

## **From Words to Woofs: Storytelling Point-of-view in Dutch and Chinese Dog Adoption Social Media Posts**

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This study investigated the influence of social media posts' storytelling point-of-view on individuals' dog adoption intention, as mediated by empathy, and the moderating effect of visual representation on this relationship. Two online experiments (N1 = 122, N2 = 121) were conducted among Chinese and Dutch participants, considering the potential cultural differences. The results unveiled a notable difference between the two cultural groups regarding the direct effect of point-of-view, with the first-person point-of-view significantly influencing dog adoption intention among Chinese participants, but not Dutch participants. The indirect effect and the mediating role of empathy were confirmed in both studies, however. Storytelling messages from a first-person point-of-view generated more robust empathy responses and subsequently led to higher adoption intention among both Chinese and Dutch participants. The moderating effect of type of visual representations on the relationship between storytelling point-of-view and empathy was not found among either group of participants.

Keywords: AI-generated voice; Storytelling point-of-view; Dog adoption intention; Persuasion; Cross-cultural study

World Health Organisation estimates the global population of 200 million stray dogs worldwide, with China accounting for one-fifth of this total (Martyn, 2023). Meanwhile, the dog adoption rate in China (11.8%) is far below the international average (Tone, 2019). In sharp contrast, the Netherlands has shown to be successful in dog adoption and has emerged as the first country with no stray dogs (Sawbridge, 2022). Animal shelters combating the issue frequently resort to visuals and storytelling as a communication strategy to introduce adoptable dogs, showing dogs' personalities naturally (e.g., JAI Dog Rescue Organisation, Pet Finder). It helps to convey a large amount of information through a narrative design, facilitating the acceptance of the presented information by triggering empathy (Gilliam et al., 2013; Lin & Li, 2018). Empathy, as a moral emotion of affective matching, or "feeling the way that you think others feel", promotes altruistic behaviour (Batson, 1987; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Yang & Yen, 2018). Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that dog adoption,

itself an altruistic behaviour, can be positively influenced by empathy. The point-of-view employed in messaging influences information processing and evaluation (Tsai, 2020). First-person perspective, for example, enhances emotional engagement and reduces persuasion reactance, leading to favourable outcomes (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Nan et al., 2016; Quintero Johnson et al., 2021). Most Chinese animal shelters, however, use a third-person point-of-view in their social media posts, specifically from the host family's perspective, wherein dogs are referred to by their names and third-person pronouns (i.e., she/he). Many Dutch shelters, in contrast, employ a first-person point-of-view to introduce their dogs.

Visual aids, including images and videos, are commonly used by shelters as supplementary materials to help potential owners know the dog more comprehensively and enhance their storytelling efforts. Variations in visual cues can affect individuals' perceived clarity. Prior research indicated that media richness reduces the ambiguity of the message (Maity et al., 2018). This, in turn, raises perceptions of the authenticity, as well as behavioural intention (Chidiac & Bowden, 2022).

Research on the impact of empathy and visual representation in storytelling, however, has primarily concentrated on profit-oriented or health-related domains (e.g., Bell et al., 2021; Chidiac & Bowden, 2022; Rodríguez-Contreras & Igartua, 2019; Tsai, 2020; Yang & Yen, 2018). Pet adoption intention is not directly related to monetary factors and costs less than purchase from a breeder ("Animal League", 2022; Lawrence, 2021). Adopting and purchasing also result in different levels of social approval in the context of dog acquisition. The ideology that adoption is the most ethical way to have a dog was reinforced by media coverage. This ideology, in turn, may impact people's perception of dog adoption (Bir et al., 2018). Therefore, this knowledge gap warrants investigation. Additionally, the current study aims to inspire communication practitioners to convey stories more effectively to achieve better persuasive results, by addressing the following research questions:

*What is the effect of the storytelling point-of-view (first-person vs. third-person) on dog adoption intention, and can it be explained by empathy (low vs high)? What role does the format of visual representation (picture vs. video) play in this context? How do these relationships differ for Chinese and Dutch residents?*

In addition to examining the relationships between the above discussed concepts, the present study also offers a cross-cultural perspective. As countries with vastly different situations regarding dog adoption practices, China and the Netherlands offer a potentially interesting comparison. Since dog adoption rates in China is lower than in the Netherlands, it is reasonable to assume that there is less societal support for dog adoption within the Chinese than the Dutch society. Chinese people will, thereby, likely be exposed to fewer subjective norms regarding the issue than the Dutch. Additionally, individuals from collectivist cultures are more likely to conform to group norms than those from individualistic cultures (Oh, 2013). Thus, the possible difference in the number of perceived social norms, as well as in the strength of their impact, may result in different effects.

### ***Storytelling Point-of-view in Pet Adoption Social Media Posts***

Storytelling tactics have been extensively employed by brands and organisations in their marketing activities (Kang et al., 2020), enabling corporations to illustrate the brands and characteristics of products and services through stories that touch customers, elicits empathy, and facilitate brand recall among audiences (Tsai, 2020). Research also shows that storytelling can affect consumers' behavioural intentions (Nie, et al., 2017; Tabassum, et al., 2020). One of the aspects of storytelling scholars have paid attention to is the storytelling point-of-view. First-person point-of-view involves the story being narrated from the narrator's point-of-view using first-person pronouns like “I” and “me”, while the third-person perspective involves the story being narrated by a third person, using pronouns such as “she” and “her” (Quintero Johnson et al., 2021, p. 226).

Different points-of-view result in different message evaluations (Tsai, 2020). Specifically, a first-person narrative was found to be more persuasive than a third-person narrative (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). It enhances the accessibility of the story by providing a sense of immersion (Cohen, 2001, p. 245), resulting in generation of attitudes that are consistent with the story and ultimately enhancing the persuasiveness of the message (Nan et al., 2016). The use of a first-person perspective can also decrease persuasion reactance and elicit favourable responses (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010; Quintero Johnson et al., 2021). First-person and third-person point-of-view also result in different self-position, leading to different affective responses. In first-person narration, readers go through and comprehend the narrative through the eyes of the character narrating the story. Third-person point-of-view, on the other hand, makes readers more likely to position themselves as observers outside the story rather than actors within the scene. (Mulcahy & Gouldthorp, 2015, p.100).

First-person point-of-view was shown to be effective in non-profit aspects. For example, a story told from a first-person perspective was found to have a greater positive impact on individual engagement and donation performance (Lim et al., 2019; Robiady et al., 2021). Hence, it is reasonable to assume that the first-person point-of-view may likewise augment individuals' intention to adopt a dog, which falls under the realm of non-profit-oriented altruistic behavioural intention. Therefore, we posit:

H1. Exposure to first-person point-of-view (i.e., dog perspective) storytelling social media posts will lead to stronger dog adoption intention than exposure to storytelling messages narrated from a third-person point-of-view (i.e., foster perspective).

### ***Empathy and Transportation Theory***

According to the transportation theory (Green & Sestir, 2017), emotional responses play a significant role in explaining the effectiveness of storytelling. The theory posits that the receiver of the narrative tends to be psychologically drawn into the scenes described in the story

(Green & Sestir, 2017). Consequently, the narrative generates emotional convergence, increases audience involvement, reduces critical thinking, and encourages behavioural intentions consistent with the storyline (Green & Sestir, 2017; Kang et al., 2020; van Laer et al., 2014). In the context of storytelling, a higher degree of emotional arousal is associated with a more robust persuasive impact (Nan et al., 2016). Specifically, storytelling arouses character empathy (van Laer et al., 2014), which in turn, makes the message more persuasive. First-person narratives are expected to enhance experience-taking more effectively than third-person narratives (Kaufman & Libby, 2012). First-person point-of-view fosters the protagonist's empathy and enables the audience to embody the protagonist's experience (Mulcahy & Gouldthorp, 2015). Thus, the first-person point-of-view is assumed to have the potential to enhance the audience's empathy responses, given that audiences will be emotionally consistent with the characters in the storytelling context (Green & Sestir, 2017; Kang et al., 2020; van Laer et al., 2014). Moreover, in non-profit contexts, first-person point-of-view was found to effectively prompt the donation behaviour by arousing individuals' emotions and prompting altruism (Pansari & Kumar, 2016; Robiady et al., 2021).

In turn, empathy promotes altruistic behaviour, including care for others and providing help (Yang & Yen, 2018, p.261). Numerous empirical studies have found evidence for the positive association between high levels of empathy and increased voluntary helping behaviour (Bacq & Alt, 2018). Given that dog adoption is widely recognized as an ethical means to having dogs (Bir et al., 2018), the adoption intention represents people's intention for altruistic behaviour and can be regarded as a moral responsibility that can be triggered by empathy. Therefore, empathy should increase the desire to care for the dog and the adoption intention. With this in mind, we posit that:

H2. Exposure to first-person point-of-view storytelling social media posts (a) will elicit a greater empathy response than exposure to third-person point-of-view, which, in turn, (b) will lead to higher dog adoption intention.

### ***The Role of Visual Representation***

According to media richness theory, richer media (e.g., video) are more effective than leaner media (e.g., pictures, or even just text) in transmitting information (Frasca & Edwards, 2017). Rich media enables the recipient to process the message faster with less cognitive effort (Wang, 2022), facilitates understanding, building trust, and increases perceived authenticity, subsequently positively impacting behavioural intention (Chen & Chang, 2018; Chidiac & Bowden, 2022). For example, video content has been found to have a greater influence on consumers' purchase intention than image content (Chen et al., 2022). Therefore, we posit:

H3. Exposure to a pet adoption social media post that includes rich media content will lead to stronger adoption intention than exposure to one with lean media content.

Moreover, media richness contributes to people's comprehension (Chidiac & Bowden, 2022). Specifically, video formats allow the audience to receive information through various details, such as proximity, facial expression, and body language (Chidiac & Bowden, 2022). Additionally, video provides moving images, presenting the information in dynamic ways, which makes the information more understandable and accessible (Allen et al., 2004; Frasca & Edwards, 2017). Studies also indicate that video, which comprises of both visual and audio information, benefits information processing by activating two sensory systems and dual channels (Bol et al., 2015; Meppelink et al., 2015). This may compensate for the disadvantage of third-person point-of-view in pet adoption social media posts. Thus:

H4a. For people exposed to richer media content (i.e., video), a story with a first-person point-of-view will elicit the same level of empathy response as a story with a third-person point-of-view,

H4b. For people exposed to lean media content (i.e., photo), a story with a first-person point-of-view will elicit a stronger empathy response than a story with a third-person point-of-view.

## **Method**

Two online 2 (storytelling point-of-view: story from the dog's point-of-view vs the story from the host family's point-of-view) x 2 (types of visual representation: video vs photo) between-subjects experiment was designed to test the conceptual model (Study 1 in China and Study 2 in the Netherlands; see Figure 1 for conceptual model). For study 1, the questionnaire was back-translated into Chinese. English was used in study 2, since there are no significant differences in emotionality, attitude, and behavioral intention between Dutch and English messages among Dutch individuals (Daza, unpublished study). In study 1, the final sample consisted of 122 participants, aged between 19 and 30 ( $M = 24.15$ ,  $SD = 3.11$ ), predominantly female (68%), and highly educated (45.9% Bachelor, 43.4% Master, 1.6% PhD). The final sample of study 2 consisted of 121 participants, aged 18 - 42 ( $M = 24.83$ ,  $SD = 3.41$ ), predominantly female (72.7% female), highly educated (46.3% Bachelor, 38.0% Master, 2.5% PhD).

For the stimuli, fictitious adoption-seeking posts were created. In the first-person point-of-view conditions, the story is told from the dog's perspective, through the use of "I" statements. In the third-person point-of-view conditions, the dog is referred as "Sami". In the video condition, an existing YouTube video of a dog from SWNS (2020) was presented. The screenshot of the SWNS (2020) video was used in the image conditions to maintain cross-condition consistency. The textual information (both text and subsidy) was by Jai Dog Rescue, an existing, but not widely familiar pet shelter. Besides the point-of-view of the story and the visualisation methods, other factors (e.g., storyline, tone, font) were kept constant across conditions to eliminate confounding variables (see Figure 2 for stimuli).

At the start of the questionnaire, participants were exposed to an informed consent form, followed by two filter questions to ensure participants did not have previous experience with dog adoption and currently reside in either the Netherlands or China. Next, participants' level of familiarity with Jai Dog Rescue was assessed (Kent & Allen, 1994). After that, participants were randomly assigned to one of the conditions and exposed to a social media post appropriate to the condition they were assigned to. Afterwards, the participants' empathy level (11-item, 7-point State Empathy Questionnaire developed by Shen, 2010;  $\alpha = .98$  in study 1,  $\alpha = .97$  in study 2) and dog adoption intention (4-item, 7-point Likert scale, designed by integrating three items from Guo and Barnes (2011) and one item from Wang and Mattila (2015);  $\alpha = .96$  in both studies) were measured, followed by a manipulation check (participants perceived a higher level of first-person point-of-view in the first-person point-of-view conditions ( $M1 = 6.25$ ,  $SD1 = 1.14$  and  $M2 = 5.70$ ,  $SD2 = 1.46$ ) than in the third-person point-of-view conditions ( $M1 = 2.86$ ,  $SD1 = 1.90$  and  $M2 = 2.37$ ,  $SD2 = 1.53$ ) in both studies), demographic questions, and a textual debriefing.

## Results and Discussion

To test hypotheses 1, 2, and 4, we ran two PROCESS macro model 7 (Hayes, 2013, V4.3) analyses, with storytelling point-of-view (1 = third-person, 2 = first-person) as independent variable, empathy level as mediator, visual representation (1 = image, 2 = video) as moderator, and adoption intention as dependent variable. For hypothesis 3, two One-way ANOVAs were conducted, with visual representation (image vs. video) as independent variable, and adoption intention as dependent variable. The findings depicted in Figure 3 and Figure 4 demonstrate that storytelling messages from a first-person point-of-view evoked more robust empathetic responses than storytelling messages from a third-person point-of-view ( $b^* = 2.34$ ,  $t = 3.14$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI [0.86, 3.81] and  $b^* = 2.55$ ,  $t = 3.23$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% CI [0.98, 4.11] among Chinese and Dutch participants, respectively), leading to a higher adoption intention ( $b^* = 0.68$ ,  $t = 8.26$ ,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.52, 0.84] and  $b^* = 0.93$ ,  $t =$

12.17,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [0.78, 1.08] among Chinese and Dutch participants, respectively) among both Chinese and Dutch participants. These findings align with the existing literature highlighting the effectiveness of using a first-person perspective in enhancing empathy and facilitating individuals' immersion in the protagonist's experience (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Mulcahy & Gouldthorp, 2015). Subsequently, empathy prompts pro-social behaviours, such as adopting a dog. The present study's findings provide empirical evidence of the significant role of a first-person point-of-view, mediated by empathy, in shaping adoption intention.

Despite previous research suggesting that videos are expected to be more effective in persuasion than images, the findings of the current study among both groups of participants do not provide support for this expectation. Results revealed that exposure to rich media content would not result in stronger dog adoption intention ( $M = 4.62$ ) than exposure to lean media content ( $M = 4.19$ ,  $p = 0.158$ ) in either China or the Netherlands. Similarly, the moderating role of visual representation was not found in either study. Contrary to previous findings, rich media content did not significantly influence the strength of the relationship between storytelling point-of-view and the level of empathy.

A possible explanation for the lack of significant effects of visual representation could lie in the fact that the voice used in the video was AI-generated, which might result less favourable perceptions and a weaker effect on dog adoption intention than expected (Ischen et al., 2022; Ruijten et al., 2016; Van Zant & Berger, 2020). To better understand the potential effect of the AI-generated voice, a small qualitative follow-up study was conducted (see Figure 5), revealing that general scepticism towards AI might caused the motives of using AI voice to be perceived as immature or not trustworthy. Participants perceiving the third-person (foster family) narrative tended to be more critical of employing AI-generated voice, while interviewees' perceiving the first-person (dog) point-of-view had a higher tolerance of AI-generated voice use. Individuals who follow multiple pet shelters on social

media were more critical of the AI-generated voice than those who do not. They questioned why the fosters did not use their own voices, expressing scepticism about potential hidden motives or undisclosed information. It is, thus, clear that the use of AI voice in the video condition could have impacted the results of the study and warrants further research.

Differences between Chinese and Dutch samples were found regarding the direct effect of the storytelling point-of-view. Partial mediation was found among Chinese participants, which means empathy accounts for some, but not all, of the relationship between the storytelling point-of-view and the dog adoption intention. Other factors other than empathy may also explain the relationship. However, full mediation was found among Dutch participants, which means empathy underlies all of intention. These disparities could potentially be attributed to different expected standards in the two countries. As mentioned above, most Dutch shelters use first-person point-of-view in adoption posts. However, first-person point-of-view is seldom used by any Chinese shelters. Hence, the first-person point-of-view is considered an expected standard in the Netherlands, whereas it is outstanding and creative in China. Creativity and rarity may also explain the relationship. Furthermore, cultural differences can provide an explanation for the disparities. According to Hall's context theory (Hall, 1989), people with different cultures communicate differently. Specifically, people with low-context cultures, such as Dutch culture, tend to communicate directly, while people with high-context cultures, such as Chinese culture, tend to communicate indirectly (Alizadeh Afrouzi, 2021; Wawrzyniak & Kim, 1990). Consequently, first-person point-of-view, which is more direct than third-person point-of-view, may be more effective among Chinese participants due to their freshness towards directness.

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Figure 1. Conceptual Model

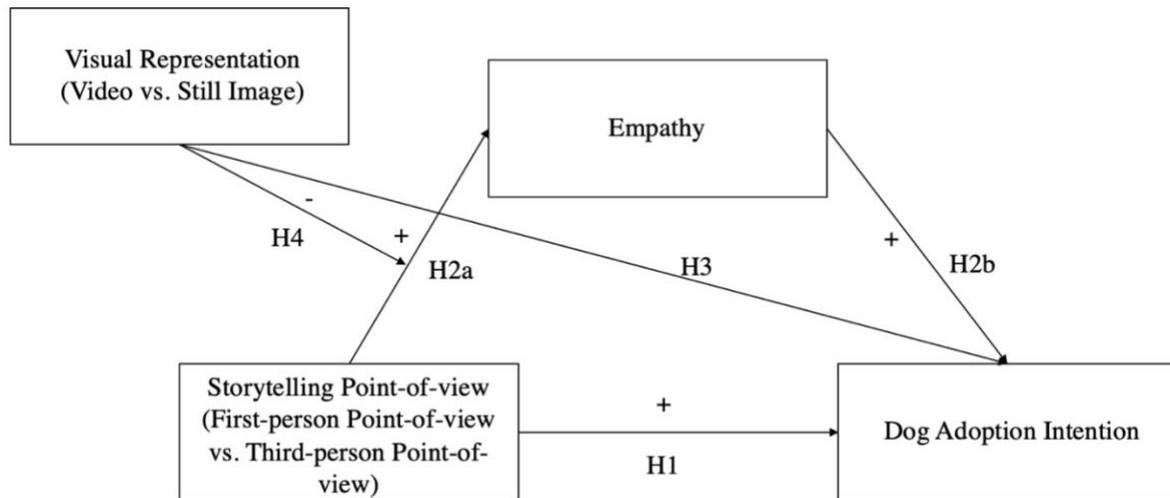


Figure 2. Stimuli

Condition 1 - Dog's point-of-view & high

In English

[video format]



In Chinese

[video format]



Condition 2 - Dog's point-of-view & low

In English



Hi, my name is Sami. I'm dreaming of becoming a home member with you. I am one year old and live with my host family on a farm, and I was abandoned by my family at a young age and was about to die. But I recently celebrated my first birthday: a big milestone for me, who was once so close to death. Keen to make up for lost time, I am a pure bundle of joy! I love making friends – of both the two- and four-legged variety! – and will happily spend the day exploring, playing, and adventuring with my fellow rescues.

I am very confident that I would adjust well to most home environments. I could happily live with another dog or be just as happy lapping up all the attention to myself, and I could also live with dog-savvy children, providing they are mindful of that all-important settling-in process.

I might be happy to spend the day relaxing, but I will also need a family to provide me with mental and physical stimulation. I need to be a happy, contented young dog. So, you've read the details, you've fallen in love, and now you'd like to adopt? I don't blame you...you're only human after all!

Are you ready?

In Chinese



你好，我的名字是萨米。我正梦想着成为你们的家庭成员。我今年一岁了，和我的寄宿家庭一起生活在一个农场里，我在很小的时候就被家人抛弃了，即将死去。但是我最近庆祝了我的一岁生日：对于曾经离死亡如此之近的我来说是一个很大的里程碑。我渴望弥补失去的时间。我喜欢交朋友--无论是两条腿的还是四条腿的！我很乐意花一天的时间与我的伙伴们一起探索、玩耍和冒险。

我非常相信我可以很好地适应大多数家庭环境。我可以很高兴地与另一只狗生活在一起，也可以很高兴地独处，我还可以与懂狗的孩子生活在一起，给他们陪伴。

我也很乐意花一天时间来放松自己，但我也需要一个能够为我提供精神和身体刺激的家庭。我需要成为一只快乐的、活泼的年轻狗狗。

所以，你已经读了这些细节，相信你已经爱上了我，现在你想收养我吗？我不怪你下定决心.....毕竟你只是一个会心动的人类！

你准备好了吗？

Condition 3 - Host family's point-of-view & high

In English

[video format]



In Chinese

[video format]



Condition 4 - Host family's point-of-view & low

In English



Hi, we are Sami's temporary host family. Sami is dreaming of becoming a home member with you. She is one year old and lives with us on a farm, and she was abandoned by us at a young age and was about to die. She recently celebrated her first birthday: a big milestone for her who was once so close to death. Keen to make up for lost time, she is a pure bundle of joy! She loves making friends – of both the two- and four-legged variety! – and will happily spend the day exploring, playing, and adventuring with her fellow rescues.

We are very confident that she would adjust well to most home environments. She could happily live with another dog or be just as happy lapping up all the attention to herself, and she could also live with dog-savvy children, providing they are mindful of that all-important settling-in process.

She might be happy to spend the day relaxing, but she will also need a family to provide her with mental and physical stimulation. She needs to be a happy, contented young dog.

So, you've read the details, you've fallen in love, and now you'd like to adopt? We don't blame you...you're only human after all!

Are you ready?

In Chinese



你好，我是萨米临时寄宿家庭的主人。萨米正梦想着成为你们的家庭成员。她今年一岁了，和我们一起生活在一个农场里，她在很小的时候就被家人抛弃了，即将死去。但是她最近庆祝了她的一岁生日：对于曾经离死亡如此之近的她来说是一个很大的里程碑。她渴望弥补失去的时间。她喜欢交朋友--无论是两条腿的还是四条腿的！她很乐意花一天的时间与我的伙伴们一起探索、玩耍和冒险。

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她也很乐意花一天时间来放松自己，但她也需要一个能够为她提供精神和身体刺激的家庭。她需要成为一只快乐的、活泼的年轻狗狗。

所以，你已经读了这些细节，相信你已经爱上了她，现在你想收养她吗？我不怪你下定决心..... 毕竟你只是一个会心动的人类！

你准备好了吗？

Figure 3. Hypothesis Testing Summary Study 1

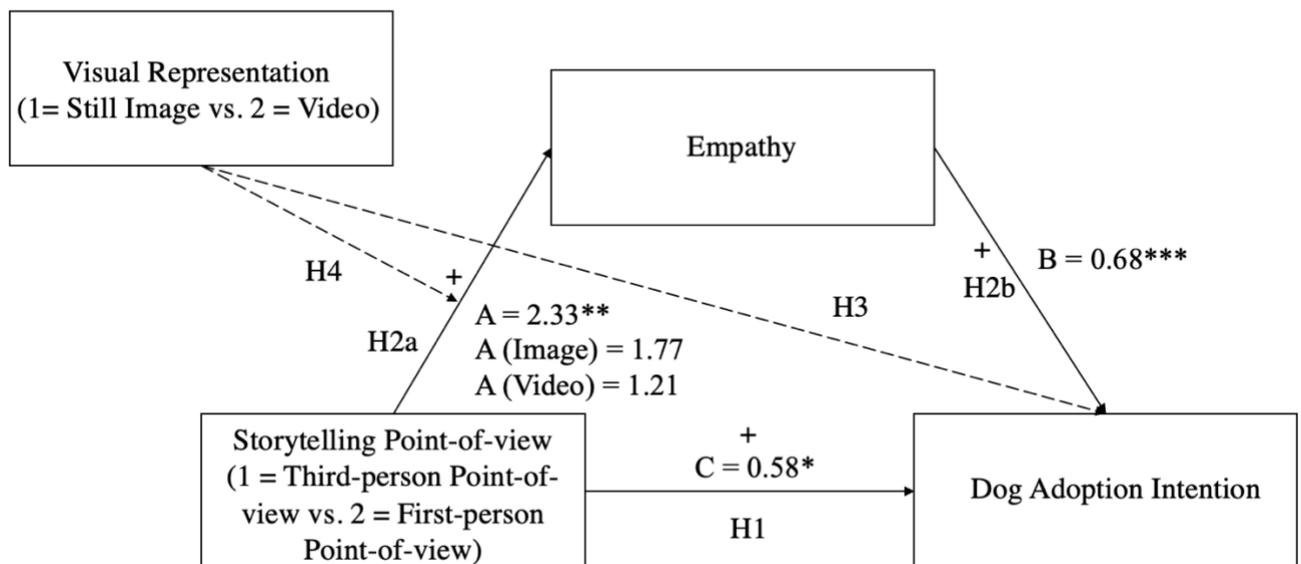


Figure 4. Hypothesis Testing Summary Study 2

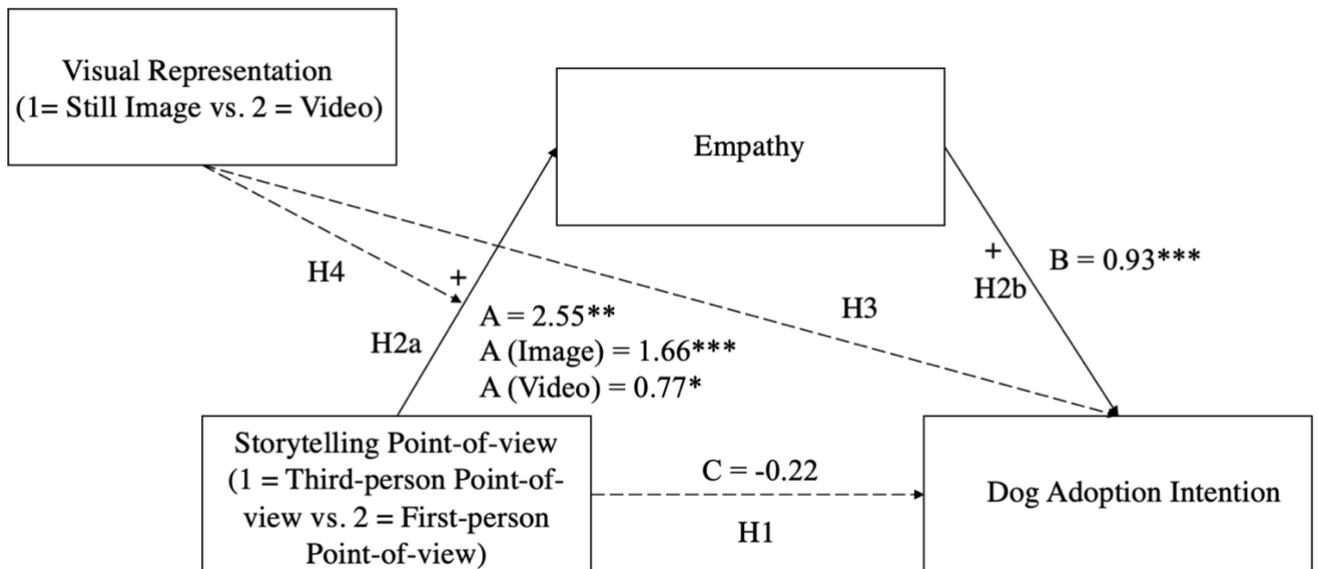


Figure 5. Concept indicator model of the follow-up study

