

# How Adoptable is that Doggie?

## The Effects of Manipulation of Photographs on the Perceptions of Shelter Dogs

### Background

According to the ASPCA, nearly one million healthy and adoptable dogs are euthanized each year in the United States. Pit bulls and lookalike breeds are the most common types of dogs found in shelters. Just as people form impressions of other people based on their appearance in photographs, people likely form impressions of dogs based on their appearance in photographs. While the internet is full of opinions on how best to photograph shelter dogs, these beliefs are largely untested. Three experiments investigated the effects of various aspects of photos on perceptions of shelter dog attractiveness.

### Method

In Experiment 1, 120 participants were randomly assigned to view one of four photos of the same dog in the same position: alone, with a boy, a man, or both the boy and man. Participants then rated the dog's attractiveness using a 5-item scale used in previous studies. Experiment 2 ( $N = 215$ ) also randomly assigned one of four photos to be viewed by participants, however, the photos were either of a dog with her head tilted and mouth closed, a dog with her head straight and mouth closed, a dog with both her head tilted and her mouth open, and a dog with no head tilt and her mouth open. The rest of the method including the attractiveness scale remained the same as in the first experiment. Experiment 3 used the same procedure to show 172 participants the same dog on one of three backgrounds (outside on grass, inside on a neutral background, or inside in a cage) and the photo showed either the whole dog or was zoomed in on the dog's face.

### Results

Statistical analyses using ANOVAs demonstrated that the presence of people in photos did not have a significant effect on perceptions of the dog in the first experiment. Experiment 2's results also revealed no significant difference between ratings of a dog based on head tilt or mouth position. Results for Experiment 3, however, showed that background significantly affected perceptions ( $p < .05$ ) but zoom did not; the dog photographed in the cage was rated least attractive while the dog photographed inside on a neutral background was rated most attractive.

### Discussion

While the three experiments suggest shelters should avoid photographing dogs in cages, more research is needed to identify additional ways to present shelter dogs that will increase adoption rates. A potential worthwhile area for further research is to look at the effects of other aspects of online dog bios, including breed label, dog name, and personality descriptions.

Word Count: 417