Exploring Best Practices in Constructing Dog Adoption Advertisements

Angela S. Kelling[1], Megan L. Wilson[2], Allison L. Martin[3],

Sarah Barker[3], and Suma Mallavarapu[3]

[1]Department of Psychology, University of Houston-Clear Lake

[2]Psychology Department, Georgia State University

[3]Department of Psychological Science, Kennesaw State University

Abstract

A primary goal of animal shelters is to adopt animals into permanent homes. Many potential adopters learn about adoptable animals via online advertisements. It remains unclear how to best format these advertisements to increase the likelihood of a successful adoption. Participants ($N =$ 561) completed a questionnaire after viewing fictional dog adoption advertisements in which certain characteristics were systematically varied. Results indicated that characteristics of the advertisements influenced participant opinions. Participants showed preference for advertisements in paragraphs over those written as bullet points. Participants' perceptions of the dog and their ability to identify potential behavioral challenges were influenced by the type of language used in the advertisements. Participants expressed interest in having additional information in the advertisements, including information about the dog's behavior. Our findings can help guide the content and structure of dog adoption advertisements to maximize information transfer, meet reader expectations, and result in more successful adoptions.

Key words: *companion animal, adoption, advertisements, dog, shelter, formatting*

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Introduction

Modern animal shelters provide various services, including low-cost spay and neuter programs, caregiver education, and community outreach. Their primary goal, however, is to adopt homeless animals into permanent, loving homes. When surveyed, people living in the United States express interest in adopting dogs from shelters (American Humane Association, 2012) and believe adoption from a shelter is the most ethical way to acquire a dog (Bir et al., 2018; Romo et al., 2019). However, there seems to be a disconnect between reported opinions and actual behavior. For example, Bir et al. (2016) found that only 39% of surveyed dog caregivers indicated acquiring dogs through adoption. The decision to adopt a companion animal is influenced by many factors, including socioeconomic status, demographics, and personal values (Holland, 2019). Specifically, prospective dog caregivers may avoid adopting from shelters because of a belief of lack of availability of their preferred dog, difficulty in acquiring information about the dog, and difficulty obtaining approval to adopt (see Holland, 2019 for review). For example, Griffin and colleagues (2020) found that many organizations within the United Kingdom utilize strict screening procedures that may prevent prospective dog caregivers from adopting a dog. Further, the belief that dogs that are available for adoption from shelters have behavioral problems is prevalent (Mornement et al., 2012). The overall result is more nonhuman animals (hereafter "animals") than adopters, leading to nearly a million animals in U.S. shelters euthanized each year (ASPCA; see Garrison & Weiss, 2015 for review).

When people do adopt from a shelter or rescue organization, the choice of a specific dog is often strongly influenced by dog characteristics, such as coat color, breed, and size (DeLeeuw, 2010; see Holland, 2019 for review; Lepper et al., 2002; Posage et al., 1998; Siettou et al., 2014). Some studies suggest that physical characteristics impact the length of time a dog spends at the shelter (coat color: Nakamura et al., 2020; Voslarova et al., 2019; size: Brown et al., 2013; breed: Brown et al., 2013; age: Brown et al., 2013; ears: Nakamura et al., 2020; and facial expression: Nakamura et al., 2020), and subsequently, the probability of adoption (Cain et al., 2020), although not all studies report consistent findings. For example, Brown et al. (2013) did not find an effect of coat color on length of stay of dogs at the shelter. Not surprisingly, there is variability among potential dog caregivers when it comes to the attributes that they prioritize when adopting (Blackman et al., 2019).

The internet has changed how people engage with dog shelters and learn about adoptable animals. Wilson (2016) surveyed visitors to two animal shelters and found that, on average, 63% of participants had visited the shelter's website prior to visiting the physical shelter. Similarly, Weiss et al. (2012) state that 36% of participants surveyed about their experience adopting a dog indicated that information posted about the adoptable dog online was valuable. Elements of the advertisement also impact the adoption process. Higher quality photographs were associated with lower median days to adoption (Lampe & Witte, 2015). Further, photographs of adoptable dogs also influence how their personalities are rated, with coat color, ear shape, and size all affecting people's perceptions of a dog's personality (Fratkin & Baker, 2013; Woodward et al., 2012).

Written information on adoption websites also has the potential to affect rates of adoption and length of stay. Wells et al. (2012) found that participants' perceptions of the dogs could be influenced by providing biasing information to readers through a phenomenon known as priming. Specifically, the authors manipulated the language that was used to describe German Shepherds, using either positive or negative terms. Those participants who viewed descriptions that included negative language later perceived the breed of dog negatively. Further, text used to describe adoptable dogs in online profiles affects length of stay (Nakamura et al., 2019). Specifically, personality adjectives, such as "lively", "clever", and "eager" were associated with shorter lengths of stay. Personality adjectives such as "dominant", "sensitive", and "happy-go-lucky" were associated with longer lengths of stay, potentially indicating low appeal to potential adopters. Markowitz (2019) also found that wording impacted adoption time, with profiles that contained social language reminiscent of storytelling staying for a longer time on the Petfinder website, indicating increased time waiting to be adopted.

Ideally, adoption advertisements should be both enticing and informative, piquing interest and presenting relevant information that ensures a good match between a potential adopter's expectations and dog characteristics and behavior to encourage a successful adoption and avoid relinquishment (see Lambert et al., 2015). Although anecdotal evidence exists about writing companion animal profiles (Best Friends Animal Society, n.d.), it remains unclear how to best format dog adoption advertisements to convey necessary information, make dogs appealing, and increase the likelihood of successful adoption. In other contexts, some have claimed that important information, such as conclusions to articles, may be best communicated through bullet points (Kozak & Hartley, 2011). Word count may also be critically important given that word

count has been positively correlated with perceived usefulness in other realms, such as restaurant reviews (Cheng & Ho, 2015) and trustworthiness in a peer-to-peer lending situation (Larrimore et al., 2011). Whether these trends also apply to animal advertisements remains unclear. Markowitz (2019) found a positive correlation between word count of companion animal adoption advertisements and number of days the animal remained advertised on the Petfinder website, although a complex relationship likely exists between these two variables.

To date, there is insufficient experimental evidence to inform best practices for writing dog adoption advertisements that will influence rates of adoption. Indeed, understanding potential adopters' preferences is critical to the goal of placing adoptable companion animals into permanent homes (Voslarova et al., 2019). One way to address this gap in the literature is to evaluate participants' responses to different adoption advertisements. In the current study, we measured participant responses to fictional dog advertisements with systematically varied characteristics. We hypothesized that there would be a difference in participant preference depending on the language used in the advertisements (distinguishing between "cute" and "plain" language), and between paragraph and bulleted advertisements. Given the potential that "cute" language may not convey information as clearly, we further hypothesized that participants would be more successful at identifying behavioral challenges included in the "plain" advertisement and would better retain information from "plain" advertisements when compared to "cute" advertisements.

Method

The current study administered an online survey to college students at three universities in the southern United States. Specifically, we used quantitative and qualitative methodology to measure participant responses to fictional dog advertisements with systematically varied characteristics. In examining existing online advertisements, we discovered two main methods of conveying information. Advertisements tended to either use "plain" or "cute" language. "Plain" advertisements appeared to be more direct about conveying the dog information but could be perceived as less interesting and enticing. "Cute" advertisements seemed to be written to be fun and appealing to potential adopters, but the less direct wording may not clearly convey some crucial information, such as the needs or challenges of a particular dog.

Participants

This study was given ethical approval by the Institutional Review Boards of Kennesaw State University (#20-400) and Georgia State University (#20-544) and by the University of Houston-Clear Lake's Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (#20-088). A total of 561 participants across the three universities, all enrolled in psychology courses, completed the survey. Most participants were female (67.4%). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M =$ 21.2, $SD = 5.38$). Although the majority of the participants identified as White (56.5%), other races were represented, including Black (24.2%) and Asian (10.0%). Additionally, 20.7% identified as Hispanic. The majority of the participants were single (90.4%) and without children (91.4%). Participants reported a variety of living arrangements, with most living with their parents (52.2%), followed by apartments (21.2%), dormitories (10.7%), owned homes (6.4%), and rented homes (7.3%). Given the complexities of assessing socioeconomic status during the transitional college-aged years, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Adler

& Stewart, 2007), asking students to place themselves on a graphic ladder with 10 rungs where 0 represents people with the least money, respected jobs, and education and 10 indicating people with the most money, respected jobs, and education. Participant mean rating was 5.17 ($SD =$ 1.59). Additionally, participants reported a range of familiarity with dog advertisements, with 13.9% not familiar at all, 16.8% slightly familiar, 35.5% moderately familiar, 18.5% very familiar, and 15.3% extremely familiar. Participants also represented a variety of companion animal caregiver statuses, with the most relevant being no current companion animals (27.6%), one dog (25.3%), and more than one dog (16.9%).

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of four sections. In section one, participants saw side-by-side full sentence paragraph and bullet point versions of the same advertisement for four different dogs ("Apollo", "Bella", "Lucy", and "Tex", see Figure 1 for example). Participants were randomly assigned to bullet or paragraph appearing first and they indicated their preference for the different formats of advertisement on a 5-point scale.

[Place Figure 1 here]

In section two, participants were randomly assigned to view either a "plain" or "cute" version of four advertisements. These advertisements each had a specific target challenge for participants to identify. The target challenges were housetraining ("Buddy"), high energy ("June"), aggression ("Carlos", see appendix), and owner surrender ("Dylan"). These first three challenges were chosen because they have been found to be common reasons people report for relinquishment (for discussion see Martin et al., 2021). In addition, information about these behaviors and the

8

circumstances regarding how the dog ended up in the shelter often appeared in various phrasings in actual dog advertisements. These advertisements differed in how information was presented, with the "plain" versions stating directly that the dog has "had a few accidents in the house", is "high energy", "tends to display aggression", or was "surrendered"; whereas the "cute" versions used language like "does best on a schedule", "gets the zoomies", "is picky about his friends", or "her last owners could not meet all her needs". For example, in the advertisement focused on aggression, the "plain" version was:

> Carlos has been trained on several tricks, but tends to display aggression towards other dogs and should be an only pet. Carlos is about 2.5 years old and 75 pounds. He is anxiously awaiting a forever home where he can learn even more tricks. Come meet Carlos and see his big brown eyes in person.

Whereas the "cute" version was:

> Carlos is a big hunk at 75 pounds, but he prefers to show off his brains. He knows over 10 tricks. He is picky about his friends and wants all the attention to himself. Carlos is about 2.5 years old. He is anxiously awaiting a forever home where he can learn even more tricks. Come meet Carlos and see his big brown eyes in person.

For each advertisement, participants were asked to indicate how much they liked it, how likely they would be to inquire about adopting the dog, what stood out most, and what challenges they thought each dog would present (the latter two were open-ended questions). In section three, all participants saw a short, basic advertisement that included dog information for "Max", a young, male, lab blend:

Max is a male, lab blend who is around 1.5 years old. Max is a sweet dog who is fully house-trained. He is medium-sized and weighs about 35 pounds. His coat color is tan and white. He is up to date on vaccinations and is neutered.

Participants were asked their opinion about the amount of information provided, how likely they would be to inquire about adopting the dog, what they liked about the advertisement, and what they disliked about it (the latter two were open-ended questions). Participants ranked what aspects of the advertisement were most important to them and then re-read the basic advertisement and were asked to recall information about it. Section four gathered demographic information, which included questions on familiarity with dog adoption advertisements, current and previous companion animal caregiver status, preference for sex and size of dogs, and other demographic questions.

Procedure

Participants at all three universities were recruited using an online participant pool system and offered class credit for participating. The survey was administered through Qualtrics from February to May 2020. Once participants provided their informed consent, it was confirmed that they were at least 18 years of age and had not previously completed the survey. Participants who completed less than 90% of the survey were removed from the study. In total, 600 participants were recruited and 39 of those participants were excluded due to incomplete surveys, thus 561 participants remained. Because some participants skipped individual questions, sample sizes are reported for each analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

A Friedman analysis (α = 0.05), which is a non-parametric version of a repeated measures analysis of variance used to examine median differences across a set of rankings (Sheskin, 2007), was performed to examine the order of importance of the various pieces of information included in the basic advertisement to determine which types of information participants felt were most important. A One-Sample Wilcoxon, which is a non-parametric version of a one-sample t-test used to determine if the population median matches a hypothesized value (Sheskin, 2007), was run to examine the differences in preference between the paragraph versus bullet presentations of the advertisements. Additionally, a Friedman analysis was run to examine the consistency of bullet versus paragraph ratings within individuals to determine the strength of preference. To correct for family-wise error in these tests, a Bonferroni correction was used with a corrected p value of 0.05/2= 0.025. For the "cute" versus "plain" language comparison, Mann Whitney U analyses (α = 0.05), which are non-parametric versions of independent samples t-tests to examine differences between groups (Sheskin, 2007), were run on the questions about how much the participants liked the advertisement and how likely they were to inquire about the dog to examine differences between those who saw the "cute" advertisements and those who saw the "plain" advertisements to determine if type of advertisement influenced ratings.

Qualitative Analysis

Thematic Analysis Methodology. Participants' responses to the open-ended questions were coded using thematic analysis. We used a coding reliability approach in conducting our thematic analysis (Joffe, 2011). A rater took an inductive, semantic analysis approach, examining the raw data and developing themes that summarized participant responses regarding likes,

dislikes, what stood out, and what challenges each dog would present. A codebook was developed for six questions, including what was liked and disliked about the basic advertisement ("Max") and what challenges each of the other four dogs ("Buddy," "Carlos," "Dylan," and "June") would present. The codebook included the category name, description, and some examples. All authors then discussed and refined the themes and codebook prior to the rater coding all responses. Rating was done by hand using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with each row representing a response and each column representing a coding category. The rater then indicated whether or not each coding category applied to a given response. This also allowed for frequencies and percentages to be calculated for each theme. A second rater independently coded 60/561 (10.7%) of the responses in likes, dislikes, and each of the four behavioral challenge free-response questions for inter-rater reliability (IRR) purposes. An agreement between the first and second rater meant that all categories were scored identically. Any disagreements retained the main coder's ratings. Joffe (2011) states that inter-rater reliability above 75% is indicative of a reliable coding framework, with other authors concluding that reliability above 70% is generally acceptable for exploratory studies (Lombard et al., 2002), and reliability above 80% is acceptable in almost all other situations (Neuendorf, 2002). In our analysis, the mean IRR across all questions (likes, dislikes, and each of the four behavioral challenge questions) was 87.5% (minimum 83.33%, maximum 96.67%).

Coding Categories. Codebooks were developed for the free-response questions within the likes, dislikes, and challenges. Within the likes and dislikes, the two overarching themes were structure-related responses and content-related responses. Structure-related responses contained information aimed at the advertisement itself, such as wording, organization, amount of information, and tone. Content-related responses were aimed at information about the dog in the

advertisement. Once these two broad themes were identified, each was further broken down into more specific categories based on the most common responses. Additional categories within likes and dislikes were "no response", "no stated likes or dislikes", and "unable to code". When the participant left their response entirely blank, it was coded as "no response". When the participant did respond but indicated they did not like or dislike anything (e.g., "I liked everything about the ad" or "n/a"), it was coded in the "no likes" or "no dislikes" category. Finally, those responses that were not understandable or ambiguous beyond categorization (e.g., "I em") were recorded as "unable to code".

For what participants liked about the basic advertisements, structure-related responses were broken down into amount of information (e.g., liking it because it was brief or included the right amount of information) and organization/formatting, which included liking elements such as the tone, wording, and layout. Content-related responses were broken down into behavior, which contained disposition and house-training categories, and physical characteristics, which contained breed, age, size, spay/neuter status, health, appearance, and other categories.

When participants were asked to name what they disliked about the basic advertisement, their responses were coded based on two major themes seen throughout: disliking the information presented and wanting more information than what was presented. These two categories, disliking information and wanting more information, were specific to content-related responses: behavior, activity level, personality, lack of picture, breed, age, size, spay/neuter status, health, and appearance information. The structure-related categories for the dislike responses were

broken down into not enough information, too much information, unnecessary information included, and poor presentation/organization.

For the question that asked participants to identify challenges that each dog might present (e.g. housetraining issues or aggression), the coding categories for each dog were "no response", "no challenges identified" (i.e., the participant responded but indicated they did not see any challenges present), "target challenge identified" (i.e., clearly identified the dog's target challenge), and "other challenge identified" (i.e., participant indicated a challenge, but different from the dog's target challenge). For Dylan's ad, responses were further coded for whether the response attributed blame for surrender to the dog (e.g., "she seems like a problem dog") or human (e.g., "her last owners weren't good to her"). Participant identification of the target challenge as well as the blame attribution for Dylan's surrender were further analyzed using Pearson's chi-square tests with an alpha level of 0.05.

Results

Paragraph versus Bullet Presentation

A total of 557 (of the 561) participants indicated preference for paragraph versus bullet in the four advertisements. Overall, participants preferred paragraph advertisements, with the Wilcoxon test finding a significant difference, $z = 68396.0$, $p = 0.01$. The Friedman test found that the degree of preference for paragraph or bullet point differed by advertisement, $\chi^2 (3) = 27.6$, $p < 0.001$, with one advertisement at no preference ($M = 3.01$) and the others all showing preference for paragraph ($M = 3.16$, 3.20, and 3.24).

"Cute" versus "Plain" Language

A between-subjects analysis was conducted on the language comparison, with subjects randomly assigned to either "cute" ($n = 281$) or "plain" ($n = 280$) language advertisements. There were no differences in ratings of how much participants liked the two types of advertisements ($U = 37637$, $p = 0.372$) or in how likely they were to inquire about the dog if they were looking for a dog of these characteristics ($U = 35610$, $p = 0.051$).

The open-ended questions asked participants to identify the challenges they thought each dog would present. A low number of participants did not respond to Buddy's "plain" ad (1), June's "cute" ad (3), Carlos' "cute" ad (3), and Dylan's "cute" ad (5). All other responses were tallied and compared using Pearson's chi-squares. Participants who read the "plain" advertisement were better able to identify the challenges presented for Buddy (housetraining; χ^2 (1) = 46.48, $p < 0.001$) and Carlos (dog aggression; χ^2 (1) = 82.80, $p < 0.001$). Participants identified the challenge of June's high energy level similarly between conditions ($\chi2$ (1) = 0.07, $p = 0.796$). The majority of participants did not identify caregiver surrender as a possible challenge for Dylan, but more participants in the "cute" version of the advertisement identified this as compared to the "plain" version ($\chi2$ (1) = 6.79, $p = 0.009$) (See Table 1).

[Place Table 1 here]

For Dylan's advertisement, participants who read the "cute" version ("her last owners could not meet all her needs, so she needs a true forever home") differed in their categorization from those who read the "plain" version of the ad ("her last owners surrendered her, so she needs a true forever home"), χ^2 (2) = 18.40, $p < 0.001$. Those who identified Dylan's surrender as a possible

challenge in the "plain" version of the advertisement were more likely to give responses that could not clearly be coded as attributing blame to either the dog or human caregiver (74.1%, *n* = 63 out of total 85) than those who read the "cute" version (45.1%, *n* = 51 out of total 113) (e.g., "I would like to know why Dylan was surrendered to the shelter because that could present a challenge"). Those who read the "cute" version and identified Dylan's surrender as a possible challenge were more likely to blame the dog (27.4%, *n* = 31 out of total 113) than those who read the "plain" version (8.2%, *n* = 7 out of total 85).

Importance of Information

Fifteen participants skipped the ranking question of order of importance in the basic advertisement; therefore 546 individuals answered. The Friedman test found that there were differences in rank ordered preferences of the information in the advertisements, χ^2 (5) = 862.8, *p* < 0.001. Behavior was rated as most important (See Table 2). This trend was also seen in the qualitative data with 24.6% of participants commenting that they wanted more information related to the behavior or personality of the dog (e.g., "There was not enough description on how they would behave in a house with children or other people").

[Place Table 2 here]

Information Retained from Basic Advertisement

The majority of participants (*n* = 561) retained the information from the basic advertisement, with the mean number correct being 3.3 out of 4 (*SD* = 0.88) and 54.5% (*n* = 306) of participants

getting all four questions correct. Percent correct ranged from 78.3 to 86.6% (see Table 3 for the pattern of responses).

[Place Table 3 here]

Opinions of Basic Advertisement

Participants (n = 561) ranked the amount of information in the Basic advertisement on a 5-point scale from "far too little" (1) to "far too much" (5) with an average rating of "neither too much nor too little" (M = 2.94, SD = 0.543). They also rated how likely they would be to inquire about adopting the advertised dog if they were searching for one matching his characteristics on a 5-point scale from "Extremely unlikely" (1) to "Extremely likely" (5). The mean rating was 4.28 (SD = 0.824), slightly above somewhat likely.

When participants were asked what they liked about the basic advertisement, 7 participants left the question blank, 10 reported that they did not like anything about the advertisement (e.g., "nothing," "n/a"), and 3 participant responses were ambiguous and unable to be coded into our coding scheme. Therefore, 541 participants identified at least one thing they liked about the advertisement. Of these, 69.7% (n = 377) commented on the structural components of the ad and 35.3% (n = 191) commented on the content-related components of the advertisement, with 5.0% commenting on both aspects. Within the structure-related comments (n = 377), 60.2% (n = 227) liked the amount of information in the advertisement (e.g., "I liked that the advertisement listed most of the necessary information I would look for in my search for a pet") and 54.1% (n = 204) liked the organization or formatting (e.g., "I liked how all of the information was given clearly

and the ad was straight to the point while still being personal"). Within the content-related comments (n = 191), the percentages commenting on physical characteristics of the dog (61.3%, n = 117) and the behavioral descriptions (59.7%, n = 114) were similar. Of the responses focusing on the dog's physical characteristics (n = 117) (e.g., "I like that it is up-front with the data, as the age and size of the dog are important characteristics to me"), health information (39.3%, n = 46), appearance (28.2%, n = 33), breed (21.4%, n = 25), size (16.2%, n = 19), neutered status (16.2%, n = 19), and age (13.7%, n = 16) were the most commented-on features. Of those commenting that they liked the behavioral descriptions provided (n = 114), 71.1% (n = 81) liked the housetraining information (e.g., "that it included that he was house trained") and 35.1% (n = 40) liked the general disposition or behavior of the dog (e.g., "that he is a sweet dog").

For what they disliked about the same advertisement, 220 (39.2%) reported no dislikes (e.g., "nothing," "I didn't dislike anything about this ad") and 8 did not answer the question, leaving 333 participants who identified at least one thing they disliked. In contrast to the question about what was liked about the advertisement, more participants focused on content-related dislikes (69.7%, n = 232) than structure-related dislikes (37.2%, n = 124), with 6.9% (n = 23) focusing on both aspects of the advertisement. Of those who stated disliking a structural aspect of the advertisement (n = 124), 56.5% (n = 70) disliked its presentation or organization, including elements like tone or formatting (e.g., "I disliked the order of the information and the choppy sentences," "it lacks emotion."), 26.6% (n = 33) felt that not enough information was included (e.g., "there was not a lot of information"), 11.3% (n = 14) felt there was too much information (e.g., "overload of info"), and 10.5% (n = 13) felt that unnecessary information was included

(e.g., "The weight doesn't seem necessary"). Among the participants that disliked content-related information (n = 232), 75.9% (n = 176) disliked some aspect of the behavioral information while 26.3% (n = 61) disliked content related to the dog's physical characteristics. Within the behavioral dislikes (n = 176), the largest category involved participants who wanted more information on the dog's behavior or personality information (78.4%, n = 138, e.g., "I'd like to know how he is around other dogs and kids," "No information on the dog's personality"). In addition, 32.6% (n = 45) of the comments in this category expressed a desire to know why the dog was at the shelter (e.g., "It doesn't say why he was put in the shelter or talk about his past"). The most common themes among comments expressing dislike about dog physical characteristics (n = 61) focused mostly on wanting a photograph (19.7%, n = 12, e.g., "Needs a picture") or on not liking the appearance information (19.7%, n = 12, e.g., "I feel the dog's coat color is irrelevant to the ad").

Discussion

Overall, the characteristics of dog advertisements did influence participant opinions. Specifically, participants preferred paragraph form over bullet points. While no preference was seen for ads using different language styles, the perceptions of the dog described in the ad were influenced by the language. Finally, participants expressed interest in having additional information in the advertisements, including information about the dog's behavior. Although dog adoptions are often strongly influenced by appearance (reviewed by Holland, 2019; Weiss et al., 2012), well-written adoption advertisements are important given the high likelihood that potential adopters interact with advertisements before visiting the shelter (Wilson, 2016; Weiss et al., 2012). The ratings and statements by participants in this study can help guide the

composition of dog adoption advertisements to maximize information transfer, meet reader expectations, and ideally result in more successful adoptions.

Paragraph versus Bullet Presentation

Participants had a slight preference for paragraph advertisements over bullet lists. Bullet lists are ubiquitous in modern discourse, from Powerpoint presentations to instruction manuals (Djonov & van Leewen, 2013), and may be easier to read than paragraphs (Kozak & Hartley, 2011). These factors, however, did not lead to preference in this study, perhaps because the current study examined opinions of college students, instead of opinions of individuals actively selecting companion animals for adoption. Our findings align more with Cheng and Ho (2015) who found that consumer reviews with higher word count were considered more useful. However, there was one advertisement to which participants reported no preference between the two formats. For that advertisement, the language was less conversational, so future research should examine preference with a more diverse sample and use different writing styles compared to bullet points. Additionally, although participants overall did prefer the paragraph, some participants who read the basic advertisement (written as a short paragraph) expressed their desire for bullets (e.g., "I like the bullet point advertisements better, not the paragraphs"). Future research should also examine these advertisement styles with those in the adoption process. Additionally, it would be useful to include a mix of formats with some relevant information in bullet lists and a longer paragraph version to see if that would lead to higher engagement and ratings.

"Cute" versus "Plain" Language

There was no significant difference in preference for the "cute" or "plain" paragraph advertisements, yet there were differences in the information gleaned from the advertisements based on language. For two of the four advertisements, participants who read the "cute" version did not identify the target behavioral challenge (housetraining, dog aggression) as well as those who read the "plain" version. Based on the comments made, participants reported that some words that we used in the "cute" advertisement were unclear. For example, participants indicated that they had not heard of "zoomies", although this is a term that is regularly used in online advertisements for adoptable dogs. However, over half of the participants were able to identify the target challenge, so the word may be fairly well known. It is also possible that "high energy" was not clear enough to be perceived as problematic given that only just over half of the respondents identified it as the target behavioral challenge. We maintain that it is important to clearly convey behavioral information so that potential adopters can select a dog that will fit their expectations, and the current data suggest that changes in how the information is worded may impact adopter perceptions of behavioral issues. Advertisements with "cute" language may not be as clear to the reader and may not convey crucial behavioral information about the dog, possibly decreasing adoption success. "Cute" language may obscure the intended message and lead an individual to adopt a dog that is not a good match for their lifestyle.

Additionally, "cute" language may not be as well received. Markowitz (2019) noted that whereas social descriptions and humanizing details may hurt an animal's chances of being adopted quickly, information about behavior relates to less time spent on an adoption website, suggesting that advertisements written in a more straightforward manner will be more successful. Our

findings that readers sometimes understood information better after reading the "plain" paragraph align with Markowitz's findings.

In Dylan's adoption advertisement, the "plain" version of "surrendered" was changed to "could not meet all her needs" for the "cute" version. For this advertisement, the target behavioral challenge was identified by less than half of participants. It was also the only advertisement in which those reading the "cute" version were more likely to identify the behavior challenge. This difference may have been because the change in language caused a shift in perception, with those participants reading "could not meet all her needs" being more likely to blame Dylan for being surrendered. Thus, language choices can impact how a dog is perceived and the human-dog match, and future work should further investigate the impact of language choice.

Importance of Information

Although there is an abundance of previous research suggesting that dog appearance has a substantial impact on adoption (for review see Holland, 2019), behavior information may be more essential to ensure a good match between potential adopter's expectations and reality. People surrender dogs for a variety of reasons, but a meta-analysis by Lambert and colleagues (2015) found that reasons related to unmet expectations were frequently reported in many studies. In our study, behavior was rated by our participants as the most important piece of information to include in the advertisements. Participants in previous studies also expressed a desire for more behavioral information about a dog to make a more informed adoption decision (Neidhart & Boyd, 2002; O'Connor et al., 2017). Therefore, it may be worth exploring what specific types of behavioral information are viewed as most important. For example, 45

participants stated that they would like to know why the dog was at the shelter (e.g., "I [would] like to know why a pet is at the shelter, in the case of this dog... why is such a fantastic sounding dog at the shelter?"). The frequency of mentioning this specific information indicates that it would be good to analyze how this information should be conveyed and how often it appears in real advertisements.

In the current study, we wanted to focus on text analysis and thus did not provide photographs of the dogs that were described in the paragraph advertisements. This absence was noted by 12 participants who expressed that they would like to see a photo. Obviously, a photo cannot contain much information on the complexity of behavior or personality (Workman, 2016), but a photograph may be what mainly inspires a potential adopter to visit a shelter. Future research should compare the effects of paragraph alone versus paragraph presented with photographs on participants' impressions of adoptable dogs.

Social psychology research on persuasion adds valuable context to these findings. For example, the Elaboration Likelihood Model-- ELM of persuasion (see Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) can help explain what type of information is processed by an audience (see Markowitz, 2019 for review). According to the model, recipients will either process information via the central route (high elaboration or message-focused) or the peripheral route (low elaboration, context-focused), which will ultimately affect their attitudes and behaviors. In the current study, advertisements were kept short but differed in terms of the language they contained. These differences, along with participant characteristics, may have affected the route by which they processed the message, in this case, dog adoption advertisements. Future studies could focus on the role of the

ELM in dog the adoption process. Systematically varying the information presented to potential adopters, in addition to learning more about the participants, will help determine the most effective way to create long-lasting change in attitudes in potential adopters and persuade them to take the next step in the adoption process.

Information Retained from Basic Advertisement

An additional and encouraging finding from the study was that participants were able to correctly answer questions about a short and simple advertisement they read. It would be useful to investigate which information is most salient and most likely to be retained by potential adopters.

Opinions of Basic Advertisement

In terms of opinions on the basic advertisement, participants felt that the amount of information presented was appropriate and agreed that they would be likely to consider adopting the dog described. Additionally, more participants identified things they liked than disliked (many of the dislikes involved wanting more information, contradictory to the mean ratings). The advertisement was written to be fairly short to replicate the basic information present in many dog adoption advertisements. Therefore, the advertisement as written may have been judged adequate during the ratings, but when asked what they disliked, participants may have thought of aspects they wanted included.

Limitations

The exploratory nature of this study limits its generalizability, given that it consisted of surveying a convenience sample of university students in the United States. The sample had

racial diversity. There was also diversity in the level of experience with dog advertisements and companion animal caregiver status. That being said, there was an overrepresentation of females (67.4%) and younger individuals (range 18 to 40 years, mean 21.2). Future research should aim to obtain a more diverse sample, including drawing from an international and non-student population to improve generalization. Although convenience samples greatly restrict external validity, this sample was drawn from universities consisting of largely non-traditional students; the students completing the survey were more likely to be employed and older than more traditional student populations. Therefore, the sampled students may better represent the population of potential dog adopters than traditional college students in the United States.

Conclusions

Overall, our study suggests that participants did not have strong preferences between the different advertisement styles that we studied but would like the advertisements to clearly convey relevant information, especially behavioral information, about the dog. Additionally, clarity, both in the language used, and in the information presented, is essential to enhance the likelihood that people select an appropriate animal companion, which would increase the chances of a successful adoption. Future research should expand this work to further analyze best practices in writing dog advertisements and to examine many of these same themes with potential companion animal adopters at actual shelters.

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Table 1

Percentage of participants identifying the target behavioral challenge in the cute or plainly worded advertisement for each dog

Dog	Cute	Plain
Buddy (housetraining)*	57.7%	83.9%
June (high-energy)	53.2%	52.1%
Carlos (dog aggressive)*	52.2%	87.5%
Dylan (caregiver surrender)*	40.9%	30.4%

*Indicates the chi-square comparison was significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 2

Mean and Median rankings of the importance of various information frequently found in dog

advertisements, with 1 being most important

Information	Mean rating	Median ranking	Percent ranking most important
Behavior	1.97	1	50.5%
Age	2.91	3	13.9%
Breed	2.91	3	22.5%
Why at Shelter	4.30	5	7.3%
Sex	4.35	5	3.8%
Weight	4.56	5	1.8%

Table 3

Number and percentages of each answer choice for the four factual questions about the

advertisement (correct answer is bolded)

Answer choice	Yes	No	Did not mention	Skipped
Under two years of age	**439, 78.3%**	107, 19.1%	14, 2.5%	1, 0.2%
Over 50 pounds	59, 10.5%	**474, 84.5%**	28, 5%	–––––
Housetrained	**486, 86.6%**	17, 3.0%	58, 10.3%	–––––
Good with kids	81, 14.4%	10, 1.8%	**469, 83.6%**	1, 0.2%

Figure 1

Example of a side-by-side full sentence paragraph and bullet point versions advertisement

Tex is

- Neutered Male
- About 3 years old
- 60 pounds
- Up-to-date on shots
- Good with kids
- Good with other dogs

My name is Tex and I am about 3 years old and 60 pounds. I am good with kids and other dogs. I am neutered and up-to-date on shots.

Appendix A

Example Dog Adoption Advertisements used in the Study

1. Bullet versus Paragraph Versions of Same Advertisement

Tex is
- Neutered Male
- About 3 years old
- 60 pounds
- Up-to-date on shots
- Good with kids
- Good with other dogs

My name is Tex and I am about 3 years old and 60 pounds. I am good with kids and other dogs. I am neutered and up-to-date on shots.

2. Plain versus Cute Version of Advertisement

    a. Plain Version

Carlos has been trained on several tricks, but tends to display aggression towards other dogs and should be an only pet. Carlos is about 2.5 years old and 75 pounds. He is anxiously awaiting a forever home where he can learn even more tricks. Come meet Carlos and see his big brown eyes in person.

    b. Cute Version

Carlos is a big hunk at 75 pounds, but he prefers to show off his brains. He knows over 10 tricks. He is picky about his friends, and wants all the attention to himself. Carlos is about 2.5 years old. He is anxiously awaiting a forever home where he can learn even more tricks. Come meet Carlos and see his big brown eyes in person.

3. Basic Advertisement

Max is a male, lab blend who is around 1.5 years old. Max is a sweet dog who is fully house-trained. He is medium-sized and weighs about 35 pounds. His coat color is tan and white. He is up-to-date on vaccinations and is neutered.