

How ads with dogs and cats affect consumer behavior

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Researchers from University of Massachusetts Lowell, University of South Carolina, and Hong Kong Polytechnic University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines how pet-related

experiences affect people's consumption-related decisions.

The study is authored by Lei Jia, Xiaojing Yang, and Yuwei Jiang.

Pets are prevalent and play important roles in consumers' daily lives. For example, 68 percent of U.S. households, or 84.6 million homes, own a pet. Dogs and cats are the most popular pets, with 48 percent of U.S. households (60 million homes) owning at least a dog and 37 percent of U.S. households (47 million homes) owning at least a cat. Pet adoption rates have climbed significantly, with about one in five households having acquired a dog or cat since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pets also frequently appear in popular culture, mass media, and [marketing communications](#). For example, Target chose a dog as its brand mascot, Microsoft featured [dogs](#) in its 2020 holiday commercial to inspire people to find joy, and Wells Fargo used a cat in its commercial to advertise its suspicious card activity alert services.

Specifically, this new research examines the effects of pet exposure (e.g., recalling experience interacting with dogs or cats or viewing ads featuring a dog or a cat as the spokesperson) on consumers' subsequent judgments and decision making, even in pets-unrelated domains. The researchers demonstrate that exposure to dogs (cats) makes consumers subsequently more promotion- (prevention-) focused, meaning that consumers will become more eager (cautious) in pursuing a goal and more risk-seeking (risk averse) when making decisions. Jia explains that "These effects occur because pet exposure experiences remind consumers of the stereotypical temperaments and behaviors of the pet species."

These results are supported across multiple product and service contexts. For example, exposure to dogs (cats) led research participants to choose riskier (risk-averse) options in decision making, such as choosing the riskier stock investment option (the less risky mutual fund investment

option), and more willing to risk monetary compensation for a chance to win an even a bigger payment. In addition, exposure to dogs (cats) led participants to prefer ad messages that are framed with a promotion (prevention) focus or messages featuring eagerness (vigilance) appeals.

Furthermore, secondary data results show that people in US states with a higher percentage of dog ownership are more interested in searching promotion- (prevention)-focused words online and are more likely to get COVID-19 during the pandemic. The proposed effects are moderated by pet stereotypicality, such that the effects of pet exposure on consumer behavior only persist to the extent consumers are reminded of the stereotypical temperaments and behaviors of the pet species.

Yang describes the novel implications to marketers. "First, marketers should consider crafting their advertising messages differently or recommending different products and services when they target consumers depending on their pet exposure situations. For example, to enhance the effectiveness of advertising appeals or communication messages, marketers should emphasize promotion-focused goals such as gains and non-gains if they are targeting dog owners or after consumers are exposed to dogs or dog-featuring stimuli such as in an advertisement. Conversely, they should focus on prevention-focused goals such as losses and non-losses if they are pursuing cat owners or after consumers who are exposed to cats or cat-featuring stimuli. Importantly, our findings show that this advice holds even when the advertised product or service has nothing to do with pets or pet products."

The research offers important insights into how to incorporate pets into marketing communications. One consideration is the type of product or service being advertised. For products or services mainly perceived as promotion-focused (e.g., stock investments, sports cars), featuring dogs in the ad is likely to increase the ad's persuasiveness. For products or services deemed more prevention-focused (e.g., mutual fund investment,

insurance), featuring cats may increase the ad's appeal.

Jiang adds that "Marketers should ensure that stereotypical pet temperaments are made salient in the message. For example, the eagerness aspect of the dog or the cautiousness aspect of the cat should be highlighted. Otherwise, the intended effects of featuring pets in the ad may not be achieved." Lastly, the finding that pets and pet ownership are potentially related to COVID-19 transmission rates and prevention behaviors could shed new light on policies related to the prevention of COVID-19 and potentially other infectious diseases. For example, policymakers in states with more dog owners could design more customized educational programs and materials related to the diseases. Alternatively, when designing ads to prevent the transmission of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, cats could be incorporated as a spokesperson and/or the cat temperament can be referenced in the message to enhance the effectiveness of the ad.

More information: Lei Jia et al, EXPRESS: The Pet Exposure Effect: Exploring The Differential Impact of Dogs Versus Cats on Consumer Mindsets, *Journal of Marketing* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/00222429221078036](https://doi.org/10.1177/00222429221078036)

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