

Problem

- About half of the dogs in shelters, nearly 700,000, are euthanized each year in the United States (ASPCA).
- Approximately 80% of cats and dogs euthanized in shelters each year are healthy and adoptable pets (Humane Society).
- The first impression of a dog's looks have a big effect on its potential adopters (Cattet, 2014).
- While anecdotal evidence suggests that manipulating certain aspects of online photos of dogs may have an effect on the speed of dog adoption, little empirical research has been conducted.
- The purpose of these experiments was to look at the effect of shelter dogs' photographs on potential adopters.

Literature Review

- Photographing a pit bull with an elderly woman or a male child increased the dog's perceived friendliness, intelligence, and adoptability and decreased the dog's perceived aggressiveness and difficulty to train compared to the dog photographed by itself (Gunter, Barber, & Wynne, 2016).
- Fay (2006) suggests that anything that shows an animal's personality, such as a head tilt could make it more appealing. She cites a head tilt as an example.
- Some people suggest photographing dogs on neutral backgrounds (Fay, 2006), while others say to photograph dogs on unusual backgrounds or outside (Fromm).
- Although it makes sense that dogs photographed in cages would be less likely be adopted than dogs photographed on other backgrounds, Lampe and Witte (2015) did not find support for this idea.
- Multiple sources agree that dogs should be photographed at eye level (Fay, 2006; Palmer), and a Petfinder website advises taking the photos from close up and having the dog fill the frame.



Figure 1. Photos from the Gunter et al. (2016) study

Hypotheses

Experiment 1

Compared to a dog photographed with a boy, a dog photographed with a man or alone will be rated as less attractive.

Experiment 2

- Compared to a dog in a photograph whose head is tilted a dog who lacks this sign of personality will be rated less attractive.
- Compared to a dog in a photograph whose tongue is visible, a dog who lacks this sign of personality will be rated less attractive.

Experiment 3

- Compared to a dog shown outside or a dog shown on a neutral background, a dog shown in a cage will be rated as less attractive.
- Compared to a dog shown in a close up of her face, a dog whose whole body is shown will be rated as less attractive.

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How Adoptable is that Doggie in the Photo?

The Effect of Photos on Perceptions of Shelter Dogs

Results and Discussion

Experiment 1

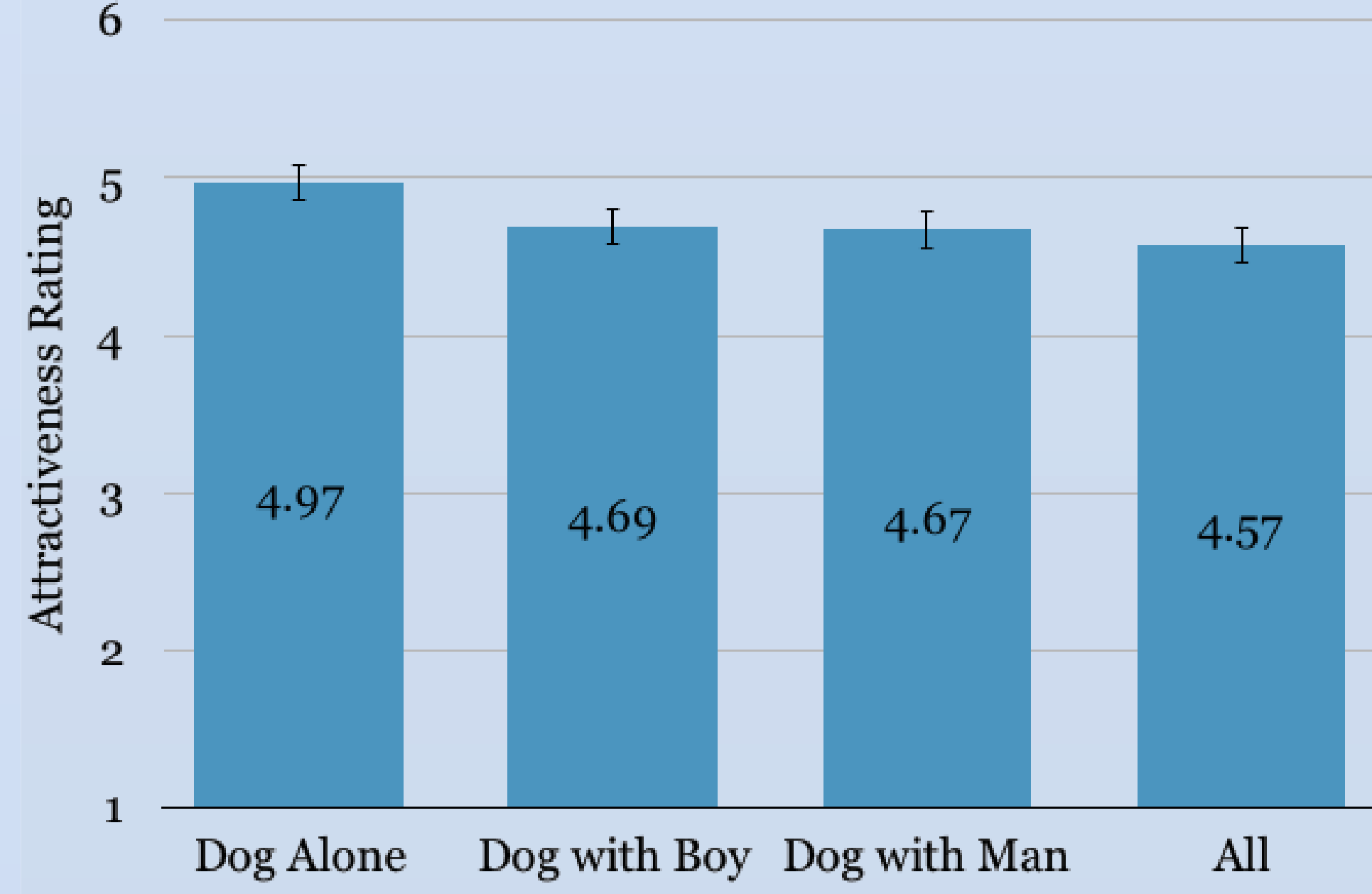


Figure 2. The Effect of Including People in Photos of a Pit Bull Look-Alike
Note: Error bars represent the +/- SE

Contrary to the hypothesis, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed that the effect of people in photos of shelter dogs was not significant.

- Previous research (Gunter et al., 2016) found that a dog was rated more attractive when photographed with a boy but less attractive when photographed with a "rough man."
- The effects may be idiosyncratic to the particular dog-person combination.

While people may associate a dog with a child with positive qualities, a dog sitting nicely alone may also evoke positive qualities.

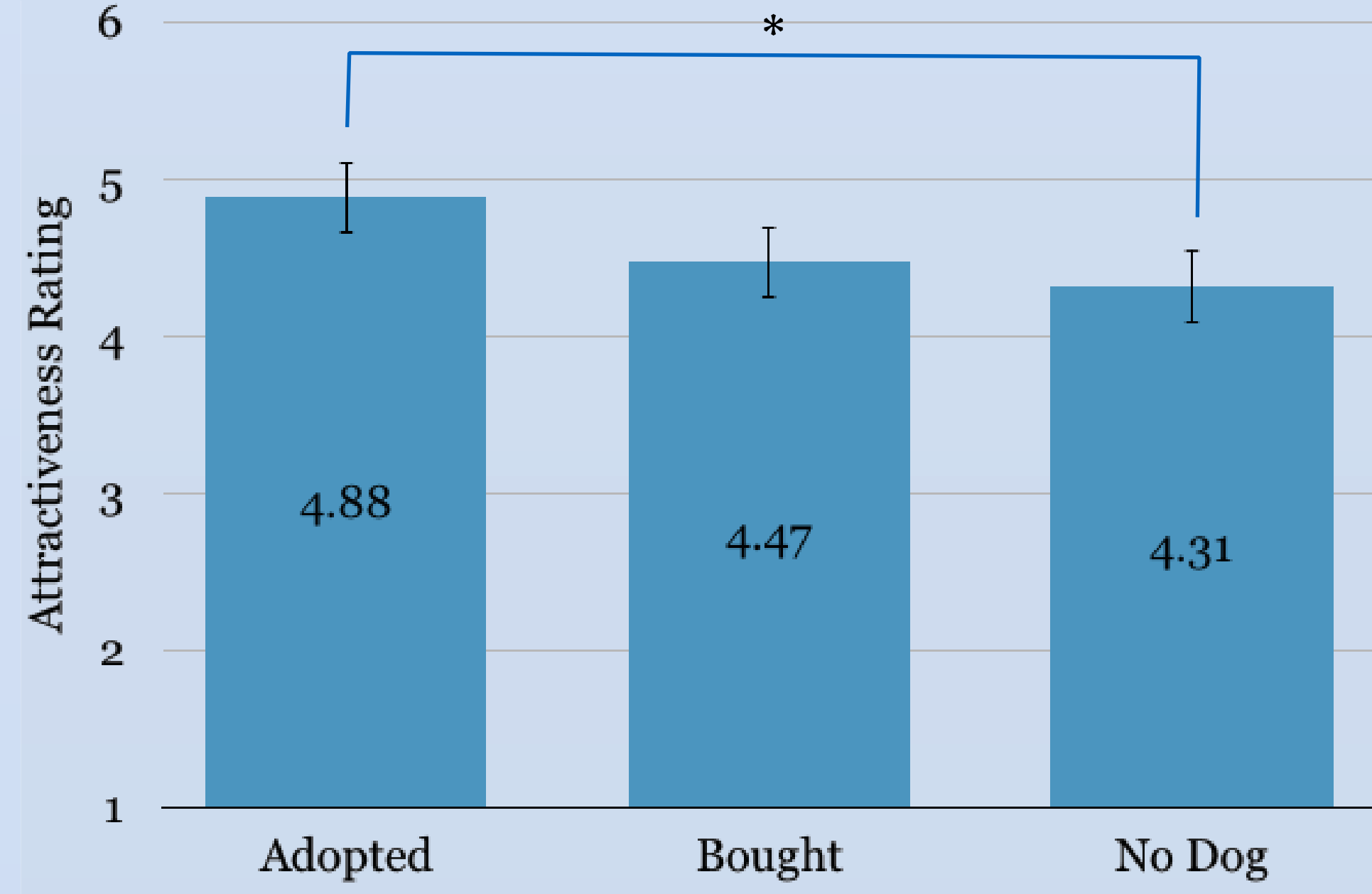


Figure 3. Differences in Attractiveness Ratings Based on Dog Ownership
Note: Error Bars represent the +/- SE

Additional analyses showed that participants who had adopted a dog in the past rated the dog as significantly more attractive than people in all other conditions.

- Past adopters may see the dog as more attractive because they empathize with shelter dogs.

- In Experiments 2 and 3, I added a question asking whether people were interested in adopting a dog in the next year.

Experiment 2

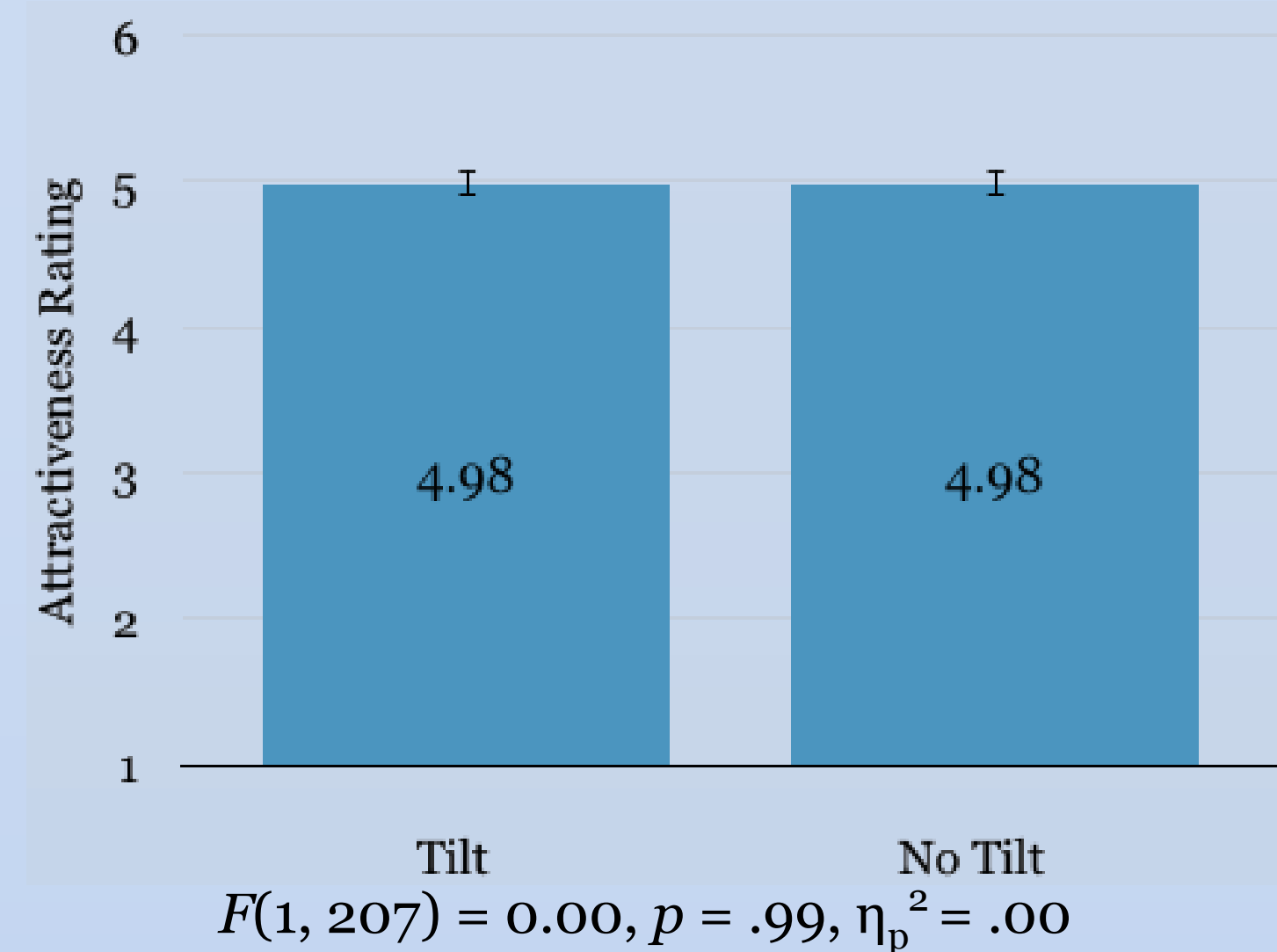


Figure 4. The Effect of Head Tilt on Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- 1 SE

Contrary to the hypothesis, an ANOVA showed that the effect of head tilt on perceptions of photos of shelter dogs was not significant.

- It was difficult to tilt the dog's head artificially without it looking unnatural; the difference may have been too subtle to have an effect.

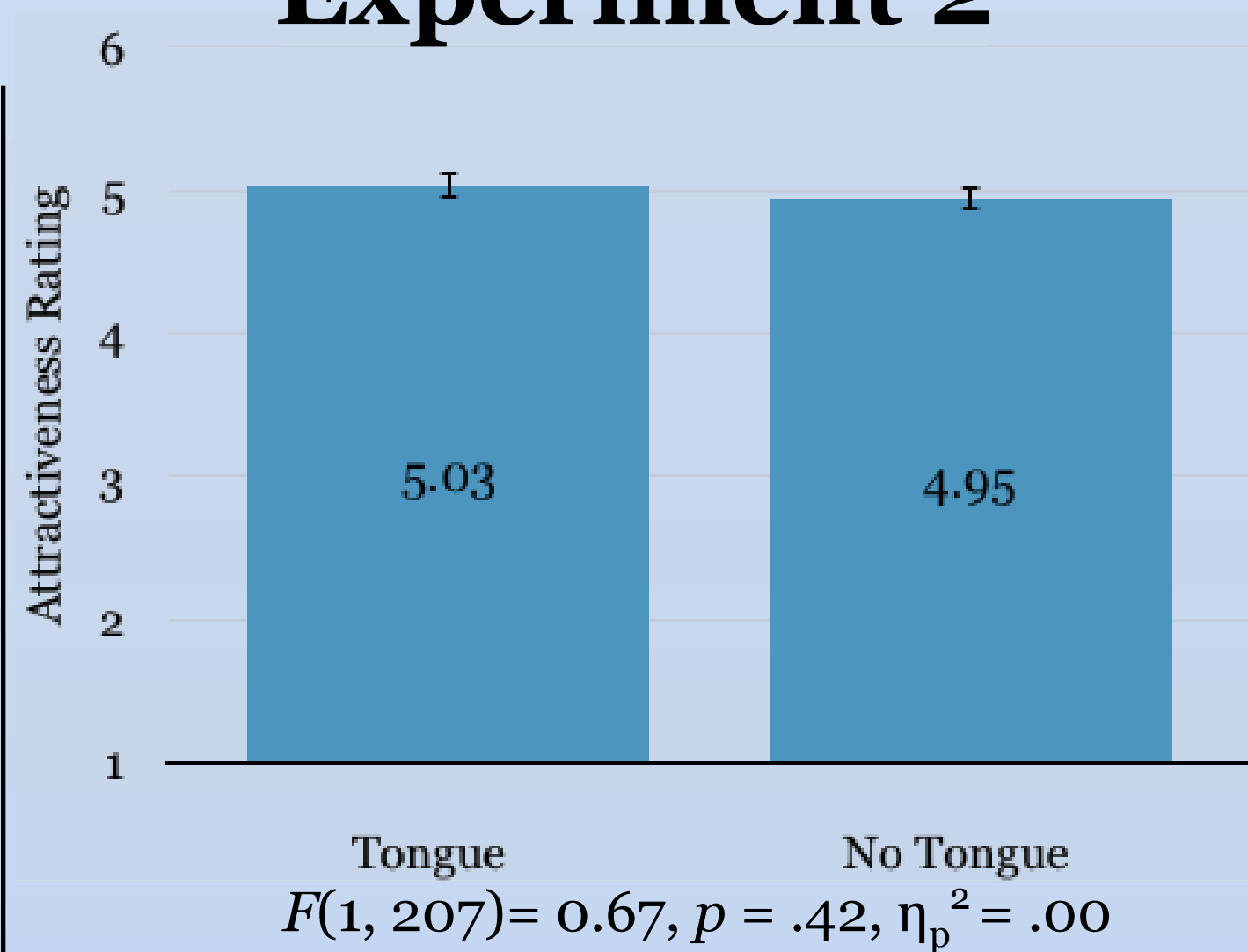


Figure 5. The Effect of Tongue Visibility on Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- 1 SE

An ANOVA refuted the hypothesis in showing that the effect of tongue visibility in photos of shelter dogs was not significant.

- While some people may find a dog whose tongue is showing cute, others may prefer a dog who keeps her tongue in.

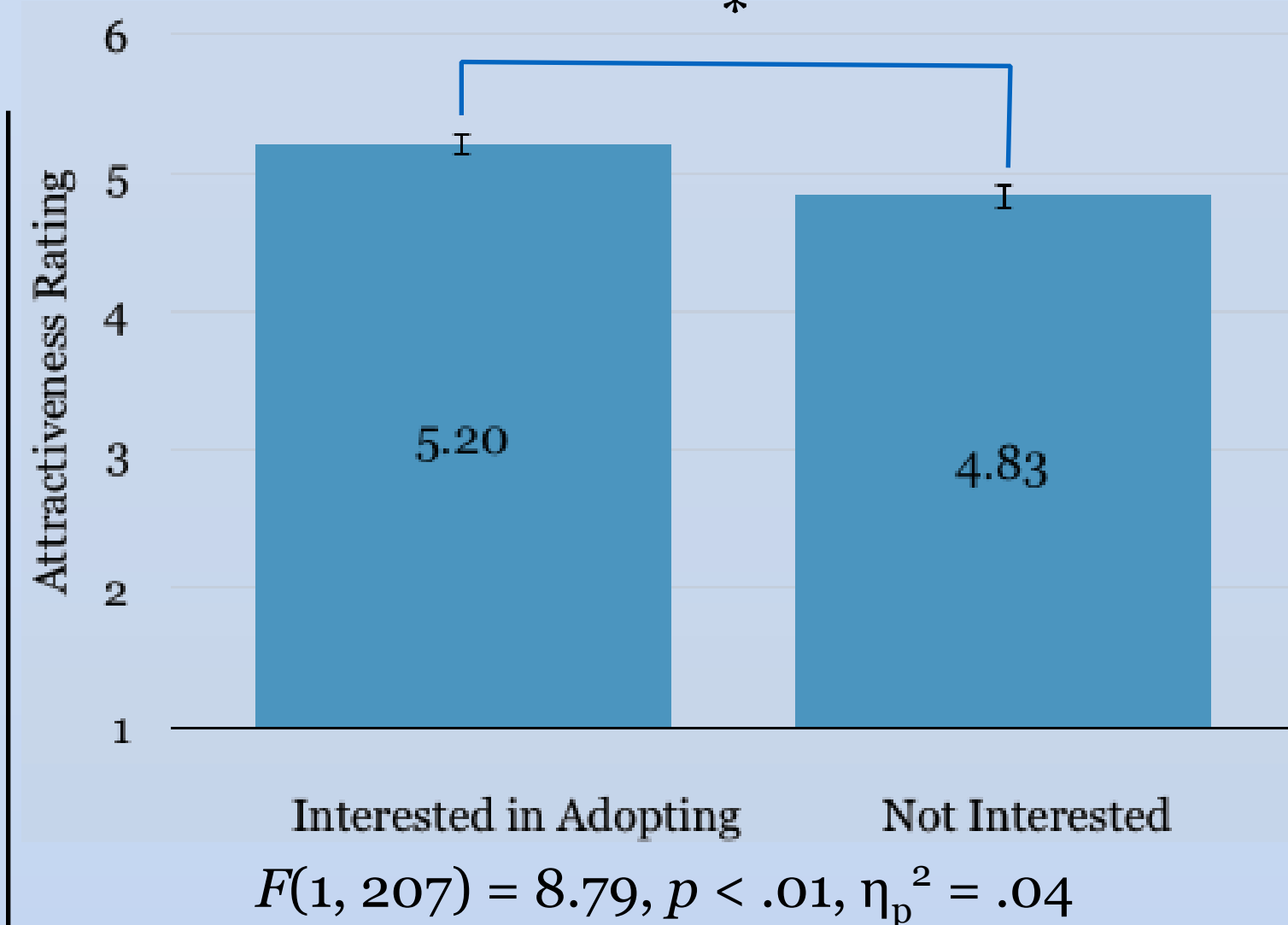


Figure 6. The Relationship between Interest in Adoption and Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- SE

The results of an ANOVA showed that people who were interested in adopting a dog rated the dog as significantly more attractive in all conditions.

- Potential adopters may have rated the dog as significantly more attractive because they care about shelter dogs more than someone who is not interested in adopting.

Experiment 3

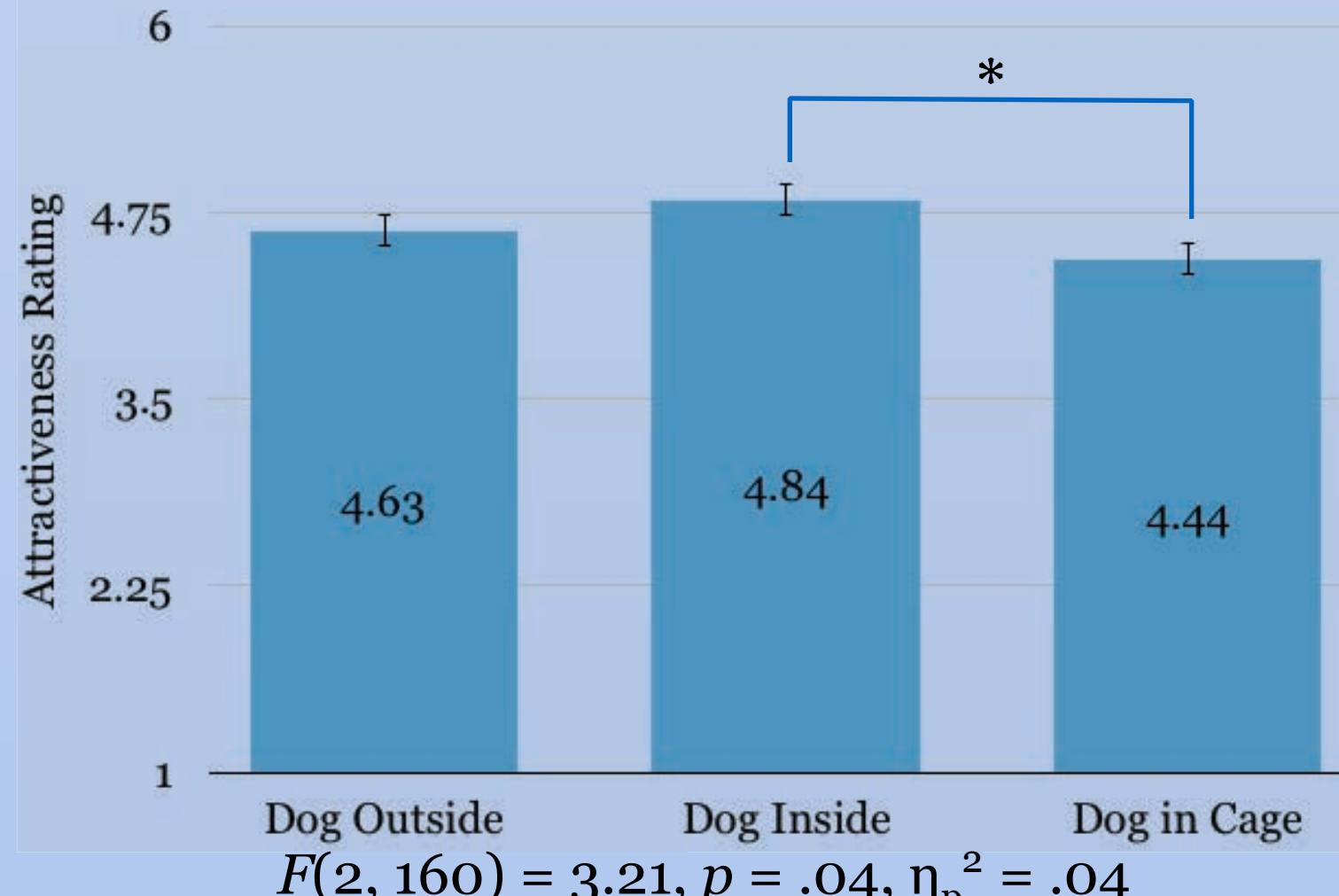


Figure 7. The Effect of Background on Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- 1 SE

The ANOVA demonstrated a significant effect of background on perceptions of shelter dogs.

- Tukey-Kramer post hoc tests showed that the plain, inside background led to significantly better ratings than the cage.
- The results were in line with some previous beliefs (Fay, 2006), however, others in the past had believed an outdoor background was best (Fromm).
- Participants' negative perceptions of dogs in cages could be from an association of a cage with a dog being aggressive or not happy.

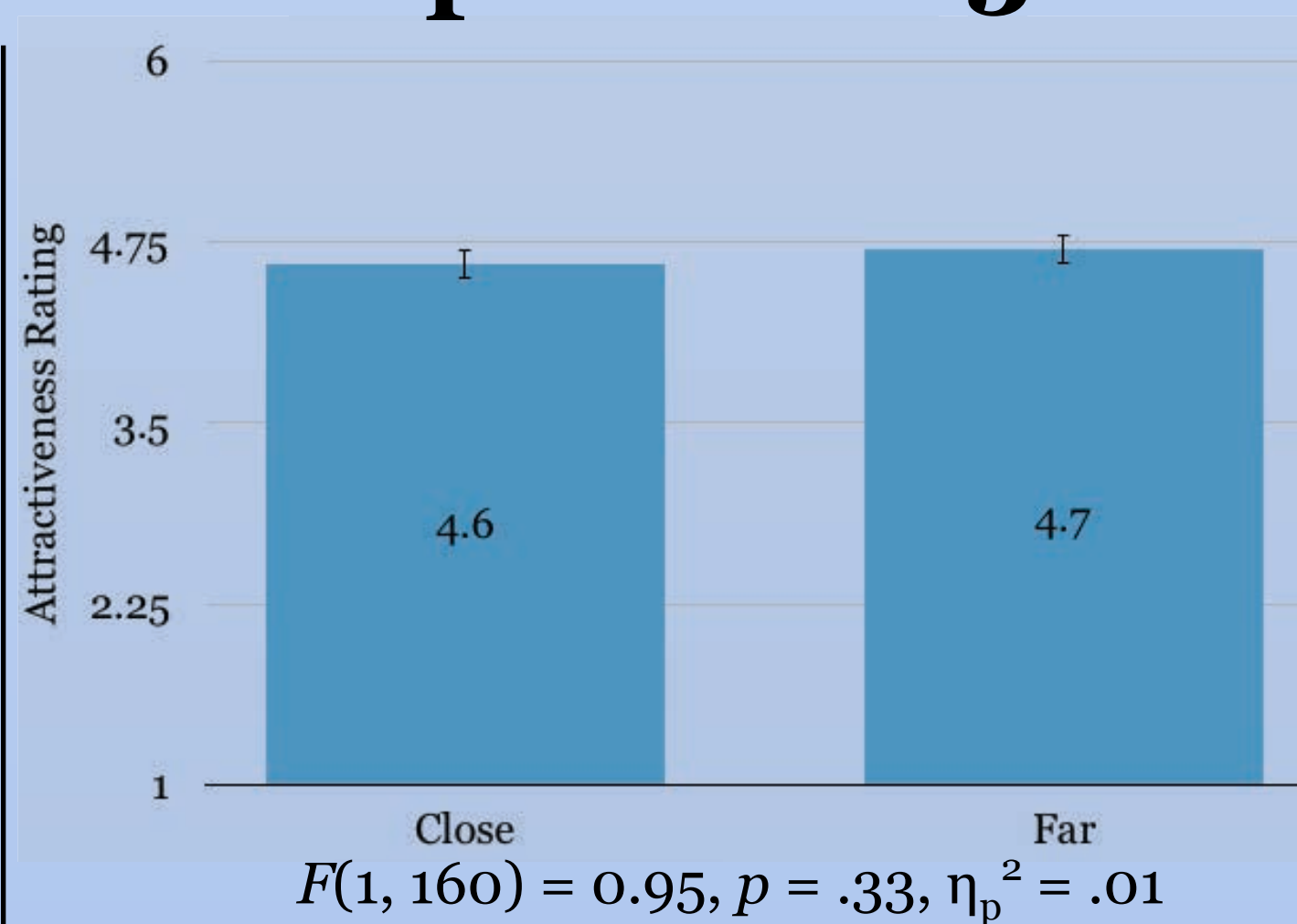


Figure 8. The Effect of Zoom on Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- 1 SE

Contrary to the hypotheses, an ANOVA showed that the effect of zoom in photos of shelter dogs was not significant.

- Photographers (Fay, 2006; Fromm) differed on the level of zoom that made shelter dogs look best in photographs.
- Further analysis showed trends in the data that suggest that people have different preferences - previous dog adopters preferred a zoomed in photo, while non-adopters preferred zoomed out

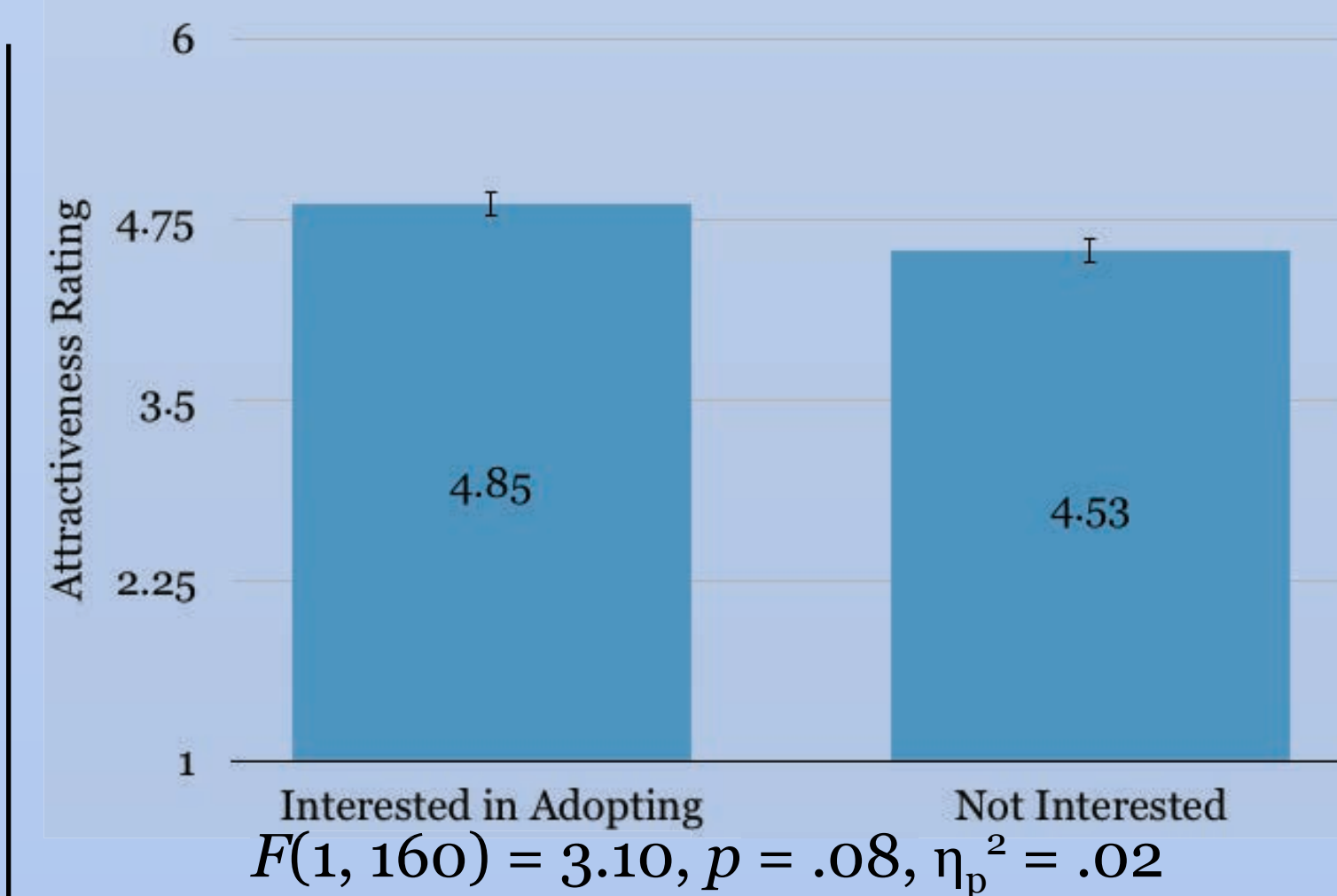


Figure 9. The Relationship between Interest in Adoption and Perceived Attractiveness
Note: Error bars represent +/- SE

Again, people who were interested in adopting a dog rated the dog as significantly more attractive across all conditions.

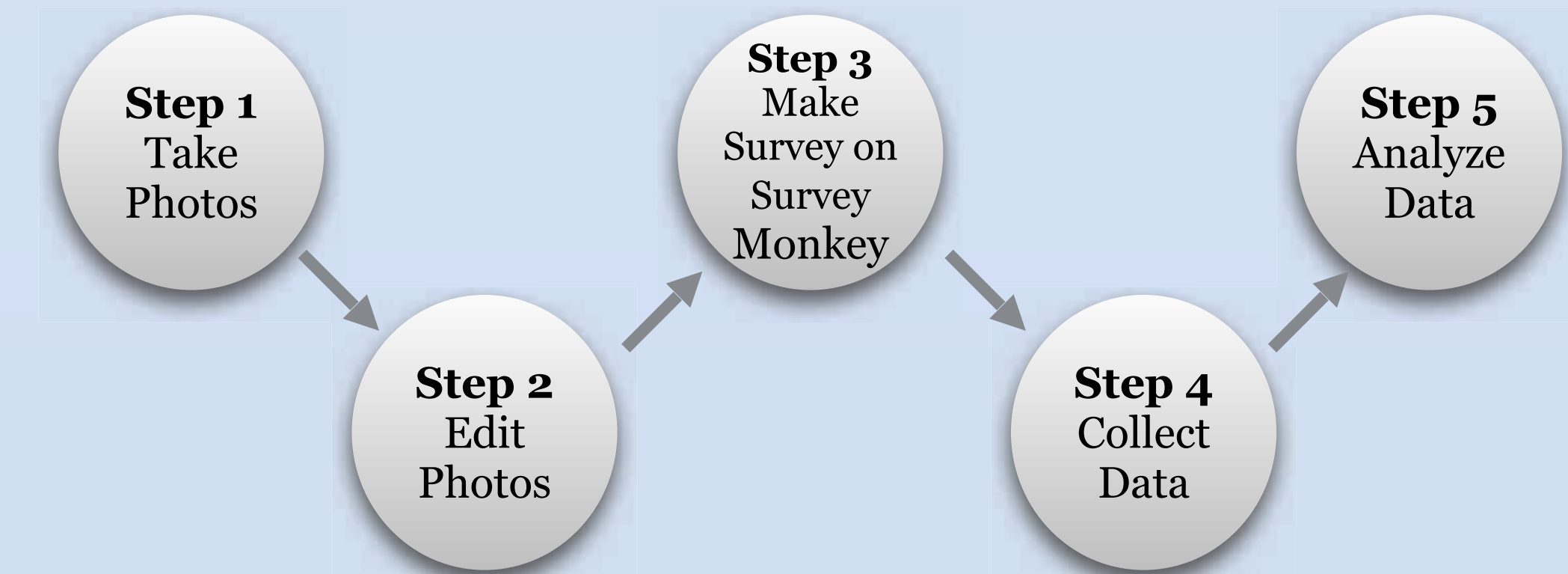
- These findings support those found in Experiment 2.
- Research on how best to portray shelter dogs should focus on people who express interest in adopting as their perceptions may be distinct from the general public's.

Conclusions

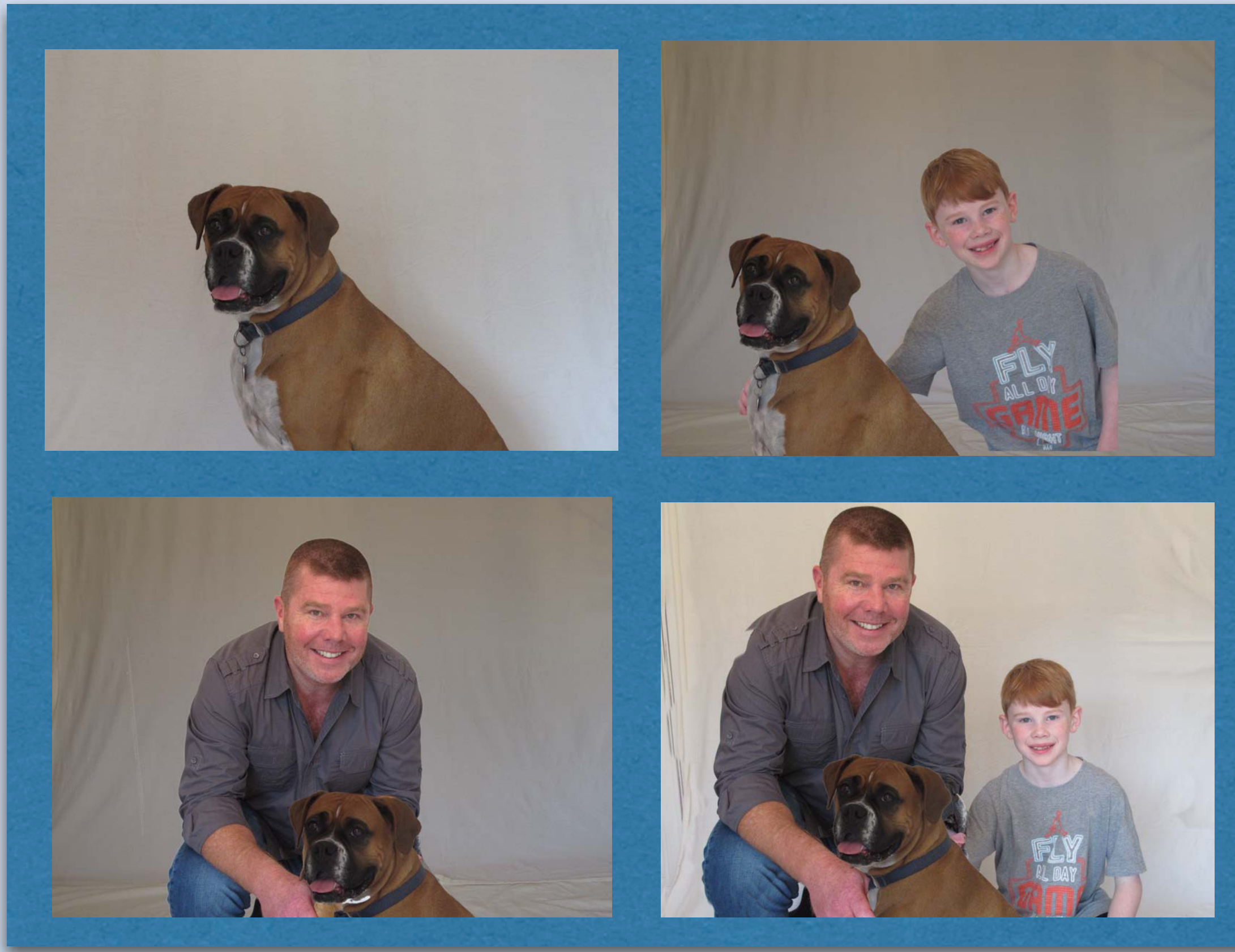
- Altering a dog's head position, tongue visibility, the degree of zoom, and the presence of people had no significant effect on perceptions of the dog.
- However, background did have a significant effect with a photo on a plain background being rated as more attractive than a photo in a cage, and an outside background rated in the middle.
- Ideally, the finding about background can be used to get dogs adopted faster and prevent the euthanasia of shelter dogs as a result.
- However, the main message of the research is that more research is necessary to validate the many online suggestions about how to portray shelter dogs in photographs.

Method

Procedure



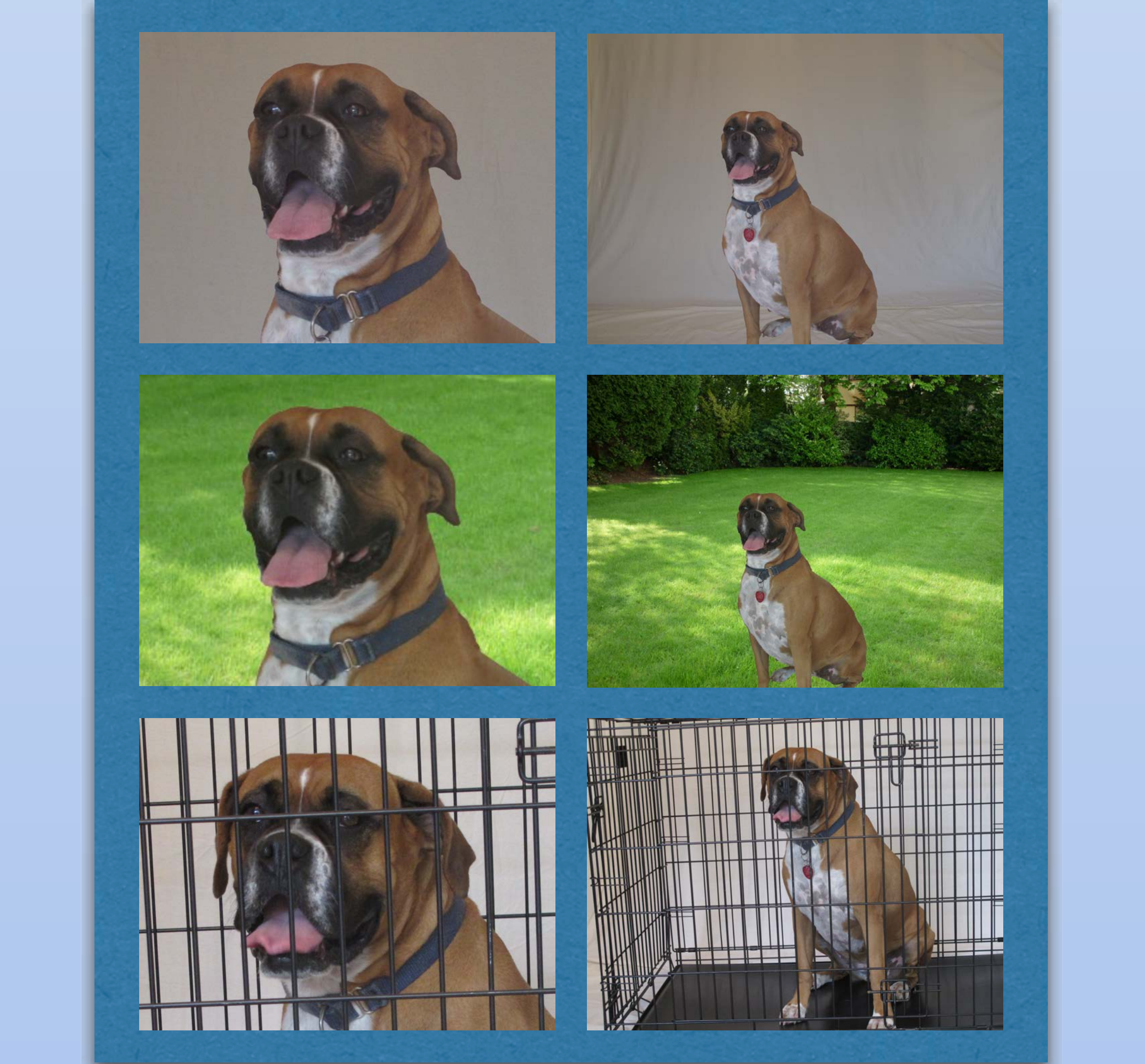
Experiment 1 Photos



Experiment 2 Photos



Experiment 3 Photos



Note: The photos used in Experiments 1-3 were taken by the researcher

Dog Attractiveness Scale (Gunter, 2016)

- This looks like an aggressive dog (reverse-scored)
- I would feel comfortable approaching this dog
- This dog looks smart
- This dog looks friendly to me
- If circumstances allowed, I would consider adopting this dog

Demographic Chart

		Experiment 1 (N=120)		Experiment 2 (N=215)		Experiment 3 (N=172)	
		Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent (%)	Number	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	56	47%	106	49%	69	40%
	Female	62	52%	109	51%	103	60%
	Other	2	2%	0	0%	0	0%
Race	White	89	74%	174	81%	141	82%
	Black or African-American	9	8%	12	6%	11	6%
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	0	0%	1	1%	0	0%
	Asian or Asian American	12	10%	17	8%	11	6%
	Hispanic	5	4%	8	4%	8	5%
	Multiracial	5	4%	1	1%	1	1%
	Currently Own a Dog	60	50%	112	52%	87	51%
Looking to Adopt	Yes	60	50%	103	48%	85	49%
	No	N/A	N/A	89	41%	60	35%