

Consumers' self-identify and effectiveness of pet-friendly hotel advertisements in China

Submitted to 2024 MAG Scholar Conference on Business, Marketing, and Tourism, Macau SAR, China

Xing Han, Ph.D.

Lecturer

School of Economics and Management (School of Tourism)

Dalian University

10 Xuefu Street, Dalian Economic and Technological Development Zone,

Dalian, 116622, China

xinghanida@hotmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4234-9636>

Professor Kara Chan, PhD and SFHEA

Associate Dean (Teaching & Learning)

School of Communication

Hong Kong Baptist University

Room 914 or 930, Communication and Visual Arts Building

5 Hereford Road, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong

karachan@hkbu.edu.hk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9805-7299>

The global rise in pet ownership, particularly in China, has led to an increased demand for pet-inclusive services in the hospitality industry. In response, hotels have started offering pet-friendly accommodations and services, and incorporating more targeted advertising strategies to attract this niche market. However, the effectiveness of such advertising is contingent upon a nuanced understanding of pet owners' self-identity and their perceptions of the benefits communicated in the ads.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in the literature on self-identity and its role in consumer behavior. Existing research suggests that consumers tend to engage in behaviors that are consistent with, or can enhance, their self-identity (Sirgy, 1982). This notion is widely accepted in tourism studies, where researchers have found that tourists' self-identity influences their choice of destination and travel-related activities (Bond and Falk, 2013; Lewis et al., 2010). In the context of pet-friendly hotels, pet owners' self-identity as either "pet owners" or "pet parents" is likely to have a significant impact on their perceptions and attitudes toward advertising. Pet owners who view their pets as family members and surrogate children (Dotson and Hyatt, 2008; Chan and Tung, 2023) may respond more favorably to advertisements that portray them as "pet parents" and emphasize the benefits to their pets (Tang et al., 2022). Conversely, pet owners who see their pets more as companions may prefer advertisements that highlight the benefits to themselves or the pet-owner relationship.

A thorough literature review guides us to develop a 2x3 factorial design experiment. We examine how different portrayals of customer identity (pet owner vs. pet parent) and benefit claims (pet benefit, owner benefit, and benefit to pet-owner relationship) influence consumer attitudes toward the advertisement, advertising effectiveness, and perceived hotel image. Six advertisements of a fictional pet-friendly hotel were designed exhausting all combinations of the 2x3 conditions and were randomly distributed among 185 valid participants. Figure 1 shows one of the six advertising stimuli.



Figure 1 An example of the advertising stimulus

The results indicate that advertisements portraying customers as "pet parents" elicit more favorable responses compared to those portraying them as "pet owners". The interaction between participants' self-identity as pet parents and the benefit claims in the advertisements significantly impacts participants' attitudes and perceptions. Specifically, advertisements emphasizing benefits to pets are more effective for participants who identify as pet parents, while advertisements highlighting owner benefits or the pet-owner relationship are more effective for those who identify as pet owners.

These findings highlight the importance of the role of pet parent identity in moderating consumers' responses to pet-friendly hotel advertisements. Pet owners who view their pets as family members and consider themselves "pet parents" are more responsive to advertising that resonates with their self-identity and emphasizes the benefits to their pets. In contrast, pet owners who see their pets more as companions may prefer advertisements that focus on the benefits to themselves or the pet-owner relationship.

The study makes several important contributions to the existing literature. First, it adds to the growing body of research on pet-related tourism and hospitality marketing, an area that has received limited empirical attention. Second, it provides valuable insights into the role of self-identity in shaping consumer responses to advertising, particularly in the context of pet ownership. Third, it offers practical implications for hotel marketers in developing more targeted and effective strategies for the pet-friendly niche market.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that pet-friendly hotel advertising should be tailored to resonate with pet owners' self-identity and emphasize the benefits that are most salient to them. For pet owners who identify as "pet parents," advertisements should highlight the benefits to their pets, such as the availability of pet-centric amenities, specialized services, and a welcoming environment. For pet owners who see their pets more as companions, advertisements should focus on the benefits to the owners, such as the convenience and comfort of traveling with their pets, or the strengthening of the pet-owner relationship.

Future research could explore additional factors that may influence the effectiveness of pet-friendly hotel advertising, such as the influence of cultural differences. Furthermore, qualitative studies could provide deeper insights into the nuances of pet owners' self-identity and how it shapes their travel preferences and decision-making processes.

In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of factors that influence the effectiveness of pet-friendly hotel advertising in China. By understanding the role of pet parent identity in moderating consumer responses, hotel marketers can develop more targeted and impactful advertising strategies that resonate with their target audience and contribute to the overall success of their pet-friendly offerings.

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