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Citation	Tourism Culture & Communication, 22(4), 387-392 https://doi.org/10.3727/109830422X16420405391961
Issue Date	2022-12-27
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/87746
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Type	article
File Information	TCC 22#4 pp 387-392.pdf



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RESEARCH NOTE

THE ROLE OF CATTERIES AND BOARDING KENNELS IN ENABLING TOURIST MOBILITY

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Pets are increasingly being recognized as family members, leaving their owners with difficult decisions about how to care for them during periods of travel. Tourists can either travel with their pets, leave them in the care of family or friends, or use a paid service provided by an animal boarding facility or “pet hotel.” We empirically explore the latter option and theorize pet hotels as enablers of tourist mobility in tourist-generating regions. User-generated content (UGC) consisting of textual pet owner reviews on Google Reviews and Facebook from boarding kennels and catteries across six countries are analyzed using qualitative content analysis. We identify three key themes revealing what users of these services emphasize in their reviews: first, catteries and boarding kennel enable pet owners to travel; second, these facilities alleviate tourists’ feelings of guilt or worry; third, pets are imagined to be enjoying their own holidays while at the facilities. This research note sheds light on a growing cultural phenomenon relating to tourism among a globally mobile population for whom pets substitute or extend their human families.

Key words: Tourism enablers; Boarding kennel; Cattery; Pet hotel;
User-generated content (UGC)

Introduction

There is increasing recognition of the role played by pets in contemporary society. Many pet owners see their companion animals as cherished family

members (Armstrong et al., 2001; Vänskä, 2014). An example of this emotional bond can be seen in reports that older people sometimes refuse evacuation during disasters if their pet cannot be taken with them (Douglas et al., 2019). Similarly, Chen et

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al. (2011) identified that the ability for pet owners to take their pets along for leisure activities resulted in heightened motivation to attend the activities. Research is only just beginning to reveal the myriad connections between pet ownership and tourism (e.g., Carr, 2017; Markwell, 2015; Wu & Chang, 2021). This research note contributes to an emerging literature by exploring the role of pet accommodation for cats (catteries) and dogs (boarding kennels) in enabling tourist mobility. This species focus reflects the fact that cats and dogs are the most prevalent pets kept by humans, and the most common boarding guests at “pet hotels” around the world.

Pet owners seeking to go on holiday must either bring their pet with them, leave the pet in the care of family or friends, or use a paid service provided by an animal boarding facility (Markwell, 2015). Research shows that there are certain pet-specific constraints to travel and that owners who have an emotional attachment to their pet are likely to take the pet with them, unless they can safely leave the pet in good care in their home region (Blichfeldt & Sakáčová, 2018). However, increasing global mobility (Eurostat, 2020), where people work and live far away from relatives, or with limited networks of friends, can hinder people from being able to leave their pets in the care of friends and family. Even in the absence of logistical constraints, pet owners may be faced with difficult ethical decisions regarding the welfare of their animals. For example, research indicates that both cats and dogs can experience anxiety associated with separation from their owners (Schwartz, 2003).

Tourism and leisure research related to pets has so far mostly considered means by which animals can travel along with their owners (e.g., Carr & Cohen, 2009; Chen et al., 2013; Gretzel & Hardy, 2015; Kirillova et al., 2015; Wu & Cheng, 2020). Carr and Cohen (2009) argued that dog owners prefer to take their pets along on vacation, but that does not always become reality, due to the lack of pet-friendly accommodation. This reveals “a gap in the tourism industry” relating to services for pet owners (Carr & Cohen, 2009, p. 301). People can overcome constraints of traveling with pets through recreational vehicle (RV) travel (Gretzel & Hardy, 2015; Pearce & Wu, 2018). However, not everyone wants to, or can, travel with an RV due

to destinations, time constraints, or the fact that pets may suffer from motion sickness (Mariti et al., 2012; Rodan, 2010). Further constraints to travel specifically related to pets are the need for pet identification, vaccination, transportation, accommodation (Leggat & Speare, 2000), stress, costs, and the behavior of the pet (Ying et al., 2021).

There are clearly considerable barriers to travel with pets, both locally as well as internationally, and to leaving pets with family or friends. Decisions about taking pets traveling, as well as leaving them at home, implies a whole series of enablers and constraints. Thus, by examining boarding kennels and catteries as prerequisites for tourism, this article lends understanding about tourist-generating regions and about enablers of tourist mobility. This study is exploratory and contributes new knowledge about catteries and boarding kennels as important tourism-enabling services, as well as a basis to further investigate perceptions of tourism among both pet service hosts and pet owners.

Methodology

The study analyzed user-generated content (UGC) consisting of textual pet owner reviews on Google Reviews and Facebook. These data sources are not widely used in tourism research, except for a few isolated cases (Fine et al., 2017; Lee & Yu, 2018; Wu et al., 2014). In total, 119 catteries and boarding kennels were examined across 12 cities in 6 countries (see Table 1) to exemplify the global reach of the services provided, as well as commonalities and differences between cultures. A convenience sample was used to select locations familiar to the authors where it was known that catteries and boarding kennels exist.

Table 1
Case Locations of the Pet Boarding Facility Reviews

Country	Cities	Facilities	Reviews
Australia	2	30	670
China (SAR)	1	7	488
Italy	2	23	1,037
Japan	3	13	363
Norway	2	12	232
Sweden	2	23	319

The business selection was limited by a time–space distance from the city center, to simulate a customer choice set. An approximate 1-hr-long round trip by any means from a city’s center was used as the frame. Google Reviews are accessible through Google’s Map function, and it allows searches to be made based on business classifications. All businesses connected to pet boarding services for cats and dogs within that 1-hr driving radius were included. Each business’ social media pages were also analyzed separately, and supplementary data were collected. All reviews for each business were collected manually and placed in spreadsheets. The reviews were sorted in a descending order based on when they were written. Dates, names of reviewers, their full comments, and possible replies from business owners were placed in separate columns.

The study is not claiming to be generalizable in positivist terms, but rather to function as a geographically broad and diverse qualitative sample. For example, some businesses had no Facebook pages, some did not have webpages, though Google Reviews is a convenient tool as it classifies businesses into categories, regardless of whether or not the business owners are actively using social media. Data collection took place between August 2019 and February 2021, but the reviews were posted in a wider time range. All data were collected in the language they were written and, when necessary, translated into English. All authors are fluent in English, two in Norwegian and Swedish, and one in Italian. Comments in Japanese and Chinese were interpreted with the help of translation tools and confirmed by people who speak the languages.

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which is “a method for systematic and rule-guided classification and description of text material considering latent content and contexts” (Mayring, 2003, cited in Burla et al., 2008, p. 113), providing a window into individuals’ “life worlds” (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Inductive coding was used to identify prominent aspects of the reviewers’ experiences in leaving their pet at a cattery or boarding kennel. When analyzing qualitative data as a team, it is important to ensure that coding is consistent. There was constant dialogue between the researchers in order to ensure trustworthiness and intercoder reliability (Burla et al., 2008). The codes were then aggregated into

higher level themes, three of which are presented in the following results section. Names of the catteries and boarding kennels are not used in the data extracts in order to preserve user confidentiality and have been replaced with “XX.”

Results

In this section, we present and illustrate three key themes that were developed from the qualitative content analysis of the cattery and boarding kennel online reviews. This analysis indicates that highly rated pet boarding facilities not only enable tourist mobility in a purely practical sense but also allow tourists to derive greater enjoyment from their holidays by alleviating feelings of guilt or worry about the well-being of their pet. This affective dimension of the tourists’ reviews is also found in the final theme in which pets are imagined to be enjoying their own holidays at the boarding facility while their owners are away.

Theme 1: Catteries and Boarding Kennels Enable Tourist Mobility

The reviews revealed tourists’ concerns about their ability to travel given the responsibility of having a pet. As this first extract illustrates, some reviewers worried that holidays would no longer be an option for them until they found a suitable pet boarding service:

I previously worried about the chance to have no travel after raising a dog. Not anymore, the XX hotel will be my next choice. (Boarding kennel)

Boarding kennels and catteries were also found to be used by tourists who would normally take their pets with them while traveling:

we had to find accommodation for our little . . . , he usually travels with us but this time it was impossible. (Cattery)

Another review highlighted the precarity of attempting to go on holiday as a pet owner, given how easily travel plans can be derailed if there are issues with a pet’s boarding arrangement. Here, they praise the cattery for taking in their cat even though the cat was injured and needed medical

attention during the stay, thereby allowing them to travel:

he has twice returned home after fights the day before holidays. The journeys would have had to be cancelled unless XX would have accepted taking him in. (Cattery)

This theme demonstrates that pet hotels such as catteries and boarding kennels function as enablers of tourist mobility. They provide a service that allows pet owners to become tourists in circumstances under which traveling with their pet is either not possible or desirable.

Theme 2: Alleviation of Tourist Guilt or Worry

Many of the positive reviews praised the catteries and boarding kennels for alleviating previously held feelings of guilt or worry about the care of their pets:

What a relief, we no longer feel guilty leaving her. (Cattery)

I can enjoy my holidays without having to worry about the care of my pets. (Cattery and Boarding kennel)

I can now go on holidays with peace of mind that my dogs will be well looked after. (Boarding kennel)

This affective dimension goes beyond the findings in the first theme. Here, not only do the pet hotels function as enablers for tourist mobility but they allow pet owners to have “peace of mind” while on holiday. These comments imply also a sentiment of unwillingness to leave a beloved family member in the care of strangers. This kind of comment was common in the Italian and Australian data sets, but almost absent from the Nordic and Asian data sets. Given the strong emotional bond that many people have with their pets, it is not surprising that parting from them would induce feelings of anxiety and guilt. Using a high-quality boarding kennel or cattery may therefore enhance the tourist experience for pet owners:

24 hours of CCTV, the admin daily photo, finally I can rest assured on the holiday. (Boarding kennel)

As the preceding extract shows, some facilities aim to provide additional reassurance to customers through increased surveillance measures and providing regular updates about pets.

Theme 3: Imagining Pets as Being on Holiday

There was a tendency for reviews to discursively frame the pets’ time at the accommodation as a type of vacation. This may have the psychological effect of soothing the owners’ bad conscience for leaving their pet behind by imagining that they were also spending time away from home in an enjoyable environment:

as nice vacation as the Mistress’s and Master’s in the sun—no need to worry. (Cattery)

took great care to make sure that [pet]’s holiday was enjoyable. (Cattery)

it seems that he has been on vacation for more than me. (Boarding kennel)

clearly enjoyed his holiday at XX as much as I enjoyed my holiday in Mexico! (Boarding kennel)

These findings highlight the high status of pets as family members in contemporary society and the extent to which owners seek to indulge them. The vacation theme is also reflected in many of the names given to catteries and boarding kennels in Carr’s (2014) study, and in this study’s data set. The most common way of naming a business was a geographical signifier, or a name of an owner, followed by words like *boarding kennels*, *cattery*, *hotel*, *motel*, *inn*, *pensione*, or *care*, but also indications of luxury, such as “Cat Suite Home Hotel for Cats.”

The compliance with regulations, the presence of vaccination checks, and the wide spaces given to the animals are mentioned in the data sets for Italy and Sweden. In Italy, the wide spaces are more important, probably due to the previously mentioned anxiety to entrust the pet to strangers. Many comments from Hong Kong were commenting on pens being relatively small, but that the boarding kennels were providing large runs where the dogs could stretch their legs and socialize a few times per day—in other words a relative luxury at a location where all space is valuable and hard to come by.

Conclusion and Further Research

Our analysis shows that pet accommodation can be conceptualized as an enabling service that makes tourism possible for pet owners. Traveling entails a series of potentially difficult decisions about how to care for pets while their owners are away. Catteries and boarding kennels allow people lacking a close network to leave their pets in order to travel for a vacation in a way that can alleviate feelings of “guilt” or “worry.” The total number of reviews in our data set shows that there is considerable demand for this kind of service, which underlines its importance for people to be able to participate in activities in which pets cannot participate. Traveling, both far and close, is one of these activities. It is the first time that this reality has been described through empirical research as an antecedent of tourism. Tourism depends on a multitude of services and environments to exist, and more research is needed in generating regions to make the field more professional and cohesive.

This exploratory research provides a series of themes that give us insight into the mentality of pet owners as tourists, which can be investigated further to get a broader picture of pet accommodation services. Future research should focus on the perspectives of both pet owners and pet accommodation hosts in a variety of cultural contexts in order to develop a more complete pictures of these services. There is also scope to examine other types of pet hotel catering for other species beyond cats and dogs. Such explorations will in turn allow researchers and practitioners to gain a deeper knowledge of tourism as a phenomenon, which in practice means knowing more about potential constraints to traveling and how these constraints can be more easily eliminated.

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