

DePaul University

Pit Bull Perceptions: Marketing for Positive Change

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**Abstract**

The perception of pit bulls has been fatally tainted in the minds of many Americans as a result of their fighting history and unfair negative representation in the media. Pit bull breeds make up the largest percentage of dogs in animal shelters across the country. In an attempt to reverse the negative perceptions, a data-driven campaign was developed. The campaign deals with targeting people who don't have kids with an online blog and tags on the cages in the shelter in order to communicate the message that pit bulls are smart and fun to be around.

*Keywords:* pit bull, changing perceptions, strategic marketing

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A special piece of my heart goes out to all the loving pit bulls I have encountered that have inspired me to develop this project in hopes of positive change.

## **Introduction to the Problem**

In the year of 2017, Chicago Animal Care and Control took in 7,224 dogs (City of Chicago, 2018). Of these, 1,295 dogs were euthanized either by request or by shelter necessity. This is in one city alone. Nationwide, 1.2 million dogs are euthanized yearly (Brulliard, 2016). Humane groups even estimate that shelters worldwide kill more than a million pit bulls a year (Dickey, 2016). In one study, it was found that pit bull labeled dogs spend three times longer in shelters, increasing the likelihood of them falling victim to euthanasia (Weiss et al., 2012).

Additionally, pit bull breeds make up the largest percentage of shelter dogs as found through PetFinder data (Finlay, 2018). PetFinder is an online database listing dogs available for adoption. It is used by 14,000 shelters and rescue groups nationwide, therefore providing a good sense of the amount of pit bulls at shelters or foster homes.

Appearance is one of the top factors adopters take into consideration when deciding what dog to adopt (Weiss et al., 2012). Dogs that appear to resemble a pit bull breed, whether they are one or not, face the unfortunate stigma that is attached to these creatures—making them appear less favorable for adoption. Therefore, how potential dog adopters perceive the “pit bull” label and breeds that resemble pit bulls must be changed.

The purpose of this study is to reposition pit bull dogs in order to lead to more adoptions, less discrimination, and ultimately a better chance at life. The first part of this study dives into the complex history of the pit bulls breeds as a way to understand their nature, their struggles, and their friendly behavior. The second half of the study takes on a marketing approach to solve the problem pit bulls are facing. The outcome is a series of recommendations dealing with who to target, what the message should be, and how to communicate that message.

## **Part One: Understanding Pit Bulls**

### ***I. PIT BULL BACKGROUND***

#### **A. WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

The term “pit bull” does not define one breed, but rather a handful of related breeds. These breeds include: American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, American Bully, and Staffordshire Bull Terrier. Pit bulls can weigh anywhere between 25 - 100 pounds and come in at least sixteen different colors and patterns (Turner, n.d.). It is common to consider any short hair dog with a short snout to be a pit bull.

Often times, pit bulls are bred with other breeds. In fact, mixed breed dogs have nearly overtaken the purebred population (Olson et al., 2015). About 46% of the dogs in the U.S. are mixed breeds, yet people base breed labels on one identifier alone—appearance (Olson et al., 2015). If a dog appears to resemble a pit bull, despite whether it is one or not, it falls victim to the discrimination faced by pit bulls. One study showed that although DNA tests identified 25 of the dogs in one shelter as pit bull-type, the shelter staff identified 52 dogs as having some pit bull in them (Olson et al., 2015). This study suggests that it is difficult to determine a breed based on appearance alone—even for the professionals. This uncertainty makes appearance a poor determinant for behavior. However, past adopters have indicated that appearance is one of the primary reasons for choosing a particular dog, and therefore the pit bull perception must be changed.

#### **B. FUNCTION THROUGHOUT HISTORY**

The origins of pit bull breeds stem back to the early 1800s when bulldog owners began crossing them with an extinct strain of terriers (Dickey, 2016). Dog breeds have undergone

selection for behavioral traits. The primary purpose for this was to aid in working needs like hunting, dogfighting, and rat killing. Selective breeding has shaped the perception of breeds from animal professionals to the general public as people have grown to expect certain exaggerated traits from each breed (Gunter, 2016). Pit bulls were bred to fight, therefore leaving this aggressive perception imprinted on them for decades to come.

The American Pit Bull Terrier originated in 1889 in Massachusetts as a fighting dog (Delise, 2007). Dogfighting was viewed as a common pastime and was fueled by the greed of the pit ring owners as they prided themselves in hosting a good fight. There was a glamour to fighting the dogs that took on the romance of the gladiator. Many of the men who were fighting dogs worked in the coal mines and didn't have much money (Homan, 1994). Dogfighting continued to flourish in impoverished areas where people were looking to make an extra dime while re-establishing their masculinity.

The term "pit bull" has not always been used in a negative light. It is often used to evoke a feeling related to not backing down and not letting go. The image of a pit bull has served as an emblem of tenacity and grit. Pit bulls were even used with the American flag in a 1915 WWI recruitment poster as seen in Image 1 below ("War Dogs", 2012). Pit bulls had their time in both the White House and Hollywood. Former president Teddy Roosevelt had a pit bull while in office that helped him maintain his rough, macho image ("Famous Pit Bull Lovers", 2018). Fast forward nearly a century later where a pit bull played the famous role of Petey in *The Little Rascals* and was loved by adults and kids alike (Delise, 2007).

Image 1



Pit bulls' patriotic image changed as dogs became "weaponized" in the 1960s and began being featured in graphic media coverage (Dickey, 2016). People began buying dogs with an imposing image for protection, and pit bulls became a part of that trend. As a result, owners began to expect aggressive behavior from their new dog. A dog bite epidemic nearly emerged with the explosion of guard dogs and puppy mills which led to an overpopulation (Dickey, 2016). More bites occurred as people lost control of their pets. Different breeds took their turn being feared by the public—German Shepherds, Dobermans, and Rottweilers to name a few. Yet, no negative perception has persisted like that of pit bulls. There was a disproportionate amount of attacks by German Shepherds when they were the guard dog of choice, (Delise, 2007). However, the media would also discuss German Shepherds in a positive light as a result of their known police work. This neutralized the situation and didn't lead to an epidemic of discrimination like what pit bulls are up against to this day.

More fuel was added to the fire in the 1980s when drug dealers started using pit bulls to defend their supply (Schauer, 2009). Pit bulls were known for their fighting background and were found relatively cheap, making them an ideal purchase for criminals. The media reports glorified pit bull attacks, drawing the attention of the wrong crowd. Now, not only did people



fear the dogs themselves, but they began to fear the people associated with them. The public viewed pit bulls not only as fighting dogs, but also as aliases to corruption.

A switch of roles came with Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Michael Vick case in 2007. Michael Vick was an NFL star quarterback who operated “Bad Newz Kennels” which trained over 50 pit bull dogs, staged dog fights, killed dogs, and ran gambling rings (“Animal Fighting Case Study”, n.d.). Some of the punishment the dogs faced for lack of performance were as gruesome as being shot, electrocuted, or hung (Boniello, 2017). The public finally became aware of the atrocities of dogfighting. For the first time, people began viewing pit bulls as the victim rather than the aggressor. They became concerned with the welfare and livelihood of the remaining dogs. Rather than euthanizing them as damaged goods, rescue efforts were made (Boniello, 2017). Even the media was in on this one, sharing news stories to shed light on the hardships these dogs went through. The switch from aggressor to victim has helped the pit bull community, but has not been able to provide lasting relief for these breeds.

### C. ARE PIT BULLS DANGEROUS?

“Nature versus nurture only exists in the media. Everyone in the sciences knows it’s both” (Braitman, 2014). To believe that pit bulls are inherently dangerous is to only believe half the story. There is no dangerous breed. Individual dogs are dangerous. Even research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that no specific breed is inherently vicious (“5 Bully Breed Myths Debunked, n.d.). The CDC stopped categorizing by breed on the grounds that there is no accurate way to identify the number of dogs of a particular breed, and consequently no way to determine which are likely to bite or kill (Tullis, 2013). Dog bites do not occur based on one circumstance alone. Conditions that determine a dog bite are the

dog's genetics, victim's behavior, dog's socialization, dog's medical history, and owner's training (Dickey, 2016). The blame can't be placed on the breed alone.

Myths have helped spread some of the inaccuracies about pit bulls. One of the biggest myths is the locking jaw. Pit bulls share the same skull characteristics as dogs of other breeds (Rock, n.d.). There is no structural advantage. The main determinant of bite force is a dog's size and strength—not their breed (Dickey, 2016). Locking jaws, along with the belief that pit bulls just “snap,” have only intensified the issue.

Bite statistics are difficult to draw conclusions from since they rely on media reports. There is no comprehensive registry of dog bites by breed (Dickey, 2016). Media reports have falsely overrepresented the portion of dogs attacks committed by pit bull breeds (Delise, 2007). It becomes even more difficult to track because it is hard to determine what breed a dog is, especially as more dogs are mixed breeds than ever.

Some studies reveal that pit bulls have a higher probability of aggressive behavior than the overall dog population, but this number is still quite low (Schauer, 2009). It has been determined that the training of the individual dog and its disposition are better indicators of aggression than merely a breed name (Schauer, 2009).

## ***II. OUTSIDE INFLUENCES***

### **A. THE BIASED MEDIA**

The media helped intensify the negative perception of pit bulls. Dog attacks make for a sensational news story due to their rarity. In 1986, “killer pit bull” headlines took off. There were 350 newspapers, magazines, and journal articles about pit bulls printed in the US in that one year alone (Delise, 2007). Often times, these stories relied on terrifying anecdotes and a vocal

minority of people who proclaimed themselves to be “experts.” Anecdotes should be used to form hypotheses, not to confirm them.

The problem is that when one pit bull bites, it is seen as a reflection of all other pit bulls. When any other breed of dog bites, it bites simply as a species. Pit bulls take on a double consciousness. They are expected to act perfectly or else they are deemed dangerous. They get placed under a spotlight where any wrong step could be detrimental to their entire breed.

The media frames the story of supposed pit bulls attacks in an attention-grabbing way. For example, one headline reads, “Pit Bulls: Born Killers or Trustworthy Pets?” (Dickey, 2016). In 1987, *Time* magazine even had an article on pit bulls with the headline “Time Bomb on Legs,” (Delise, 2007). Dramatic headlines might be alluring to the reader, but it is doing something fatal to the breed. Now, when someone hears the term “pit bull,” they associate it with negative media stories and recall horrific dog attacks. People already have their perception set even before getting educated or interacting with a pit bull.

Citations used in media reports come from sources that were never fact-checked and have never been peer-reviewed. One animal activist wrote an article called “dog attack deaths and maimings” (Clifton, 2017). This article was cited by mainstream press and in several court cases (Dickey, 2016). The author gets his statistics solely from media reports and classified ads. Yet, this exact report has rarely been questioned and has been used to enact breed bans and further the negative perception of pit bulls. Here initiates a vicious cycle. Media reports use articles that use media reports to make claims about bite statistics. If the media is biased toward pit bulls, then so are the reports.

The ease at which information can be published and spread online adds to the issue. Anybody can publish anything they want to online, and anyone’s eyes can catch hold of it. Once

again, this furthers the negative perception of pit bulls as people stumble across self-credited “experts” who are publishing illegitimate reports on bite statistics and “aggressive dogs.”

Pit bulls serve as a scapegoat. They create a false sense of control. If dog attacks are attributed to a set of “dangerous breeds,” people are at ease with their pets. This is the idea of the “pit bull placebo.” Blaming pit bulls for attacks and aggressive behavior relaxes the feeling toward all other dogs (Delise, 2007).

## B. THE UNJUST LAWMAKERS

In the 1980’s, the United States Government began to address issues related to specific breeds. The outcome: breed specific legislation (BSL). Pit bull breeds are amongst those who fall victim to such legislation (Hunter & Brisbin, 2016). BSL can include a breed ban which prohibits ownership of the breed altogether, muzzling, or sterilization (Hunter & Brisbin, 2016). BSL occurs because: (1) the breed in question has a record of bite frequency that supports the view that the breed shows high aggression toward people; and (2) the breed has a potential to be dangerous because of its physical characteristics and functional history (Collier, 2006). Often times, BSL is created after a serious attack. Dog attacks terrify primitive, reptilian parts of the brain since they are so rare. Additionally, dog attacks feel personal since a pet is supposed to be like a best friend. In the Spring of 1989 in Miami, Melissa Moreira was attacked by a pit bull. That sparked the desire to mandate an outright breed ban in the Miami-Dade County (Dickey, 2016). In Denver, a similar story occurred, and a breed ban was formed. However, some places did allow already registered dogs to be grandfathered in if they met the following conditions: registered, sterilized, and marked with a tattoo (Dickey, 2016). Insurance companies discriminate

too based on faulty statistics which can increase a pit bull owner's insurance policy (Schauer, 2009).

Despite the continuing support for BSL, both the White House and the American Bar Association have issued statements saying that focusing on breeds is ineffective and breed bans are bad policy (Greenwood, 2013). They are expensive and difficult to enforce.

Two doctors came up with a metric called "number needed to ban" or NNB which assesses the number of dogs that would need to be banned in order to prevent a single bite-related emergency room visit or hospitalization. In Colorado, 8,333 dogs would have to be banned in order to prevent one serious bite related hospitalization (Patronek, Slater & Marder, 2010). This outrageous number proves the fact that bans have little influence.

The effect of BSL stems deeper than the individual dogs it restricts. BSL gives pit bulls a negative connotation and bad reputation. This has been detrimental to pit bulls. If a shelter in one of the areas of a breed ban acquires a pit bull, they will euthanize it unless is picked up by a shelter in a different area (Sherrill, 2018). For this reason, it is important to change the perception of pit bull breeds to help gain a positive perception and lift BSL.

## **Part Two: Marketing to Change Perceptions**

### ***I. DESIRED OUTCOME***

Pit bull breeds are the most common breeds in shelters, get euthanized the most, and are even victims to BSL as previously discussed. Proper repositioning of pit bull breeds could change the perception of these dogs in the minds of potential adopters. Currently, pit bulls are seen as dangerous and aggressive which leads to a lack of favorability. Altering this perception into a more positive and preferred perception will lead to a better life for pit bulls. As a result, pit bull breeds (and dogs that resemble them) will be adopted more frequently, euthanized less, and have fewer laws prohibiting their residence in certain areas.

### ***II. PROCEDURE***

A perceptual map was created in order to develop a set of recommendations to help reach the desired outcome. A perceptual map is a visual representation of the target market's mind. It shows how the target perceives brands—or in this case breeds. It may not align with how the breed actually is. In order to construct a perceptual map, a survey was collected. The full survey can be found in Appendix A. The survey was powered through Qualtrics online and was sent out to respondents through Amazon Mechanical Turk.

In order to qualify to take the survey, respondents had to live in the United States, be 21 years or older, and fit at least one of the following criteria: owned a dog in the past, currently own a dog, or will own a dog in the future. It was important for these respondents to be at least 21 years old because that is the required age to adopt from a majority of shelters in the U.S. Additionally, the respondents had to have some interest in owning a dog because they are the ones whose actions have the ability to save more pit bulls.

In the study, the breeds and attributes listed in Table 1 and Table 2 were examined. The breeds listed, with the exception of “pit bull,” are amongst the most popular in the U.S. as of 2017 (American Kennel Club, 2018). It was a conscious decision to use the term “pit bull” rather than the breeds that make up pit bulls. Potential adopters are more likely to recognize the term “pit bull” rather than “Staffordshire Terrier,” and therefore the perception of “pit bull” is what needed to be changed. The attributes listed are the qualities and things people look for when choosing their new pet (Weiss et al., 2012). The breeds were assessed using a Likert Scale. Respondents were asked how much they agree or disagree on a scale of 1 - 7 that each of the stated breeds embodies each of the attributes. Additionally, there was a “Not familiar with this breed” option in order to lessen some of the guessing and invalid data that might have occurred if someone was never exposed to a particular breed.

Table 1

<b><i>BREEDS</i></b>
Labrador Retriever
Golden Retriever
German Shepherd
Bulldog
Yorkshire Terrier
Poodle
Pit Bull

Table 2

<b><i>ATTRIBUTES</i></b>
Smart
Easy to Maintain
Fits Lifestyle
Family Friendly
High Energy
Playful
Cute
Aggressive
Protective
Preferred

After receiving the data, Factor Analysis was used to provide the two factors which formed the axes of the map. The factors captured 92.2% of the data, indicating good data. This is the total variance explained and should be greater than 60% in order to be considered quality data (Dolan, 1990). The Factor Analysis also provided the data points for each breed and

attribute. Breeds can be found at a singular point, while attribute points are used to make vectors that extend infinitely.

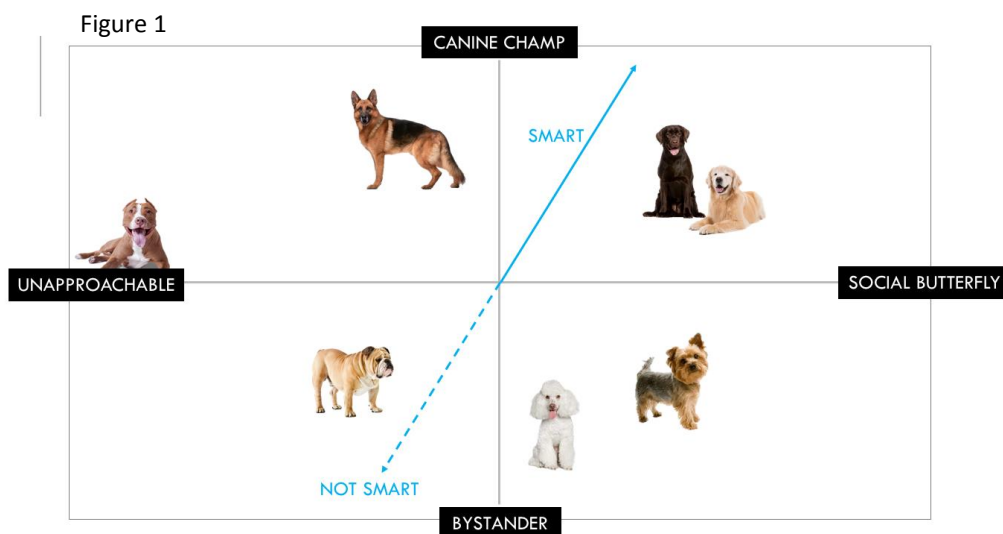
In addition to the survey questions regarding the perceptual map, the following types of questions were included in the survey:

1. *Screening* to make sure the respondent fit the prerequisites.
2. *Behavioral* related to breed familiarity and how people learn about different breeds.
3. *Psychographic and Demographic* to understand the lifestyle and characteristics of people completing the survey.

#### A. UNDERSTANDING PERCEPTUAL MAPS

There are a few key concepts to mention in regards to perceptual maps:

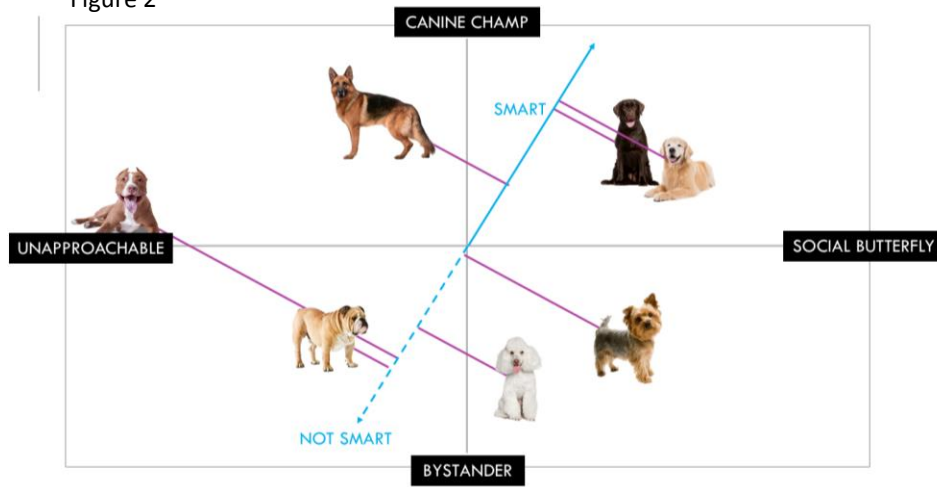
- Every attribute has a vector that extends infinitely in either direction.
- When a vector crosses the origin in the opposite direction, it takes on the opposite attribute / quality as seen in Figure 1 below. In this example, “Smart” becomes “Not Smart” as represented with the dashed line.





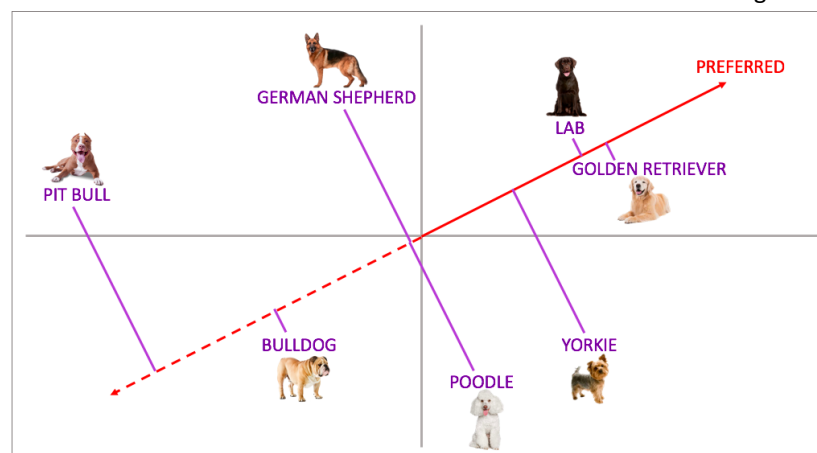
- The closer two vectors are to one another, the more related they are in the minds of the target market.
- Any breed can be assessed on any attribute by making a 90° angle with any vector. In Figure 2 below, all of the breeds are being assessed on the “Smart” vector. This allows for a comparison to be made with all the breeds. In the example below, Golden Retrievers are perceived to be the smartest, while bulldogs are perceived to be the least smart.

Figure 2



- The preference line is indicated in red. It is important because it drives action. For this project, the preference line drives adoptions. Having a higher position on the preference line is ideal. In Figure 3 below, Golden Retrievers would be the most preferred breed while Pit Bulls would be the least preferred breed.

Figure 3

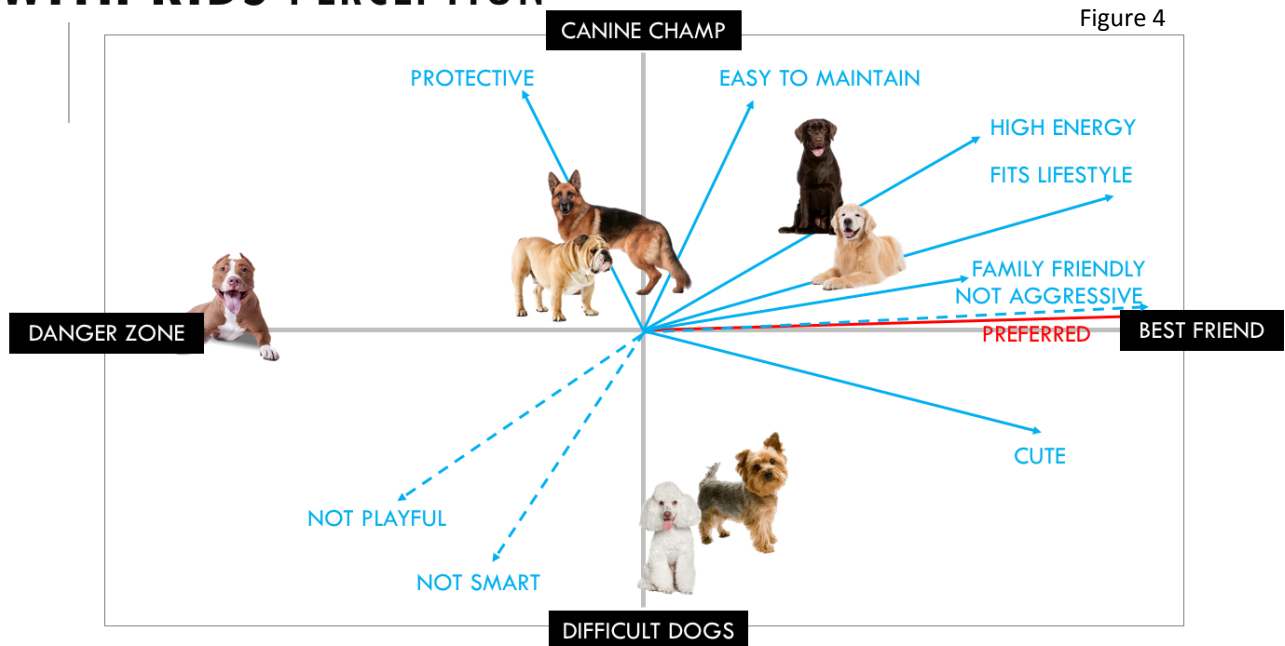


### III. OUTCOMES

The data collected from the survey was separated into two different segments: (1) people who do not have kids and (2) people who do have kids. One demographic question asked: “Do any children live in your household?” where 68 respondents answered “No” while 51 Answered “Yes”. These two pools will serve as the segments referred to in the remainder of the study. A perceptual map was formed for each segment.

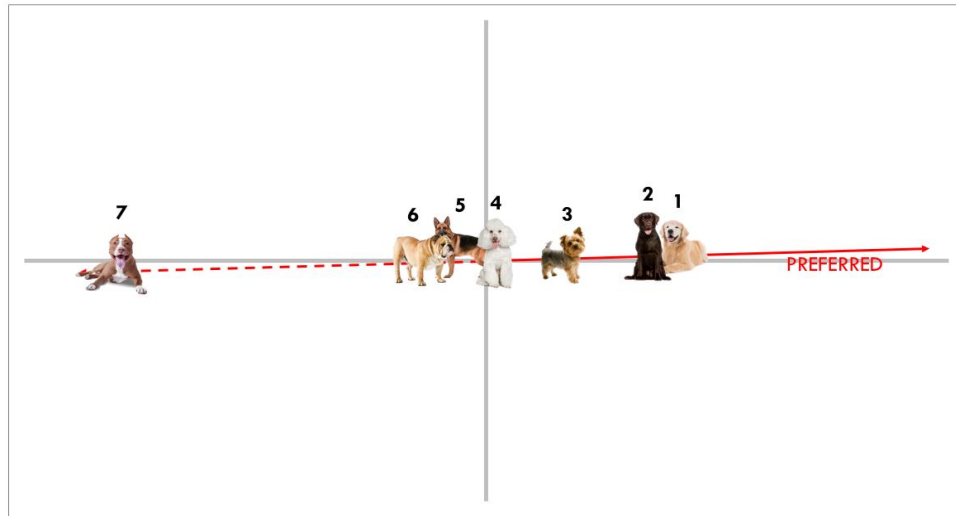
#### A. WITH KIDS PERCEPTION

### WITH KIDS PERCEPTION



People who have kids see pit bulls as aggressive and dangerous. The “Not Aggressive” vector is very close to the preference line meaning that a breed must be seen as not aggressive in order to be preferred. Pit bulls are the least preferred breed for people with kids since they see pit bulls as very aggressive. This makes them difficult to reposition. It would take years of long-term effort to convince this segment that pit bulls are actually not aggressive.

Figure 5

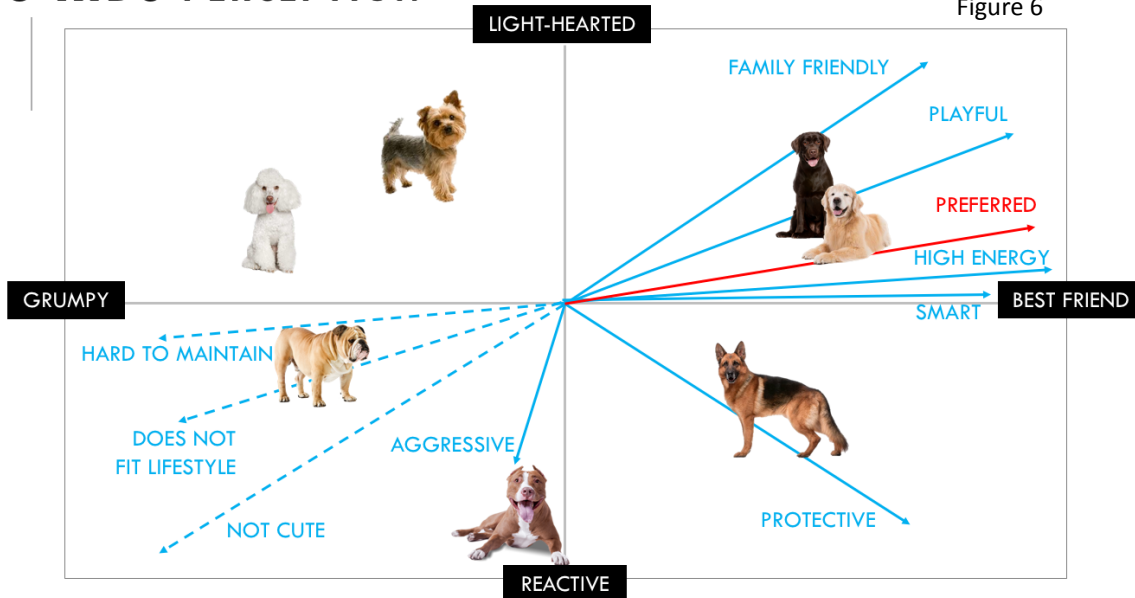


As seen in Figure 5 above, the most preferred breed is Golden Retriever, followed closely by Labrador Retrievers and then Yorkshire Terriers. Pit Bulls have a very large gap separating themselves from the sixth preferred breed, Bulldogs. It would be difficult to surpass any of these breeds since there is such a large distance between pit bulls and the rest of them.

## B. NO KIDS PERCEPTION

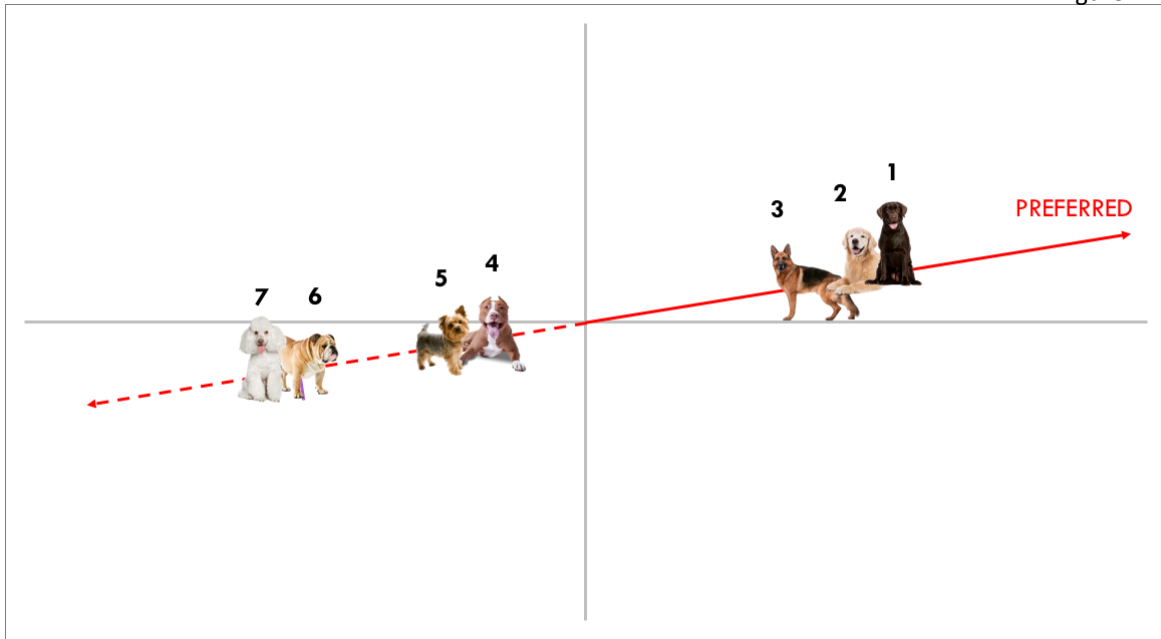
### NO KIDS PERCEPTION

Figure 6



Pit bulls are seen as aggressive and not very friendly to people who do not have kids. An important observation here, however is that being “Aggressive” is not correlated with Preference. The vectors run almost perpendicular. Therefore, for people who do not have kids, it doesn’t matter if the dog breed is perceived as aggressive or not.

Figure 7



Similar to the segment who has kids, people without kids prefer Labrador Retrievers and Golden Retrievers the most. Pit bulls are seen as the fourth preferred breed because they are viewed as more friendly, playful, high energy, and smarter than the Yorkie, Bulldog, and Poodle. However, they are still on the negative side of the preference line as indicated with the dashed red line. Therefore, while this segment has a more positive view of pit bulls than people who have kids, there is still room for improvement.

#### IV. **RECOMMENDATIONS: WHO, WHAT, & HOW**

A series of recommendations was developed using the surveys and perceptual maps as a platform. The goals of the recommendations are for pit bulls to be discriminated against less, adopted more, and face a better chance of life.

The three facets of the recommendations are all intertwined and rely upon each other to have the full effect. They deal with who to target, what the message should be, and how to communicate that message to that target. A summary of the recommendations can be found below in Figure 8.

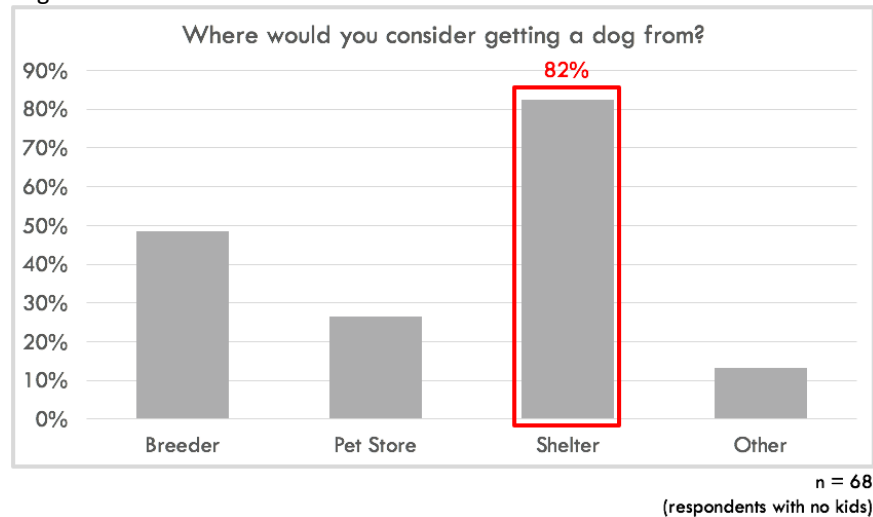


##### A. **WHO: PEOPLE WITHOUT KIDS**

Targeting people who don't have kids provides a better fit and attractiveness for pit bulls. This target market has a better perception of pit bulls than people who have kids, as made visible through the perceptual maps. Additionally, being that aggression does not matter to people who don't have kids, an easier reposition can occur since the communication could deal with more positive features and attributes. This segment is growing as more Millennials are choosing pets over kids (Bhattarai, 2016). It is reported that three-fourths of Americans in their thirties own a

dog (Bhattarai, 2016). Lastly, it was found that 82% of this target market would consider getting a dog from shelters, as seen in Figure 9. Being that there are so many pit bull-type dogs at shelters, this information further strengthens the fit of this segment.

Figure 9

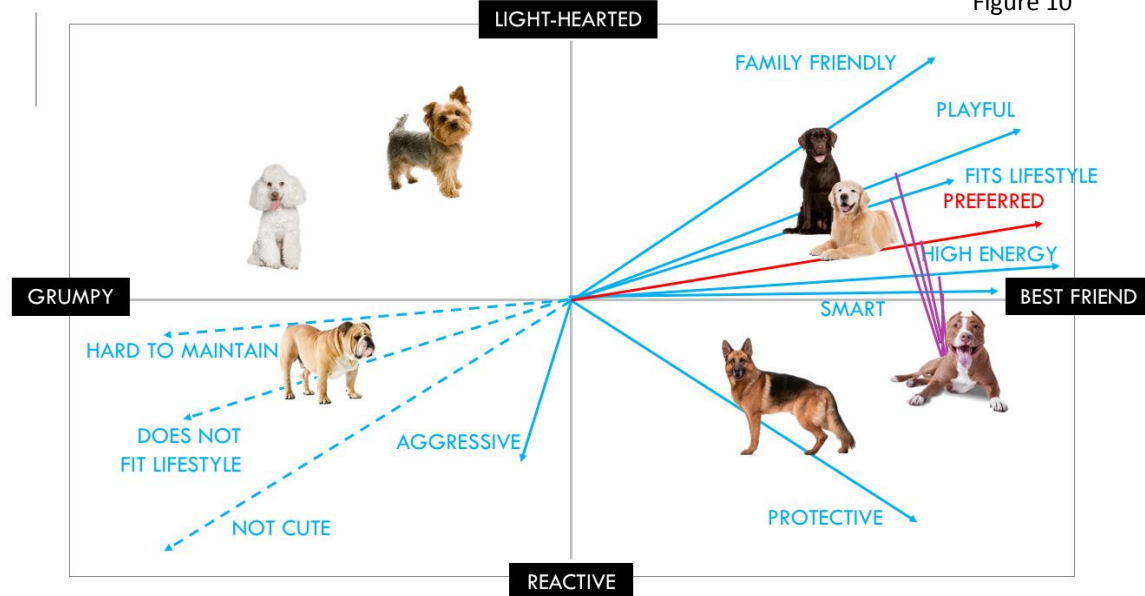


## B. WHAT: SMART & FUN TO BE AROUND

The correct message must be sent to people without kids in order to be effective. It is recommended to position pit bulls as smart and fun to be around. The target market currently sees them as aggressive and not very friendly, leading them to be only the fourth preferred breed. After the reposition, they will be the most preferred breed.

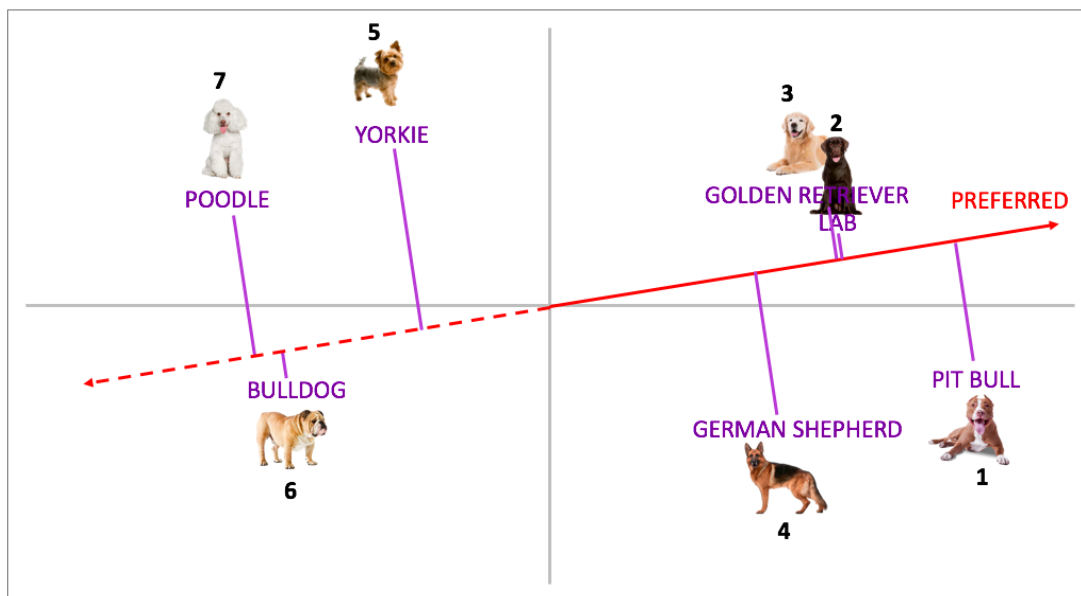
Attributes that will help the reposition include: Smart, High Energy, Fits Lifestyle, and Playful. These attributes are the closest to the preference line and are also referred to as primary attributes. They move the pit bull to the right and slightly upward to change the perception to smart and fun to be around. Moving pit bulls to this spot on the perceptual map is also good because it is not too close to other breeds. Therefore, people won't perceive them to be overly similar to the other breeds. Pit bulls will be differentiated. Further, it does not require a move that is unrealistic or too large to conquer. The new position on the perceptual map is seen in Figure 10. More details on choosing the position can be found in Appendix B.

## NO KIDS PERCEPTION



Repositioning pit bulls to be smart and fun to be around will improve their position on the preference line as seen in Figure 11 below. They will now be the most preferred breed for people who don't have kids.

Figure 11



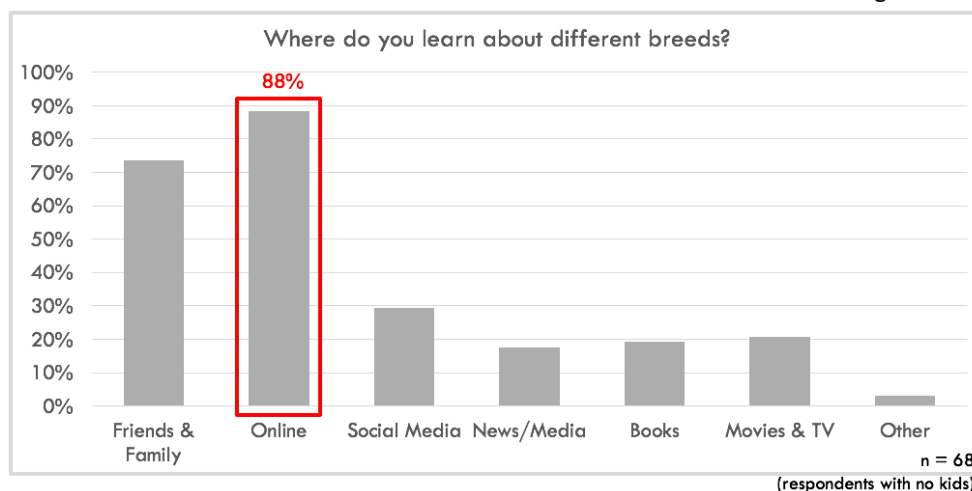
### C. HOW: ONLINE BLOG & IN-SHELTER TAGS

Both an online blog and tags on cages in the shelter provide effective ways to communicate to the target market that pit bulls are smart and fun to be around. While the blog will be key during the breed research process, the in-shelter tactic will be important when adopters are at the shelter deciding what dog to take out to play with and ultimately who to take home.

#### *Blog: My Rescue Dog Unleashed*

It was found that 88% of people in the target market learn about different breeds online (Figure 11). Therefore, the internet provides a useful vehicle to reach the target audience and communicate the message that pit bulls are smart and fun to be around.

Figure 11



A blog called *My Rescue Dog Unleashed* could be developed. The blog will be run by shelters and will feature stories of adopters and their lives with their furry friend. While the blog is not pit bull specific, it will have a high presence of pit bulls since they make up such a large portion of shelter dogs. Shelter staff can reach out to past adopters and see if they would like to write a short blog post and share pictures about life with their dog. All of the posts can be managed by



the shelter and constant additions can be made to the blog. Through stories and images, the target market will hear from people like them. It would become evident that people from very different lifestyles have pit bulls. Additionally, the target will see that pit bull breeds can be smart, high energy, and playful—ultimately fun to be around. Below is a three-frame logo for the blog. The logo would be made into a GIF when used digitally. The logo once again reinforces the different personalities of pit bull breeds and has a fun, light-hearted quality to it.



Having the blog is not enough. The target market has to actually read it. It is recommended to practice search engine optimization and use social media to share posts about the blog in order to increase traffic to the site. These are two effective and free marketing tools that are great for nonprofits like shelters.

Search engine optimization (SEO) is important because it increases a result ranking on the search engine. The higher up a result is, the more traffic it will receive (Stanko et al., 2016). There are three simple ways that this blog could be optimized for search engines.

1. *Links from shelters:* When recognized websites link to other websites, it tells Google that the site is legitimate (Stanko et al., 2016). Shelters and rescues can link to the blog from their own websites, which would add legitimacy and increase the rank of the blog.
2. *Unique content:* Having unique content helps to bring a search result toward the top. This should be easy to do since the blogs will be written in the adopters' own words. The website will be constantly updated as more stories and entries get added on.

3. *Relevant keywords:* Keywords form the backbone of SEO. They state the focus of a particular page on a website. When people go to a search engine and type in a particular query, sites optimized for that keyword have a better chance of showing up at the top. The search results for pit bull-related topics in Chicago are seen below. The numbers represent the average monthly searches on Google from May 2017 to May 2018 as recorded by Google AdWords.

Figure 12

Keyword	↓ Avg. monthly searches	Competition
pitbull	8,100 	Low
dog breeds	4,400 	Low
pitbull dog	1,600 	Low
dog shelter	1,000 	Low
rescue dogs	720 	Low
pitbull breeds	260 	Low

“Pitbull” can be optimized for on a special page of the blog related to pit bulls specifically. This page can feature pit bulls and pit bull-mixes. When someone searches “pit bull” on Google, *My Rescue Dog Unleashed* will have a better chance of coming up toward the top if the search result uses “pit bull” in the title tag, in the URL, and in the description. This is shown below in Figure 13.

Figure 13

**Pit Bull Breeds | My Rescue Dog Unleashed - A Collection of Furrytails**  
[myrescuedogunleashed.com/pit-bulls](http://myrescuedogunleashed.com/pit-bulls)  
 Pit bulls are amongst the best companions. Read about how these dogs transformed their owners' lives with their big smiles, silly behavior, and love for cuddling

The user will be taken to a landing page that deals specifically with pit bull breed stories.

This shows both Google and the user that the page landed on is indeed relevant to the

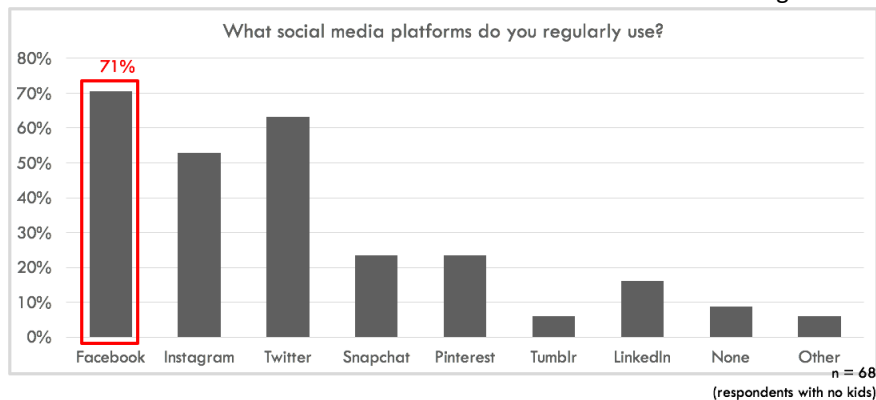
search result “pit bull”. An example of the landing page is seen in Figure 14. Notice that “pit bull” is listed at the top of the page and sprinkled throughout when necessary.

Figure 14



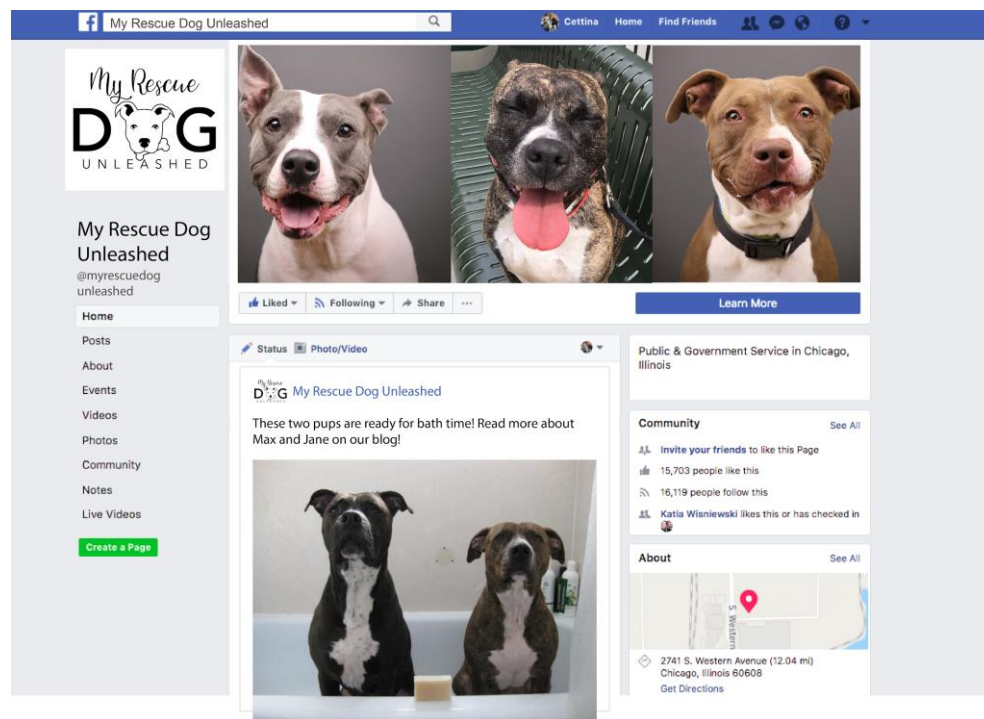
Social media can also drive traffic to the blog. Having a Facebook page for *My Rescue Dog Unleashed* would be a great way to share blog stories and vignettes. Facebook is the best social media platform to use since 71% of the target market indicated that they use Facebook regularly as shown in Figure 15. This was more than any other social media platform. In addition to the shelters sharing blogs on Facebook, previous adopters who are writing the blogs can share their stories on their personal pages, generating additional buzz and traffic.

Figure 15



A sample of the Facebook page is seen below.

Figure 16



### *Tags on Cages in the Shelter*

Once the potential adopters are in the shelter, they are at a different point of the adoption cycle. At this stage, they already did their research and have already developed knowledge of different breeds. Something must be done to combat any perceptions people in the target market might have regarding pit bulls being aggressive and not fun to be with.

A practical way to accomplish this is through tags put on the cages in the shelter. The tags would deal with the specific dog in the cage rather than looking at the breed. The tags can indicate whether the dogs are high energy, smart, and playful. The different symbols determine each attribute, and these are all attributes that the target market desires the most. The shelter can develop quantitative and qualitative measurements to determine how a dog can qualify for each

tag. A great feature of the tags is that they are easy to take on and off and are therefore cost effective. Examples of the tags can be seen below.

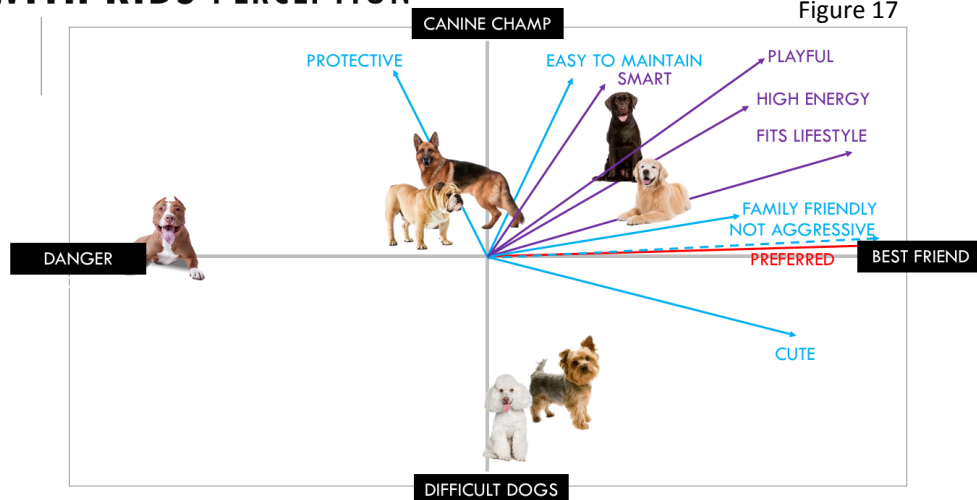


The primary goal of the tags on the cages would be to get a potential adopter to take out a pit bull dog even when they may have walked in with a more negative perception.

## V. FURTHER APPLICATION

Targeting people who don't have kids provides a more immediate solution to the problem. Dogs in the shelters need homes now. However, there is potential to tap into the segment of people who have kids. Despite being tailored for people who don't have kids, focusing on making pit bulls appear to be smart, playful, high energy, and fit lifestyle will move pit bulls along the preference line for people with kids also. These four attributes are indicated in purple in Figure 17 below. They all move toward the positive side of the preference line.

### WITH KIDS PERCEPTION



Although making pit bulls smart and fun to be around doesn't hurt their image for this segment, this segment requires a different message in order to be strongly influenced. For people with kids, pit bulls must be a breed that is family friendly and not aggressive above all else. Different tactics are required.

One great example of a way to change the perception of this segment is with children's books featuring a pit bull lead character and a plush stuffed animal to go along. Furever Home Friends does exactly that. The business was started by DePaul student Savy Leiser as a way to educate kids on shelter dogs. One of Leiser's books called *Smile, Chewie!* features a pit bull dog as the lead character. Chewie has scars on his face from being abused by someone with a prejudice against pit bulls (Leiser, 2017). Books like Leiser's will help propel the negative perception of pit bulls into the opposite direction and can get more families to adopt them as the dialogue is opened.

## **Conclusion**

The research presented is only a piece of the effort needed to give pit bulls a better chance at life. Throughout history, their strength was often misused, adding to the negative perception of these breeds. This has resulted in high rates of euthanasia and breed specific legislation. By getting people without kids to see that pit bulls are both smart and fun to be around through the use of an online blog and tags in shelter, pit bulls become one step closer to a more positive life. Targeting people without kids provides a quick solution to save pit bulls' lives right away. Additionally, targeting people with kids will provide a sustainable solution. In order to effectively change their perception, more research could be done to understand exactly where their aggressive perception of pit bulls stems from. With this knowledge, a stronger campaign can be developed

The research of this thesis project will be provided to surrounding Chicagoland shelters in hopes that some of it will be implemented. Throughout the study, a minimal budget was kept in mind in order to increase its practicality. Being able to use my knowledge of marketing to better the lives of such loving creatures has been a rewarding process. I look forward to being of any assistance during the implementation.

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## Appendix

A. The Survey: The following survey was administered to 119 Americans, ages 21+ that have either owned a dog in the past, currently own a dog, or will own one in the future.

➤ Survey link: [http://depaul.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_cveCWETxoBCoDmR](http://depaul.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cveCWETxoBCoDmR)



### Default Question Block

The following survey was created by a student of the Honors Program at *DePaul University*.  
The purpose of this survey is to understand how you feel about different dog breeds.

Please answer the questions honestly and to the best of your ability.

This survey should take about 10 minutes. Please ensure that you can complete the survey in one sitting as you will not be allowed to re-enter the survey again. Thank you in advance for your participation and we appreciate your time greatly!

### Block 1

Are you 21 years or older?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Do you live in the United States of America?

- ☐ Yes  
☐ No

Which of the following best describes you? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ I currently own a dog  
☐ I used to own a dog  
☐ I will own a dog in the future  
☐ I never owned a dog and never will

What size dog have you owned or do you plan on owning? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ Small breed  
☐ Medium breed  
☐ Large breed  
☐ Any size breed

Please answer the questions below regarding dogs and dog breeds.

Where would you consider getting a dog from? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ Professional Breeder
- ☐ Pet Store
- ☐ Animal Shelter
- ☐ Other (please specify)

What are the most importance reasons for getting a dog? Please drag and drop the responses in order of importance (1 being most important and 5 being least important).

- Companionship

- Protection

- For Fun

- To Do a Job (Hunt, Rescue, Guide etc)

- Other (please specify)

Where do you learn about different dog breeds? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ Friends and Family
- ☐ Online
- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ The News / Media
- ☐ Books
- ☐ Movies and TV Shows
- ☐ Other (please specify)

Which of the following breeds are you familiar with? (Choose all that apply)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Beagle           | <input type="checkbox"/> Labrador Retriever         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> German Shepherd  | <input type="checkbox"/> Pit Bull                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Golden Retriever | <input type="checkbox"/> Poodle                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Great Dane       | <input type="checkbox"/> Rottweiler                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Husky            | <input type="checkbox"/> Yorkshire Terrier (Yorkie) |

How much influence does a dog's breed have on your decision to get the dog?

None at All

☐

Some Amount

☐

Neutral

☐

A Little Bit

☐

A Large Amount

☐

If you are not familiar with a certain breed, please choose the **"not familiar with this breed"** option.

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

[illegible][illegible][illegible][illegible]

This dog breed *is easy to maintain*.

	1 Very Strongly Disagree	2 Strongly Disagree	3 Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree	7 Very Strongly Agree	Not familiar with this breed.
Bulldog	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
German Shepherd	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Golden Retriever	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Labrador Retriever (Lab)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pit Bull	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poodle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Yorkshire Terrier (Yorkie)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

This dog breed *is the dog breed I prefer*.

	1 Very Strongly Disagree	2 Strongly Disagree	3 Disagree	4 Neutral	5 Agree	6 Strongly Agree	7 Very Strongly Agree	Not familiar with this breed.
Bulldog	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
German Shepherd	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Golden Retriever	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Labrador Retriever (Lab)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Pit Bull	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Poodle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Yorkshire Terrier (Yorkie)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The following questions ask a little bit about you.

What type of lifestyle do you lead? (Choose all that apply)

- |                                      |  |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Adventurous | <input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Busy        | <input type="checkbox"/> Structured                                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Relaxed     | <input type="checkbox"/> Stressful                                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Active      | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify) <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Healthy     |  |

Which of the following activities do you partake in during your free time? (Choose all that apply)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read books and magazines | <input type="checkbox"/> Fish  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Watch TV                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Farm  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go to the movie theatre  | <input type="checkbox"/> Workout                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go out with friends      | <input type="checkbox"/> Shop  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go out to eat            | <input type="checkbox"/> Go to music festivals or concerts           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Volunteer                | <input type="checkbox"/> Draw or Paint                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Go to sporting events    | <input type="checkbox"/> Cook or Bake                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hunt                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (Please specify) <input type="text"/> |

What types of social media do you regularly use? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ Facebook
- ☐ Instagram
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Pinterest

- ☐ Tumblr
- ☐ LinkedIn
- ☐ I do not use social media
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

Where do you usually get your news from? (Choose all that apply)

- ☐ TV News Stations
- ☐ Radio
- ☐ Online News Websites
- ☐ The Newspaper
- ☐ Social Media
- ☐ Family and Friends
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

What's your age?

- ☐ 21-30
- ☐ 31-40
- ☐ 41-50
- ☐ 51+

Please indicate your ethnicity

- ☐ Asian
- ☐ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White (having origins in original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa)
- ☐ Black/African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Multiracial
- ☐ Prefer not to answer
- ☐ Other (Please specify)



What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- ☐ Less than a high school degree
- ☐ High school degree or equivalent
- ☐ Some college but no degree
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Graduate degree
- ☐ Doctorate degree

Do any children live in your household?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

What age are the children in your household? (Choose all that apply)

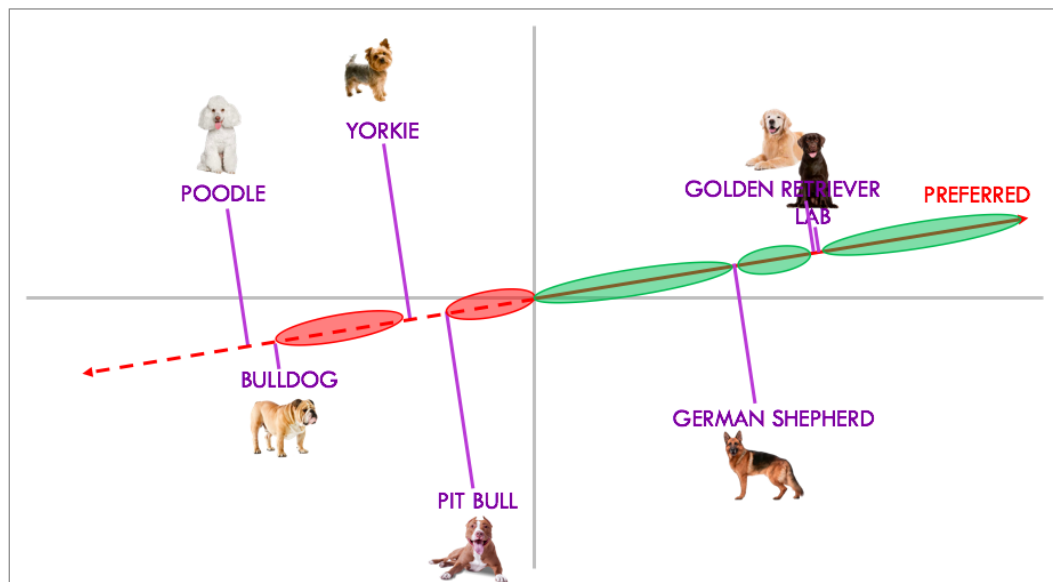
- ☐ 0 - 1 year old
- ☐ 2 - 5 years old
- ☐ 6 - 10 years old
- ☐ 11-14 years old
- ☐ 15-17 years old
- ☐ 18+ years old

What best describes your current home?

- ☐ Apartment
- ☐ Condo
- ☐ House
- ☐ Town House
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

- B. Repositioning: In order to increase the pit bull's position on the preference line for people who do not have kids, gaps were created in between breeds on the preference line. From there, spaces were extended to form "good spaces" as seen in green. Pit bulls were repositioned in the indicated space because it was a fairly close distance, far enough from competition, and increased the position on the preference line.

## NO KIDS PERCEPTION



## NO KIDS PERCEPTION

