

# PAWS AND PERSUASION:

## How Dog Influencers Shape Hotel Booking Decisions

ROSEN RESEARCH REVIEW

WEI WEI, LU ZHANG, TIANYU YING & YANYAN ZHENG

When visual appeal is low, content quality becomes the key driver of booking intention.

The research by Wei, Zhang, Ying, and Zheng explores how pet influencers—specifically dog influencers on Instagram—impact hotel booking intentions. Through two experiments, the study reveals that message appeal (rational vs. emotional) interacts with audience characteristics like prior experience and perceived attractiveness of the pet influencer. Rational messages are more persuasive for less experienced travelers and when the pet influencer is perceived as less attractive. Emotional messages, while engaging, are less effective in these contexts. This research uncovers the nuanced power of pet influencer marketing and offers practical strategies for hospitality marketers seeking to tap into the booming “cute economy” of social media.

### WHEN DOGS BECOME DIGITAL BRAND AMBASSADORS

In today’s social media landscape, influencers come in all shapes and species. From fashionistas to foodies, and now—furry friends. Pet influencers, especially dogs with massive Instagram followings, are emerging as powerful voices in marketing. With millions of followers, accounts like “Jiff Pom” and “Nala Cat” are not just adorable—they’re influential.

This study dives into the world of pet influencer marketing, asking a simple but powerful question: Can a dog’s Instagram post influence your decision to book a hotel?

The answer, as it turns out, depends on how the message is crafted and who is reading it. Wei and colleagues conducted two experiments to explore how message appeal (rational vs. emotional) interacts with two key factors: the audience’s prior experience traveling with pets and their perception of the pet influencer’s attractiveness.

The findings reveal a fascinating dynamic. Rational messages—those that focus on facts and features—are more effective for audiences with less experience traveling with pets. Emotional messages—those that

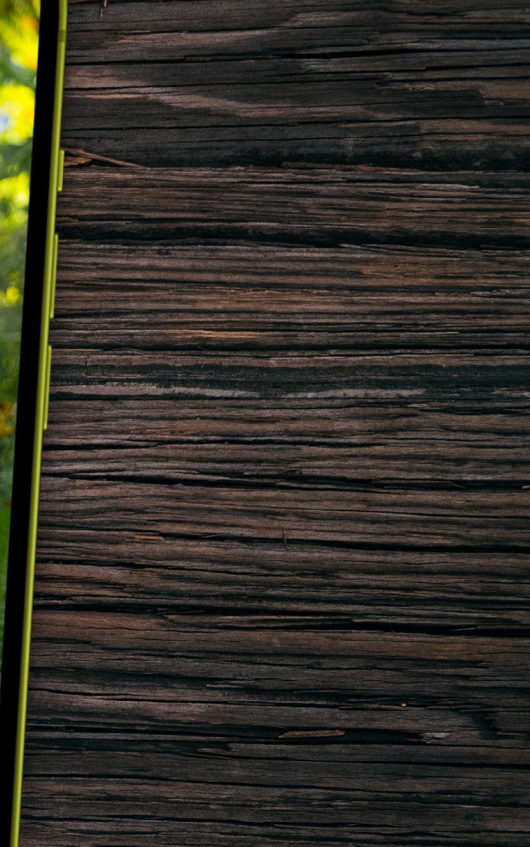
evoke feelings—do not significantly outperform rational ones for experienced travelers. Similarly, when a pet influencer is perceived as less attractive, rational messages drive stronger booking intentions. But when the influencer is seen as highly attractive, message appeal matters less.

This research sheds light on the psychology behind pet influencer marketing and offers actionable insights for hospitality brands looking to connect with pet-loving travelers. In the age of the “cute economy,” where animal images dominate social media, understanding how to craft the right message is more important than ever.

### THE SCIENCE OF CUTE: WHY PET POSTS PERSUADE

Pet influencers are more than just adorable distractions—they’re strategic marketing tools. Brands have long used animals in advertising, from Taco Bell’s chihuahua to Target’s bull terrier. But the rise of social media has given pets their own platforms, turning them into micro-celebrities with loyal followings.

This study builds on existing research in influencer marketing, persuasive communication, and hospitality behavior. It focuses on two types of message appeal: rational appeal, which presents objective, fact-based



content such as hotel amenities and pet-friendly features; and emotional appeal, which conveys subjective, feeling-based content like joy, gratitude, and excitement.

The researchers also examine two moderating factors. One is prior experience, referring to how frequently the audience has traveled with pets. The other is perceived attractiveness, which considers how visually appealing the pet influencer appears to viewers.

Drawing on theories like the Elaboration Likelihood Model and Source Credibility Theory, the study hypothesizes that rational messages will be more effective for less experienced travelers and when the pet influencer is less attractive. Emotional messages, on the other hand, may resonate more with experienced travelers or when the influencer is highly attractive.

Two experiments test these hypotheses. The first explores the interaction between message appeal and prior experience, while the second investigates the role of perceived attractiveness.

The results confirm that message effectiveness is context-dependent. Audience characteristics and influencer traits shape how messages

are received and whether they lead to booking intentions.

This research fills a gap in the literature by focusing on consumer reactions to pet influencer content—an area previously dominated by studies of influencer account managers. It also expands the concept of attractiveness beyond human influencers, applying it to pets in a novel way.

## TWO EXPERIMENTS, ONE FRENCH BULLDOG

The researchers conducted two quasi-experiments using mocked Instagram posts featuring a cheerful French bulldog in a hotel setting. In the first study, 129 dog owners were shown posts with either rational or emotional appeal. Their prior experience traveling with pets was measured, and booking intention was assessed using a validated scale. In the second study, 225 participants evaluated the attractiveness of a pet influencer and were randomly

40. In the second study, 61.7 percent were male, and the same percentage fell within the 26–40 age range. Most held bachelor's or master's degrees, and over 90 percent followed dog influencers on social media.

This demographic represents a prime target for pet-friendly hospitality marketing—tech-savvy, pet-loving, and socially engaged.

## WHEN RATIONAL WINS OVER CUTE

In the first study, participants with low prior experience traveling with pets responded more positively to rational messages, which led to significantly higher booking intentions. For those with high experience, the type of message appeal made no notable difference. In the second study, when the pet influencer was perceived as less attractive, rational messages proved more persuasive. However, when the influencer was seen as highly attractive, the message appeal had no significant impact.

**“WE DISCOVERED THAT RATIONAL MESSAGES FROM PET INFLUENCERS ARE ESPECIALLY PERSUASIVE FOR NEW PET TRAVELERS AND WHEN THE INFLUENCER'S ATTRACTIVENESS IS PERCEIVED AS LOW.”**

assigned to view either a rational or emotional message. Booking intention was again measured.

Manipulation checks confirmed that participants correctly identified the message appeal type. Realism checks ensured the scenarios felt authentic, and attention checks filtered out inattentive responses. Statistical analysis using Hayes' PROCESS model revealed significant interaction effects in both studies, supporting the hypotheses.

## WHO FOLLOWS DOG INFLUENCERS?

Participants were recruited from Qualtrics and MTurk panels. All were current dog owners and active social media users. In the first study, 62.8 percent of participants were male, and 54.3 percent were aged between 26 and

These findings suggest that rational content—highlighting amenities, services, and logistics—is more effective when uncertainty is high, such as in cases of low experience or low perceived attractiveness. Emotional content may be less impactful under these conditions. The study confirms that message appeal interacts with audience and influencer characteristics, shaping consumer behavior in nuanced ways.

## THE CUTE ECONOMY MEETS CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

According to Wei and colleagues, pet influencer marketing is not just about cuteness—it's about context. The effectiveness of a message depends on who is reading it and how they perceive the influencer.





Rational messages highlighting pet-friendly amenities drive stronger booking intentions for new pet travelers.

“TO BOOST BOOKINGS, HOTELS SHOULD TAILOR PET INFLUENCER CONTENT BASED ON AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE AND INFLUENCER APPEAL—RATIONAL MESSAGES WORK BEST WHEN UNCERTAINTY IS HIGH.”

For new pet travelers, rational messages help reduce uncertainty and build trust. These individuals seek facts over fluff. For seasoned travelers, emotional messages may evoke nostalgia or joy, but they don't significantly outperform rational ones.

Similarly, when a pet influencer is less visually appealing, audiences tend to focus more on the content itself, making rational messages more effective. In contrast, when the influencer is highly attractive, the visual appeal may overshadow the message, rendering both types equally persuasive.

This dynamic aligns with the Elaboration Likelihood Model, which suggests that people process messages either through deep thinking (central route) or surface cues (peripheral route). Attractiveness and experience influence which route they take. The study also broadens the concept of attractiveness to include non-human influencers, offering a fresh perspective on how pets can shape consumer decisions. In short, pet influencer marketing is not just about posting cute

pictures—it's about crafting the right message for the right audience.

HOW TO MAKE PET INFLUENCERS WORK FOR YOUR HOTEL

For hospitality marketers, this study offers a strategic playbook for effective pet influencer campaigns. Understanding the audience is key. When targeting first-time pet travelers, marketers should use rational messages that emphasize amenities, services, and logistics. If the pet influencer is less conventionally attractive, factual content tends to be more persuasive. In cases where the influencer is highly attractive, either message type may be effective.

Choosing the right influencer is also crucial. Not all cute animals are equally persuasive, so selecting influencers whose aesthetic and persona align with the brand is essential.

Narratives should be tailored to the audience. Emotional appeals may resonate with experienced travelers, while rational appeals work better for those seeking reassurance. Providing useful content—such as information about nearby dog parks, pet-friendly restaurants, and emergency services—builds trust and adds value.

To boost account appeal, pet influencers should be encouraged to develop engaging personas and consistent content styles, whether fact-based or emotion-driven.

Strategic collaboration between hotels and pet influencers can showcase pet-friendly amenities in

authentic and engaging ways. By understanding the psychology behind pet influencer marketing, hotels can transform adorable posts into real bookings.

FUTURE OPPORTUNITIES BEYOND DOGS AND INSTAGRAM

This study opens the door to a wider exploration of pet influencer marketing. Future research could expand beyond dogs to include other animals such as cats and birds, testing whether the findings apply across species. It could also examine platforms like TikTok, where content formats and audience behaviors differ significantly from Instagram.

Researchers may explore additional message appeals beyond the rational and emotional—such as humor or fear—to understand their effectiveness. The role of sponsorship disclosure deserves attention too, particularly in how it influences consumer trust.

Another promising direction involves analyzing the impact of prior experiences, both positive and negative, to refine audience segmentation strategies. Additionally, future studies could assess how pet influencers perform when promoting utilitarian products, where functional benefits may outweigh emotional appeal.

As pet influencer marketing continues to evolve, understanding these nuances will be essential for designing campaigns that resonate across diverse platforms and industries.

# RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS



Dr. Wei's research agenda is driven by her strong desire to advance the understanding of human psychology and behaviors within the evolving landscapes of hospitality and tourism. Her primary research tackles some of the most urgent issues in the field, such as customer-to-customer incivility and interactions, influencer marketing, and the effects of emerging technological innovations on consumer behaviors and experiences.

**DR. WEI WEI**  
**WEI.WEI@UCF.EDU**

## AUTHORS' LIST

Wei Wei (Rosen College of Hospitality Management, University of Central Florida)

Lu Zhang (The School of Hospitality Business, Michigan State University, Broad College of Business)

Tianyu Ying (School of Management, Zhejiang University)

Yanyan Zheng (Department of Hospitality, Event and Tourism Management, University of North Texas)

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## AUTHORS' RESPONSE

### Why did you choose pet influencers as the focus of this study?

“ We were fascinated by the rise of pet influencers and their growing impact on consumer behavior. With so many people traveling with pets, we saw an opportunity to explore how these furry influencers could shape decisions in hospitality. The emotional bond between pet owners and their animals is powerful, and we wanted to understand how that bond translates into marketing effectiveness. Pet influencers are a unique blend of entertainment and persuasion, and we felt they deserved closer academic attention.

### What surprised you most about the findings?

“ We were surprised by how consistently rational messages outperformed emotional ones in certain contexts. It challenged the assumption that emotional appeals are always more effective in tourism marketing. The role of perceived attractiveness was also intriguing—when the pet influencer was less attractive, people paid more attention to the content itself. It reminded us that even in the “cute economy,” substance matters.



**Pet influencers are becoming trusted sources for travel decisions among dog owners.**