We're *Not* All in This Together:
Using Empathy-based Advertisements During a Crisis

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How should companies connect with consumers during a crisis?

Companies often use **empathetic messaging** (e.g., "We're all in this together" or "One team") to **create shared emotional experiences** during times of upheaval such as a recession or pandemic **BUT** this can result in **backlash due to perceived self-interested goals.**

METHODS

- **Four pre-registered studies** (N = 2,149) via MTurk or Prolific using **between-subjects design**
- Participants evaluated **hypothetical ads**:
  - in the **context of a crisis** (pandemic or hurricane)
  - for real and imaginary brands
- Main DVs: **ad effectiveness and ad liking**

RESULTS

When a crisis is salient, **consumers perceived generic empathy (vs. neutral) ads as less effective and likable**

When can empathy ads work during a crisis?
→ When **'relevant'** brands use them (Study 1)
→ When brands demonstrate shared experience through:
  - **Specific efforts taken** to mitigate the effect of the crisis (Studies 2-3)
  - **Highlighting brand's own struggles** during crisis (Study 4)

Role of Relevance to Crisis (Study 1)
Consumers view empathy ads from DoorDash more positively than Chevrolet (context of the COVID-19 pandemic)
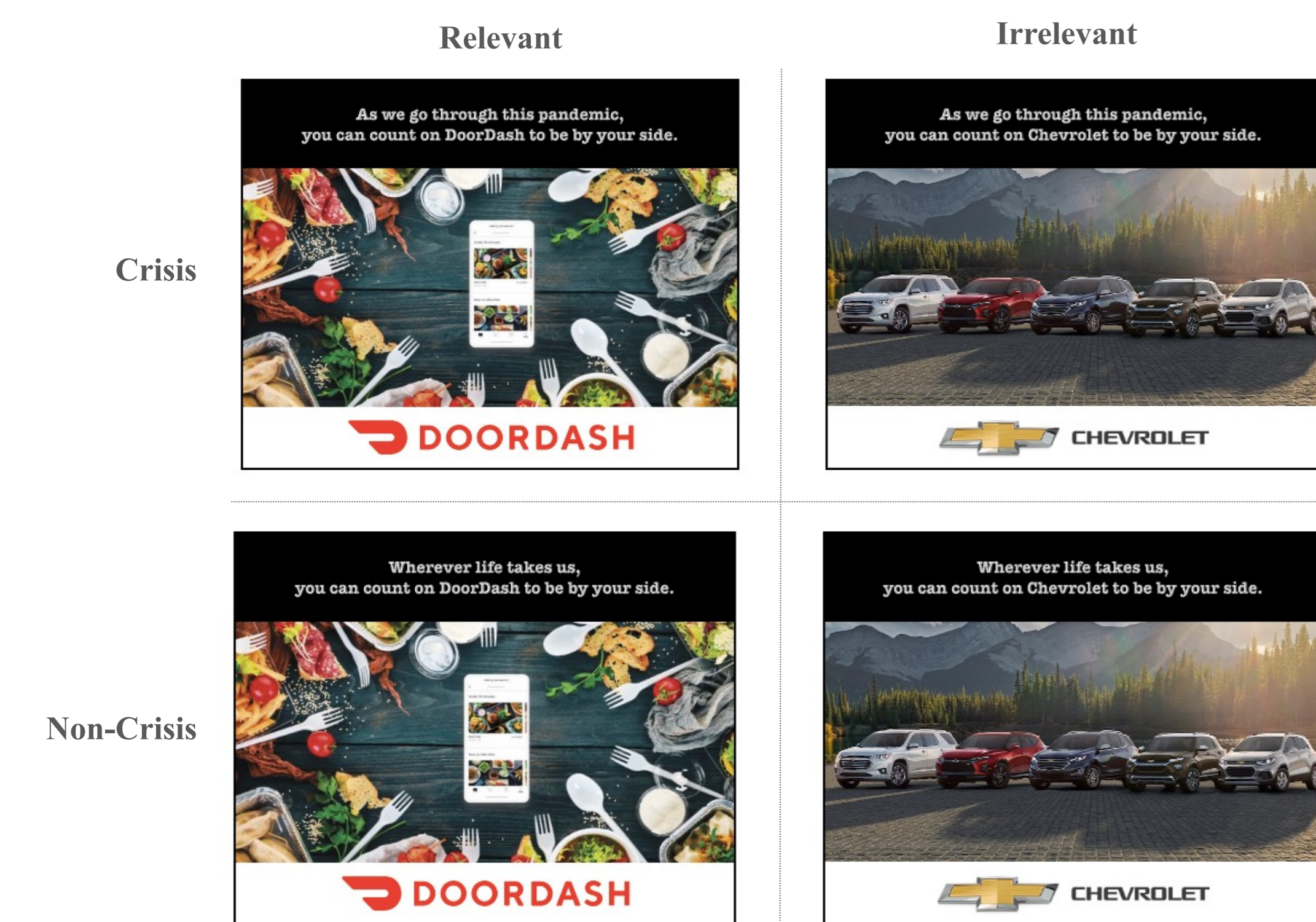

Figure 1. Ad stimuli for DoorDash and Chevrolet for crisis salience x relevance conditions
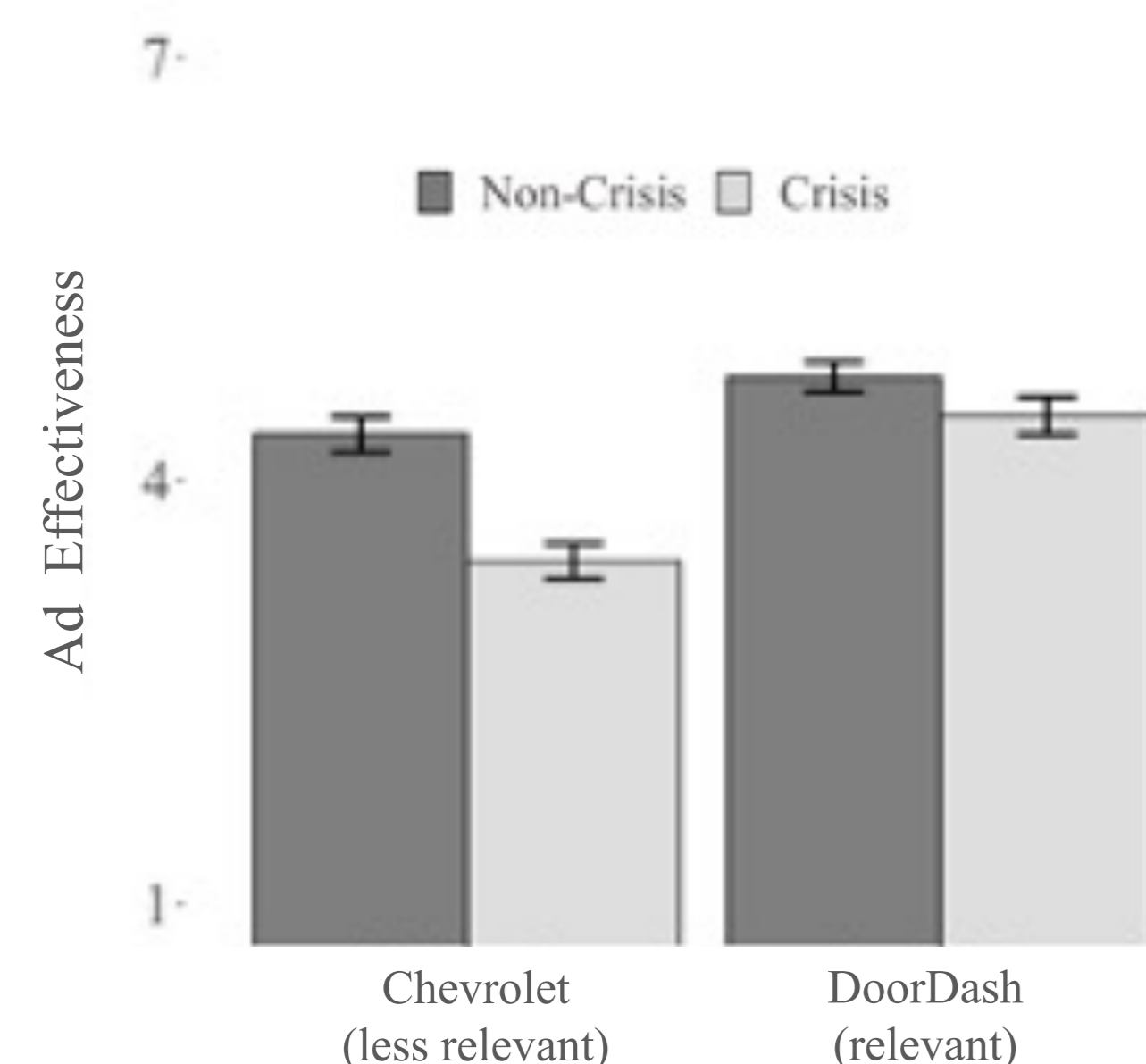

Figure 2. Ratings of ad effectiveness for empathy ads by crisis salience

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Demonstrating Shared Experience Through Effort (Studies 2-3)
Consumers view empathy ads more positively when they highlight efforts taken by the brand (context of the COVID-19 pandemic)

Figure 3. Ad stimuli for control and empathy conditions for DoorDash (from Study 2)
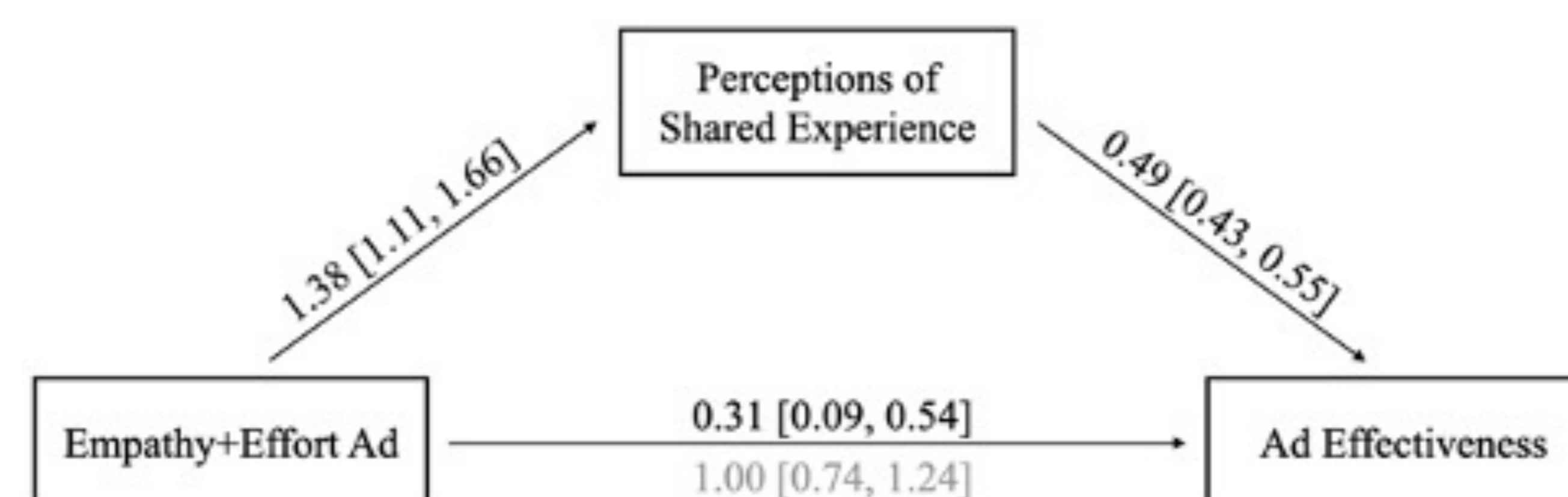

Figure 4. Mediation model for proposed mechanism for ad effectiveness (from Study 3 with Chevrolet)

Demonstrating Shared Experience Through Own Struggles (Study 4)
Consumers view empathy ads more positively when they highlight brand's own struggles (context of Hurricane Ian)
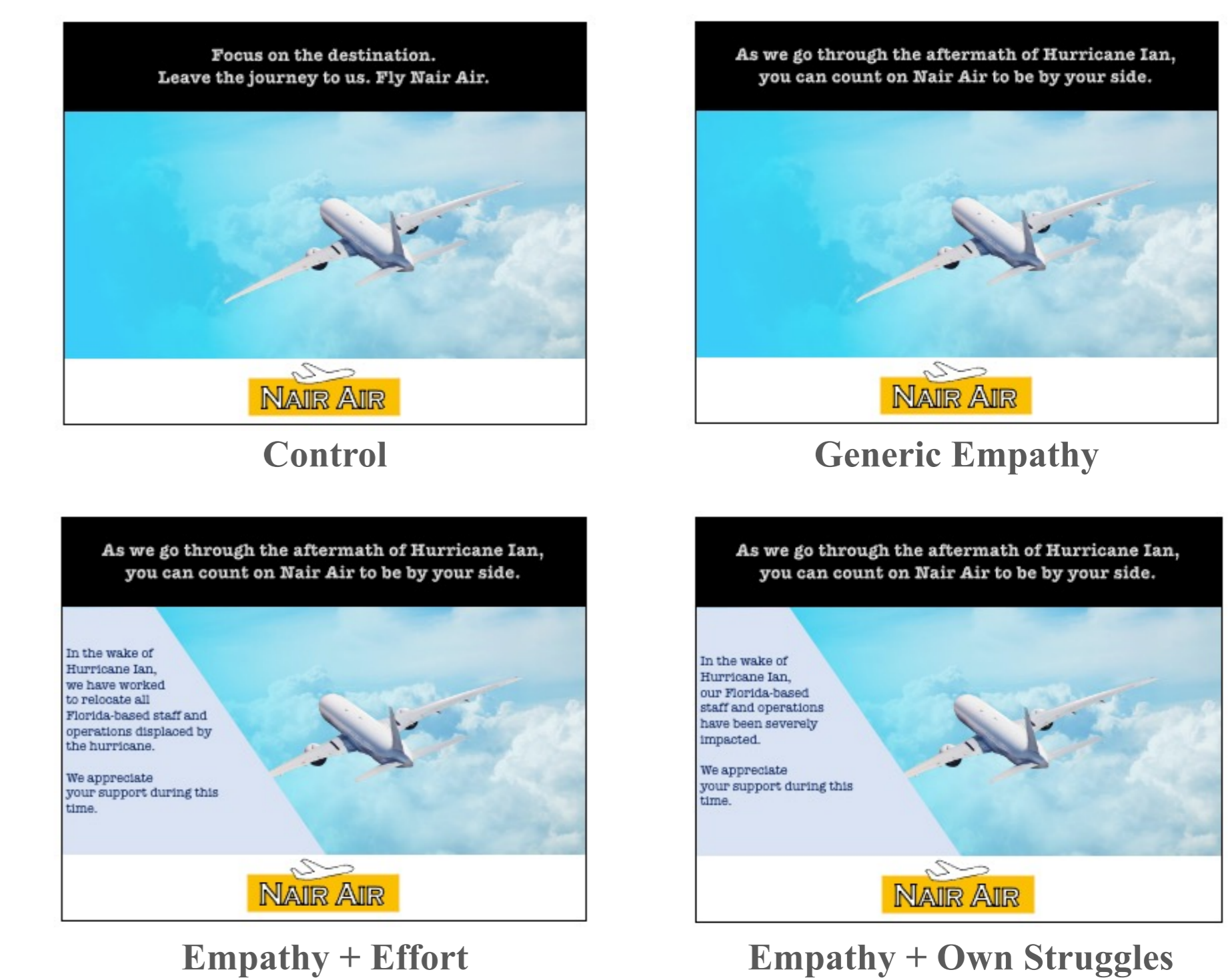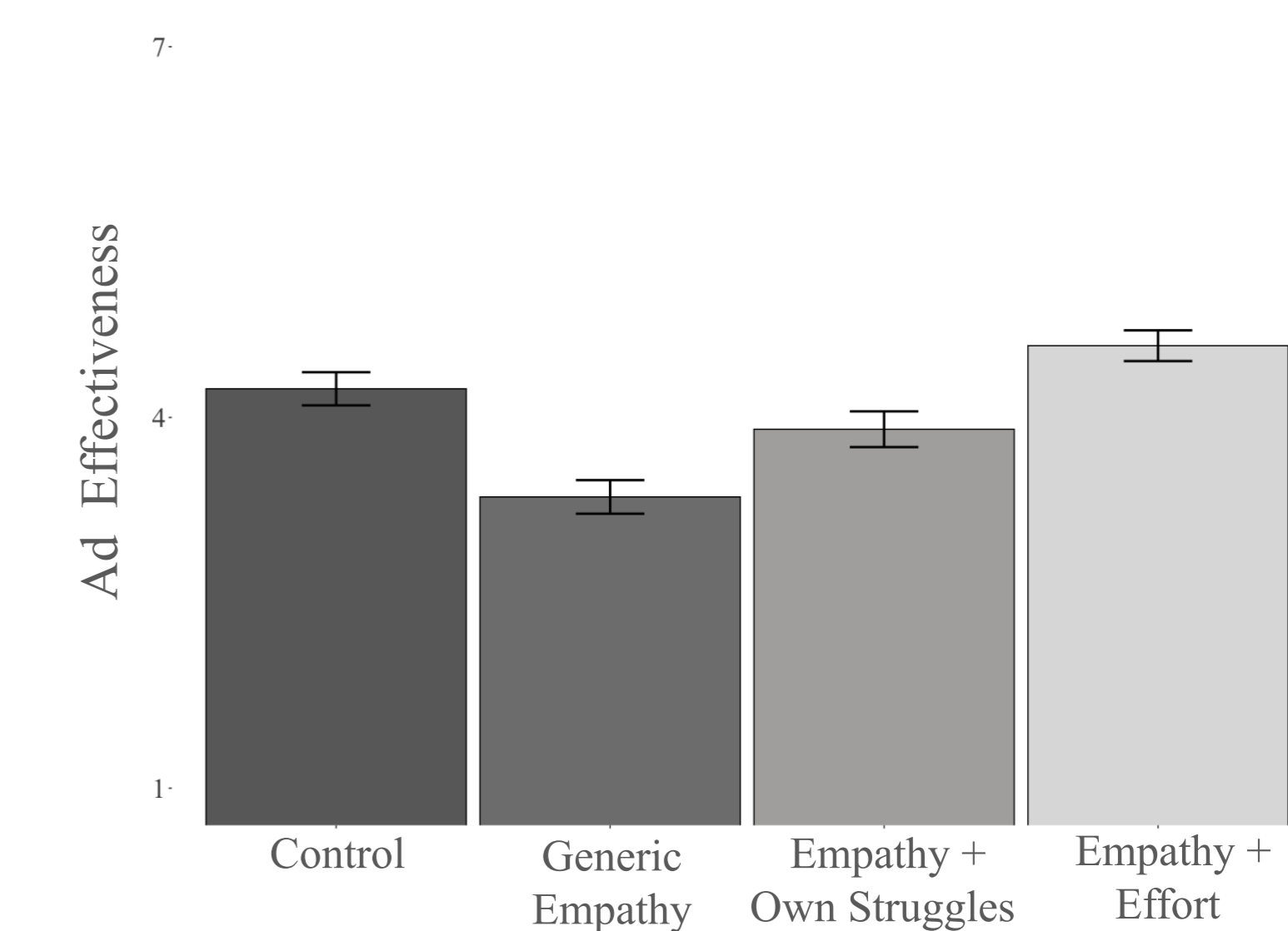

Figure 5. Ad stimuli for imaginary airline for control and empathy conditions

Figure 6. Ratings of ad effectiveness by ad type