embedded and was illustrated in 2018 when Saudi Telecom (STC) launched an advert (Figure 10) with an animated video of cats underneath tables in an outdoor café. These cats spoke to each other about how the streets were “theirs”. Such normalisation both blinds people to cat suffering and allows abandonment to be considered as not only acceptable but without consequence to society, cat guardian, or cat.



**Figure 10.** Saudi TeleCom advert

Such perceptions contribute towards behaviours prevailing in KSA. Indeed, the reason of “travelling” is often given for relinquishment, especially before annual holidays. Although social media shows responsible cat guardians searching for and often struggling to find

<sup>19</sup> Similar to the UK notion of ‘going out to get fresh air’.

suitable boarding facilities, participants report annual mass abandonment before annual, extended, and pre-planned holiday periods. Although a lack of appropriate facilities exacerbates this abandonment, participants recounted that there is little or no preparation for a multitude of “owned” cats, who are purposely abandoned in various locations: the street, at veterinary clinics outside opening hours, at grooming salons where they remain unclaimed, or outside restaurants, or in parks. These cats are left to fend for themselves for weeks (the holidays can last up to three months [Arab News, 2016a]). There appears to be some awareness of the likelihood that abandoned cats will suffer, but there exists a portion of the cat owner society that remains undeterred. If the cat manages to survive, upon the cat abandoners’ return it *might* be reinstalled as a family member. However, as the cat has lived on the street it may now be considered “dirty” and have transgressed to an unrestorable, household acceptable, pureness.

### ***Final exit***

“Travelling” also affects non-Saudi Arabian residents. Upon completion of their contract, non-Saudi residents and their dependents must leave KSA; this is known as “final exit”. Once a final exit visa is issued, the resident has a limited time to leave KSA and their re-entry is forbidden unless a new visa is issued. Many non-Saudi residents of various nationalities acquire cats while in KSA. However, the pay scale of some nationalities,<sup>20</sup> the confusion in the companion animal repatriation process, and lax attitudes towards companion animal responsibility leads to easy cat abandonment without consequence for the abandoner. Recent grassroots attempts to use social media to help people understand the complex repatriation process and find affordable repatriation solutions<sup>21</sup> have reduced this form of cat abandonment. However, these groups are not universally known.

### ***Beliefs and conflicts***

There are likely thousands of rescue cat guardians and for-pleasure cat guardians, and research participants revealed that there are a good proportion of these who disagree with

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<sup>20</sup> Pay scales are normally based upon national origins.

<sup>21</sup> Cat excess baggage and cabin tickets are cheaper than cargo.

either sterilisation or vaccination. Some individuals believe vaccinations bring disease, and a great many consider sterilisation *haram*, although Saudi Islamic scholars have ruled the procedure is not (Abdul-Rahman, 2007). Multi-cat families often become unwanted and unmanageable, and cats are often gifted or sold, unsterilised and the cycle continues.

Cats' welfare is entangled in the country's position regarding both euthanasia and "pest control." The conflict exists between an immutable belief regarding the sanctity of life over the suffering of animals even when abandoned. Although there is no definitive definition, the term sanctity of life 'embodies that the idea of life is sacrosanct' (Muhammad et al., 2016: 24), but there is no prevailing view that there is responsibility towards the quality of the life (of cats in this instance) or death, once life (including unborn kittens) has begun. Care is then relegated to "nature" and God. Taking a life is deemed incontrovertibly *haram*, meaning euthanasia is rarely considered even when cats suffer at end-of-life. Spiritual accountability dictates if a cat becomes ill during cat guardianship, the sick or dying cat may be preventatively expelled from the household. However, deliberate acts of killing, whether intermittent and spurious (Abudawood, 2018) or a form of population control employed by Baladia authorities, are reportedly frequent. This contradictory approach towards the Islamic view of the taking of a life is difficult to reconcile, however, it is reportedly generally ignored by those who may be frustrated by, or apathetic, towards cats. Furthermore, moral outrage may occur when euthanasia or abortion is considered for any cat in any circumstance, even if euthanasia or pregnancy leads to abandonment and suffering. However, a death caused by abandonment passes without similar fury. It is challenging to navigate these discordant views.

## **Discussion**

Previous studies on relinquishment reveal multidimensional reasons for these practices, reflected in this study's findings. Graduated factors across a variety of relinquishment reasons can contribute towards the collapse of the cat-human bond. The reasons identified in this research for relinquishment (which can be considered a prelude to abandonment) both converged and diverged with previous cat relinquishment studies.



that guide society. If responsibility is surrendered, once on the street, abandoned cats traverse categories: from a visible status as a family member and household companion animal, transgressing to a societal pest or nuisance whose individuality becomes invisibilised in disenfranchised street-living cat communities. The abandoned cat becomes part of the street-living cat community, thereby forced to become a semi-independent cat, which Jarōs (2021) suggests will be looked upon negatively where they are neither a possession to be responsible for, nor a commodity to be maintained for trade. Now tainted with street matter regarded as “dirt” or “pollution”, street-living cats become ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966: 35), out of place for care and considered out of place by an influential part of Saudi society.

Although societies tend to categorise companion animals as possessions and commodities, cats and humans can develop mutually strong bonds (Hill, 2020; Urquiza-Haas and Kotrschal, 2015; Vitale, 2018) to the extent where cats are considered family (Johnson, 2009; Veldkamp, 2009). However, the choice to retain the relationship bond is invariably beyond the cat’s agency. Shir-Virtesh (2012: 425) describes these loving relationships as being ‘redefined’ when companion animals are ‘demoted’ (2012: 420) and physically and emotionally removed from consideration. This flexible personhood is either broken by forces beyond a cat guardian’s control or when a cat’s existence no longer serves human use (Malamud, 2013). Furthermore, this may be considered a form of breaking the domestic animal contract (Palmer, 1997). Domestication creates human dependency (Swart and Keulartz, 2011). A conundrum emerges within the idea of cats who are considered as property, where humans have the freedom to acquire cats without experience or knowledge, and then are offered the freedom to cast off encumbrances and responsibilities without consequence by later abandoning them. Leaving cats to their divine fate appears to abrogate any responsibility humans may feel to a domesticated community member whose self-dependence has been removed through the domestication process.

### ***Reframing cats as ethically significant beings***

Thinking of cats as kin appears fraught; they can be loved and integrated into a family unit, but such interspecies relationships often do not endure, and bonds are broken when impediments and changing circumstances come into play and cats then become ‘emotional

commodities’ (Shir-Vertesh, 2012: 420). Power shapes interspecies relationships that alternate between care, indifference, and harm (Lorimer, 2010). When structure influences perception and restricts agency, and human discourse outweighs animal agency and subjectivity (Srinivasan, 2013), the animal may not be seen as free on the street as an abandoned animal, but rather as forsaken (Srinivasan, 2013). Furthermore, although pet-keeping is a process of domination over nature (Tuan, 1984b), abandonment continues to be a form of domination through deliberate and conscious neglect.

By framing relinquishment with the human needs as priority, the effect on the relinquished animals becomes invisible and their interests are often forfeited. DiGiacomo et al. when studying relinquishment to shelters, demonstrate this by declaring ‘[t]he staff offer the public shelter for unwanted pets and yet disparage those citizens who seek that service’ (1998: 42). Beneath this statement lurks a fundamental anthropocentric assuredness that shelters are there for human convenience, not for the benefit and welfare of animals. In this context there is an anthropocentric certitude that exists with those who see cats as commodities, or ‘lively capital’ (Haraway, 2008: 45), where humans have an anthropocentric prerogative to treat cats as property, objects, income, and disposable in perfunctory relinquishment actions. It could be argued that this worldview treats animal rescuers globally as existing primarily to serve and submit to cat guardian interests, where they are expected to capitulate to demands from relinquishers to accept unwanted animals regardless of the consequences for the animal. This anthropocentric attitude is also seen across much of the KSA relinquisher or potential adopter landscape.

However, reframing cats from commodities that serve our needs to community animals, part of our neighbourhoods with whom our lives are co-created, results in a reconnection with Islamic principles regarding otherthanhuman animals. Such principles, which express concern for all living species and reach out through a variety of *hadiths*<sup>22</sup> to guide communities, are in line with contemporary anthrozoological thought which seeks to reframe otherthanhuman lives within a posthuman framework. Scholars (Haraway, 2015; Kirksey, and Helmreich, 2010; Tsing, 2012) explain that ‘[a]ll living beings emerge from and make their lives within multispecies communities’ (van Dooren et al., 2016: 2), however, we do so with different levels of interaction and attention (van Dooren et al., 2016). Moreover,

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<sup>22</sup> *Hadiths* are the words and actions of the Prophet Mohammed and are considered a major source for Islamic law after the Qu’ran.



unequal power relations (Tuan, 1984b) lead such scholars to recommend we rethink our consequential relationships and reframe our views towards multispecies communities (van Dooren et al., 2016). Lestel et al. remind us that cities are hybrids of humans and animals and suggest that ‘humano-cat’ (2006: 157) society should be studied with reference to the idea that humans and cats both constitute parts of a multispecies city. Having shared spaces for millennia, cats are part of our communities, and being treated as ethically significant beings would uphold both Islamic teachings and multispecies philosophies which would substantially enhance companion animal care frameworks in Saudi Arabia.

## Conclusion

Many of the reasons given for and the factors affecting abandonment are inextricably enmeshed and are exacerbated by an underdeveloped cat care landscape. A lack of competent, contemporary, and accessible animal welfare facilities are factors which aggravate abandonment. For example, a family choosing not to retain a cat may feel there are already too many cats in a household, which in turn can be related to a number of factors, such as the lack of sterilisation facilities or the belief that sterilisation is *haram*; cats being considered to be too old once they are over 18 months to two years of age (again, related to unsterilised cats and their subsequent sexual behaviour); people travelling, which is significantly related to the long Ramadan and Haj holidays; or due to allergies. This in turn is reportedly exacerbated by a lack of information, misinformation, and doctors’ lack of thorough diagnoses. Humans changing their mind can also be related to misinformation, which is intensified nationally by poor and out-of-date information, or by reliance on social media for cat-related information. Vets who are out-of-date, duplicitous, or poorly trained reportedly create a plethora of problems. Circumstances of vets causing harm to cats through professional misconduct were shared. Stories are told of vets advising that sick cats be abandoned on the streets and replaced with another. Finances seem to play less of a role,<sup>23</sup> but abandonment can be associated with high vet costs and multi-cat households where care costs become disproportionate to household income. The lack of sterilisation facilities and the belief that sterilisation is *haram* often results in an overburdened multi-cat household

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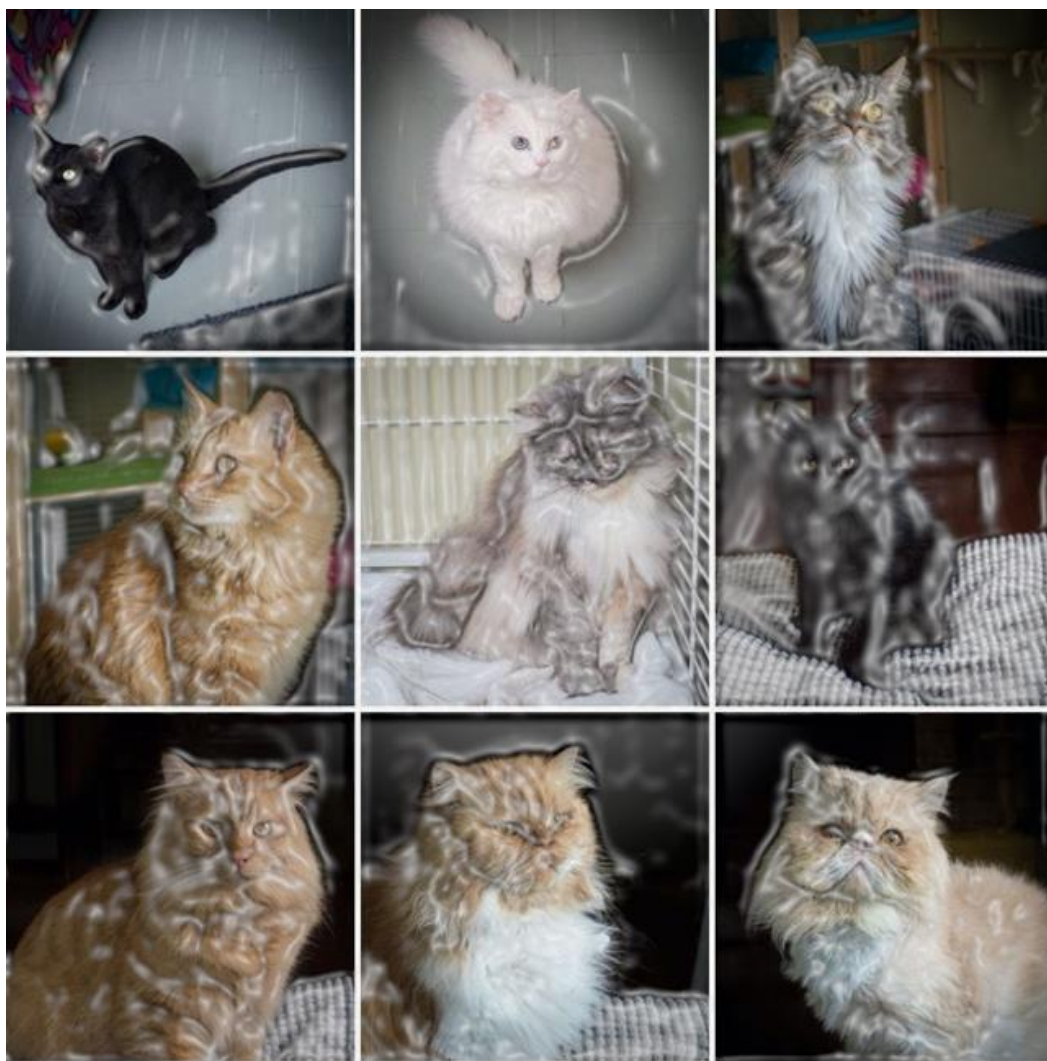
<sup>23</sup> Although finances have seemingly become more of an issue since this research was conducted (pers. obs.).

and to cats being unwanted due to their sexual behaviour. Euthanasia is also considered *haram* and there is a lack of hospice care for terminally ill cats. The belief that an “owner” will be accountable for the death of a cat in their care and the belief God *will* care for the cat on the street, are simultaneously linked to beliefs, expectations, and a lack of animal welfare facilities. Unpreparedness may be related to cats being easy to obtain and the lack of readily available cat care information. Final exit abandonment is related to lack of information and misinformation concerning the export procedure, and costs also play a part. However, the normalised practice of cat abandonment by expatriates leaving on final exit has begun to be challenged.

Power shapes the structures and norms of society and as it weaves latently through society and culture it exerts influence through institutions, societal norms, beliefs, daily practices, and expectations (Nadesan, 2014), thereby influencing the treatment of cats. This study supports the call of anthrozoological scholars for the treatment of otherthanhuman animals as part of multispecies communities and speaks directly to Islamic principles regarding the compassionate treatment of otherthanhuman animals.

This research has contributed to the understanding of cat relinquishment in a previously under-documented geographical area, Saudi Arabia. It presents factors which contribute to cat abandonment as a basis upon which to formulate strategies to reduce abandonment and encourages the creation of policies to improve the lives of Saudi Arabia’s humano-cat community.

‘There is not an animal on earth, nor a bird that flies on its wings, but they are communities like you...’ Qu’ran (6:38) (‘Quranic Arab. Corpus - Transl.’, n.d. in Linzey 2008).



**Figure 12.** Rescued KSA abandoned cats. Copyright participant photos.

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