Examine pet travel experiences from human–pet interaction: the moderating role of pet attachment

Zhenda Wei, Xi Yu Leung and Hong Xu

Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to explore the underlying mechanism of human–pet interaction in pet tourism affecting tourism experiences and daily lives of tourists. The research investigates the moderating role of pet attachment in this mechanism as well.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on the social exchange theory and value co-creation theory, this research develops and empirically tests a theoretical framework of human–pet interaction. Data were collected through an online survey of US tourists who have pet travel experiences. The data were analyzed by partial least squares structural equation modeling.

Findings – The results show that emotional value partially mediated the relationship between human–pet interaction and travel intention/quality of life, while social value partially mediated the relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life. The findings of multi-group analysis suggest that the travel experience of tourists with low (vs high) levels of pet attachment is strengthened by human–pet interaction, leading to favorable outcomes.

Originality/value – This study enriches the empirical evidence on pet tourism experience. This study extends the existing literature by demonstrating the heterogeneity of the relationship between human–pet interaction, co-creation value, quality of life and travel intention of tourists with different pet attachment levels.

Keywords Pet tourism, Human–pet interaction, Social exchange theory, Value co-creation theory, Pet attachment

Paper type Research paper

Estudio de las experiencias de viaje con mascotas desde la perspectiva de interacción entre humanos y mascotas: el papel moderador del apego a las mascotas

Resumen

Propósito: El objetivo de este estudio es explorar el mecanismo subyacente de la interacción humano-mascota en el turismo con mascotas que afecta a las experiencias turísticas y a la vida cotidiana de los turistas. El estudio también examina el papel moderador del apego a las mascotas en este mecanismo.

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1. Introduction

In modern society, an increasing number of people live with animals, especially pets, which have an increasingly significant position in daily life (Carr, 2017; Kurdek, 2008). Pets are considered the family members of pet owners and play the role of travel partners (Buhalıs and Chan, 2023). In the field of tourism, animals are gradually being considered as partners of tourists, not just as ornamental resources (Ying et al., 2021). More and more people keep a strong will to travel with pets (Carr, 2017). Human–pet interactions, from which people can get emotional support and companionship, are becoming more frequent, and this has a positive impact on well-being (Junc¸a-Silva, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to expand research on human–pet interaction in the field of tourism.

Nevertheless, few tourism research studies have been undertaken on pet tourism. Current pet tourism literature has largely focused on negative factors such as restrictions and constraints (Chen et al., 2014; Hung et al., 2016), learned helplessness (Ying et al., 2021) and absence of animal rights (Carr, 2017), with only a few studies on positive experiences of pet travel (Wu and Chang, 2021). There is still no clear answer to whether human–pet interaction can improve the tourism experience and tourists’ quality of life.

Interaction is believed to create experience value and enhance consumer experience (Kim et al., 2015). The social exchange theory (Molm, 2003) and value co-creation theory (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004) may support the good outcomes of interaction. Based on the social exchange theory and value co-creation theory, different individuals may co-create value through interaction, and according to the balance between co-creation value and cost, the individual’s behavioral intention and satisfaction will be affected (Jiang and Kim, 2015; Kim et al., 2015). Pets, as traveling partners of tourists, are likely to be considered as co-creating experience value through interaction, eventually improving tourists’ quality of life and travel intention.

Therefore, this study applies the social exchange theory and value co-creation theory in the pet tourism field to explore the relationship between human–pet interaction, co-creation value, travel intention and quality of life. What is more, there is a strong emotional bond between humans and pets (Kurdek, 2008). According to the attachment theory, different levels of pet attachment will affect the behavior and life of pet owners (Hung et al., 2016). Specifically, the study has the following objectives. First, this study aims to explore the underlying mechanism of human–pet interaction affecting travel experiences and daily lives of tourists in the context of pet tourism. Second, this study investigates the moderating role of pet attachment in this mechanism. This study makes theoretical contributions to the
2. Literature review

2.1 Social exchange theory

The social exchange theory holds that, based on reciprocity, individuals act by measuring the costs and rewards they anticipate (Molm, 2003). Although social exchange is often used to discuss human–human interactions, it has also been used in human–computer and human–pet interactions in recent years (Juncã-Silva, 2022). In daily life, human–pet interaction has an emotional and social impact on people (Bennett et al., 2015). However, tourism is intended to be separate from daily life and to offer heterogeneous experiences (Egger and Yu, 2022). In tourism settings, as unusual environments, it is necessary to clarify the exchange and reciprocal relationship of human–pet interaction for the improvement of the pet tourism experience.

Some studies of social exchange focus on the influence of individual interactions on behavioral intentions, while others emphasize satisfaction and well-being (Kim et al., 2022). Based on the social exchange theory, the occurrence of positive interactions and exchanges, benefits and values can lead to self-reinforcing behavioral cycles, thereby explaining the influence of interacting with pets on engagement intention and revisit intention (Jiang and Kim, 2015). Therefore, the following hypothesis is set up:

**H1.** Human–pet interaction has a positive impact on future travel intention with pets.

Studies on human–pet interaction have shown that pets maintain a “reciprocal relationship” with their owners; in other words, they do not think their relationship is unilateral. They feel loved by their pets (Juncã-Silva, 2022). According to McConnell et al. (2011), interacting with pets can provide social support, meet individual social needs and increase happiness. In pet tourism, although owners incur expenses, they gain emotional and social benefits from interacting with pets, potentially affecting tourists’ quality of life. Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

**H2.** Human–pet interaction has a positive impact on tourists’ quality of life after traveling with pets.

2.2 Value co-creation theory

Value co-creation was first proposed by from the perspective of strategy and marketing management (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Customer experience and activities are the source of customer value creation, with many actors involved (Arıca et al., 2023). From the perspective of value co-creation, both pets and tourists in pet tourism are value creators, and their interaction increases the value of tourism experience. In heterogeneous travel service experiences, a multidimensional value perspective is considered to be more proper for service environments (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001). Through semi-structured interviews, Tao et al. (2022) extracted the perceived co-creation value from the perspective of tourists and divided it into emotional, relational and knowledge levels. Therefore, co-creation value is examined multidimensionally as emotional value and social value in this study.

The key to value co-creation is interaction (Prebensen et al., 2013). Emotional value is conceptualized as the utility of feeling or emotional state generated by experience (Sweeney and Soutar, 2001), embodied in the enjoyment, positive experience or feelings perceived by tourists. When traveling or getting along with pets, people will form many emotions, such as excitement, enjoyment and happiness (Bennett et al., 2015; Tang et al., 2022). Based on the above, emotional value is likely to be the key value element of pet tourism, and it will be affected by human–pet interaction. Thus, the following hypothesis is set up:

**H3.** Human–pet interaction has positive impacts on emotional value.
Social value is conceptualized as utility derived from a connection with one or more specific social groups (Sheth et al., 1991). In the travel experience, the interaction between tourists or the self-recognition gained by tourism can create social value, especially in the interaction of small groups (Williams and Soutar, 2009). The interaction between tourists and their pets may increase and reinforce social relationships and self-concepts, such as belonging and friendship (Wood et al., 2005). Hence, the following hypothesis is set up:

H4. Human–pet interaction has positive impacts on social value.

The value of travel is not limited to the journey itself; it also shows up in post-trip activities, such as travel intention and quality of life (Jiang and Kim, 2015; Sirgy et al., 2011). As shown in the study of Kim et al. (2015), interaction has a positive effect on the co-creation of experience value, ultimately improving the travel intention and quality of life. This can be explained by the value co-creation theory: the interaction between pets and tourists can generate intrinsic meaning and increase tourists’ emotional and social value. When tourists perceive value, they are more inclined to experience willingness to travel and their quality of life significantly improve (Lee et al., 2018). Thus, the following hypotheses are set up:

H5. Emotional value significantly mediates the relationship between human–pet interaction and future travel intention.


H7. Emotional value significantly mediates the relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life after traveling with pets.

H8. Social value significantly mediates the relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life after traveling with pets.

2.3 Attachment theory

Nowadays, many people regard pets as family members, and there is an emotional bond between pets and humans (Carr, 2017). The attachment theory gives a perspective for comprehending this relationship, leading to the concept of pet attachment. Pet attachment is conceptualized as the intimate bonding between owners and pets, playing a role in emotional support and secure attachment (Kurdek, 2008).

Research studies have identified the influence of pet attachment on pet travel experience, especially travel intention (Hung et al., 2016). Pet attachment is one of the motivations for tourists to travel with pets, which is also related to pet interaction, social companionship and emotional experience (Tang et al., 2022). Long-term positive human–pet interactions and a high level of pet attachment can help improve adults’ quality of life (White et al., 2017). In addition, the higher degree of pet attachment, the easier individuals are to provide and receive social and emotional support, which reflects the increased value of pet attachment at the social and emotional level when interacting with pets (Charmaraman et al., 2020). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H9. Pet attachment magnifies the positive impacts of human-pet interaction in pet travel experience. In other words, the higher the pet attachment level, the larger the positive impact of human–pet interaction on (a) travel intention, (b) quality of life, (c) emotional value and (d) social value (Figure 1).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection and sampling

The study collected data in 2022 through an online survey distributed via the prolific platform (www.prolific.co), a crowdsourcing marketplace that helps researchers recruit survey subjects from a large pool of workers. US tourists who have had travel experiences
with pets in the previous 12 months were qualified to take the survey. The survey used attention check questions and open-ended questions to ensure data quality.

The 294 final samples consisted of 56.5% males and 78.6% white, aged between 18 and 77 years old. In terms of age generations, the largest generation group in the sample was millennials (42.2%), followed by Generation X (28.9%), Generation Z (18.0%) and Baby Boomers (10.9%). As for the education level, 87.8% of participants held at least a college diploma, while 18.7% had a graduate degree. Nearly 85% of the samples had traveled with pets at least twice in the past year. The sample represents American pet owners to a certain degree. Recent statistics show that white households have the highest pet ownership rate (Matthews, 2022). Millennials and Generation X were the two largest generation groups in pet owners (American Pet Products Association, 2021).

3.2 Instrument

The items used in this study are all adopted from existing scales with some rewording to fit the study context. Three items used to measure human–pet interaction were drawn from Campos et al. (2017). Co-creation values were measured using scales from Sweeney and Soutar (2001). Travel intention items include three items drawn from Wen et al. (2021). Four items were designed to assess quality of life (Mathis et al., 2016; Sirgy et al., 2011). Pet attachment was measured using scales from Albert and Bulcroft (1988). Questions were asked using seven-point Likert-type scales, with 1 referring “strongly disagree” and 7 referring to “strongly agree.” Demographic questions were also included in the survey.

3.3 Data analysis

This study analyzes data using the partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM). All samples were used to verify the inner model to verify the model fit and path coefficient significance, verifying $H_1$ to $H_5$. Using the median value of tourists’ pet attachment (5.5), the entire sample was divided into two subgroups: those who had high pet attachment ($N = 147$)
and those who had low pet attachment \((N = 147)\). For testing \(H_6\), path coefficients between the two groups (low attachment vs high attachment) were compared using SEM multi-group analysis. The sample size (294), even after divided into two groups (147 vs 147) for multi-group analysis, was well above the minimum sample size requirement (40) based on the “10-times rule” (Hair et al., 2019).

4. Results

4.1 Outer model

The outer model was evaluated as a reflective measurement model as suggested in the literature. Table 1 summarized the results of the model's reliability and validity. All factor loadings were above the 0.708 value, and the average variance extracted values (AVE) were greater than 0.5, showing that the data met the required criteria (Hair et al., 2019). Composite reliability (CR) coefficients were higher than 0.708, showing favorable construct reliability (Hair et al., 2019). Using Fornell and Larcker’s criterion, the square root of the AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlation. In addition, the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) values of all constructs are lower than 0.9, establishing acceptable discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2019). Based on the above, the proposed constructs had good reliability and validity.

4.2 Inner model

Constructs' variance inflation factor (VIF) values are lower than 5, indicating no multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2019). In the path analysis, the structural model was examined by using

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constructs and measurement items</th>
<th>Outer loadings</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>AVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human-pet interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the travel experience, I have been physically active with my pet(s)</td>
<td>0.923</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the travel experience, I directly interacted with my pet(s)</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the travel experience, I had great play time with my pet(s)</td>
<td>0.901</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When traveling with pet(s), I felt a sense of harmony</td>
<td>0.938</td>
<td>0.939</td>
<td>0.845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When traveling with pet(s), I felt a sense of sharing</td>
<td>0.928</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When traveling with pet(s), I felt a sense of belonging</td>
<td>0.937</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional value</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had feelings of well-being/enjoyment when traveling with pet(s)</td>
<td>0.956</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It made me feel happy when I was traveling with pet(s)</td>
<td>0.959</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It was fun to travel with pet(s)</td>
<td>0.960</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel intention</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am willing to travel with pet(s) again in the future</td>
<td>0.965</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I plan to travel with pet(s) again in the future</td>
<td>0.966</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will make an effort to travel with my pet(s) again in the future</td>
<td>0.974</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, traveling with pet(s) was memorable, enriching my quality of life</td>
<td>0.925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My satisfaction with life in general was increased shortly after traveling with pet(s)</td>
<td>0.902</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although I have my ups and downs, in general, I felt good about my life shortly after traveling with pet(s)</td>
<td>0.925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After traveling with pet(s), I felt that I lead a meaningful and fulfilling life</td>
<td>0.924</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet attachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel closer to my pet than to many of my friends</td>
<td>0.919</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel closer to my pet than to other family members</td>
<td>0.825</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There are times when my pet is my closest companion</td>
<td>0.879</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own work
bootstrapping method with 5,000 resampling iterations. The standardized root mean residual (SRMR) value for the structured model is 0.046, lower than the cut-off value of 0.08 (Hair et al., 2019), showing a good model fit. As shown in Table 2, $R^2$ values for emotional value, social value, travel intention and quality of life are all over 0.10, which are acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). The $Q^2$ values for four endogenous variables were 0.284, 0.244, 0.647 and 0.606, suggesting good predictive relevance of the proposed model (Hair et al., 2019).

The path coefficients and significance levels of the test model were shown in Figure 2. The human–pet interaction had a positive impact on travel intention and quality of life ($\beta = 0.139$, $p < 0.05$ and $\beta = 0.122$, $p < 0.05$, respectively), and $H1$ and $H2$ were supported. The path model results indicated that human–pet interaction had a positive impact on emotional value ($\beta = 0.559$, $p < 0.001$) and social value ($\beta = 0.529$, $p < 0.001$), supporting $H3$ and $H4$.

The indirect effects of human–pet interaction on travel intention and quality of life through emotional and social value were examined. The result showed that emotional value partially mediated the relationship between human–pet interaction and travel intention ($\beta = 0.424$, $p < 0.001$) and the relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life ($\beta = 0.338$, $p < 0.001$), supporting $H5$ and $H7$. Social value did not mediate the relationship.

### Table 2  Explanatory power of the structural model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Endogenous variables</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>$Q^2$</th>
<th>Exogenous variables</th>
<th>$f^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional value</td>
<td>0.313</td>
<td>0.284</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction</td>
<td>0.455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social value</td>
<td>0.279</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction</td>
<td>0.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel intention</td>
<td>0.703</td>
<td>0.647</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional value</td>
<td>0.939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social value</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of life</td>
<td>0.732</td>
<td>0.606</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction</td>
<td>0.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional value</td>
<td>0.660</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social value</td>
<td>0.099</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own work

### Figure 2  Path model result

**Notes:** ***$p < 0.001$; *$p < 0.05$**

**Source:** Authors’ own work
between human–pet interaction and travel intention, rejecting H6. Social value had a partial mediating effect on the relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life ($\beta = 0.121, p < 0.001$), supporting H8.

### 4.3 Multi-group analysis

PLS-MGA was carried out to contradistinguish the difference between samples with high and low level of pet attachment. Before the multi-group analysis, a measurement invariance of composite models (MICOM) procedure was carried out to determine the construct measurements across the two groups (Henseler et al., 2016). The result shows the partial measurement invariance in this study, thus providing a feasible indication for MGA of the relationship between potential variables in the study model.

When the MICOM analysis is complete, a multi-group analysis is performed. Figure 3 indicates that those who had a high level of pet attachment showed non-significant effects of human–pet attachment on quality of life and travel intention. In other words, for those who had a high level of pet attachment, their human–pet interaction would not affect their quality of life and travel intention.

The above results are also reflected in Table 3, which shows that between the two groups (low level vs high level), there were significant differences in one paths and marginal differences in one path, supporting H9a, H9d and rejecting H9b, H9c. For those who had a low level of pet attachment, the impact of human–pet attachment on travel intention was significantly higher, and the effects of human-pet attachment on social value were marginally higher.

The results show the differences in the relationship between human–pet interaction and pet tourism experience among tourists with different levels of pet attachment. In general, the pet tourism experience of tourists with a low level of pet attachment will be more easily affected by human–pet interaction.

**Figure 3** Multi-group path model

![Multi-group path model](image)

**Notes:** $\beta_1$: low attachment; $\beta_2$: high attachment; $***p < 0.001$; $**p < 0.01$; $*p < 0.05$; n.s. $p > 0.1$

**Source:** Authors’ own work
5. Discussion and implications

5.1 General discussion

This study examined the impact of human–pet interaction in tourism on tourists’ co-creation value, as well as its effect on quality of life and future intention to travel with pets of tourists. The hypothesis testing results are listed in Table 4. The findings show that human–pet interaction had a positive impact on co-creation value (social value and emotional value). The result is in line with Rihova et al. (2018) argument that tourists can co-create value for each other in the tourism environment, including affective and social value. As travel companions, pets seem to play a similar role to human companions in value co-creation. The result extends previous studies. Compared with the interaction between people and pets in life, pet tourism as a consumer product experience and co-creation value (social and emotional value) can be viewed from a new perspective.

The results indicate that human–pet interaction exists a positive effect on travel intention, and emotional value partially mediated human–pet interaction and travel intention. During pet tourism, tourists can interact with their pets in different ways, such as playing, talking, singing, walking and taking photos with their pets. These activities can stimulate the positive emotional experiences of tourists, eventually inspiring them to continue traveling with their pets. As the social exchange theory holds, the more needs and values tourists meet in the pet tourism experience, the more willing tourists are to continue to travel with their pets, thereby obtaining more value (Jiang and Kim, 2015).

The study found that social value did not mediated human–pet interaction and travel intention. According to the social exchange theory, costs and rewards in social exchange are symbiotic (Stafford and Kuiper, 2021). Pet tourism may also result in negative tourist experiences, such as the burden of relationships, money and material preparation. Some pet owners feel obliged to bring their pets with them because they regard them as friends. They prepare many items for their pets, such as cages, toys and pet food. Sometimes, they have to pay extra for transportation and accommodation, even if they do not think it is fair or

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Path</th>
<th>Path coefficient</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Travel intention</td>
<td>0.139</td>
<td>0.016</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Quality of life</td>
<td>0.122</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Emotional value</td>
<td>0.559</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Social value</td>
<td>0.529</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Emotional value → Travel intention</td>
<td>0.424</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Social value → Travel intention</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>0.870</td>
<td>Rejected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H7</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Emotional value → Quality of life</td>
<td>0.338</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H8</td>
<td>Human–pet interaction → Social value → Quality of life</td>
<td>0.121</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ own work
that it represents good value. These burdens may discourage tourists from continuing to travel with their pets.

The study found that human–pet interaction influence quality of life via social and emotional value. According to Junc¸a-Silva (2022), increasing pet-friendly practices in organizations is an efficient way to improve life satisfaction. In the pet tourism experience, tourists may feel happy and excited. The novel experience of enjoying the companionship of their pets is likely to be reflected positively in life after tourism.

Finally, the results indicate that the impact of human–pet interaction on the pet tourism experience is conditioned by pet attachment. In practice, the findings show that the impact of human–pet attachment on quality of life and travel intention exists only among tourists who have a low level of pet attachment, and their pet tourism experience is more easily affected by human–pet interaction. This finding is contrary to previous research results, which suggest that high pet attachment can act as a catalyst for a positive relationship between human–pet interaction and quality of life (White et al., 2017). The tourism context, as an unusual environment, may have a different impact on pet attachment relationships. Tourists with low levels of pet attachment are more likely to generate emotional and social value increments through human–pet interaction during tourism. This positive influence is more likely to continue into the subsequent travel intention and life quality. On the other hand, tourists with high levels of pet attachment have already had strong emotional interactions with their pets, whereby the enhancement of the pet experience brought by human–pet interaction may not be significant. The findings provide evidence for the positive role of tourism in human–pet bonding and pet tourism experience enhancement.

5.2 Theoretical implications

This study exploringly apply the social exchange theory and value co-creation theory to pet tourism, extending the social exchange and value co-creation from human–human to human–pet. This study finds that the human–pet interaction can significantly improve tourists’ future intention to travel with pets and their quality of life, further verifying the social exchange relationship between humans and pets and affecting subsequent behavior according to the trade-off between rewards and costs. The findings further deepen the understanding of the social exchange theory from the perspective of human–pet value co-creation, broadening the original boundary. In addition, this study not only enriches the value dimension of the pet tourism experience but also provides an empirical basis for the theoretical expansion of value co-creation theory in pet tourism.

The research found that human–pet interaction existed a positive effect on quality of life through co-creation value (emotional and social value). It offers a new perspective for exploring the study of quality of life and fills the research gap on the impact of pet tourism on quality of life. Finally, the study offers fresh quantitative evidence of pet attachment and the pet tourism experience. Previous tourism studies have identified pet attachment as a motivation for pet tourism (Tang et al., 2022). Therefore, by using pet attachment as a moderator, this research validates relationships that have not been explored in former studies.

5.3 Practical implications

Pet tourism has gradually become a growing tourism consumption trend, and pets play an increasingly significant role in tourism (Carr, 2017). This study has empirically demonstrated that human–pet interaction can improve tourists’ travel intention regarding pets and quality of life. One of the main motives for tourists to travel is to enhance their quality of life (Lee et al., 2018). Tourist destinations need to facilitate human–pet interaction. For example, by increasing the accessibility of scenic spots, hotels and restaurants, tourism destinations make it easier to facilitate the emergence of human–pet interaction.
The study also found that emotional and social value created by human–pet interaction plays an important role in pet tourism, especially emotional value. Therefore, tourism destinations need to consider the diverse needs of tourists and pets, providing corresponding services and creating a good tourism environment for the creation of emotional value. For instance, it has been suggested that destinations should host pet-related games or festivals in which visitors with pets are invited to participate, thereby increasing positive emotional feelings and bonding connections and improving travel intention and quality of life after travel.

Finally, the results indicate tourists with different pet attachment levels have different experiences in pet tourism, and tourists with lower levels of attachment may be more likely to benefit from pet tourism. Based on this, tourism destinations could investigate tourists’ pet attachment levels in advance and conduct precise marketing to encourage more pet owners with low levels of pet attachment to travel. Tourism products could also be customized according to tourists’ attachment levels to maximize the impact of tourism on their behavioral intention and quality of life.

5.4 Limitations and future research

This research exists some limitations. First, the sample collection is limited to the US-based pet travelers. Therefore, the results of this research may not be generalizable to other countries. Future studies could examine the model by collecting data from pet owners in different countries and regions, online and offline. Second, this study only explored multidimensional co-creation value from the perspective of social and emotional value. More co-creation value formed by human–pet interaction could be explored through in-depth interviews and field investigations. Third, this study focused on the positive effect of pets on tourists’ experiences and did not take some negative impacts of traveling with pets into account. This aspect could be explored in the future with more comprehensive research on the impact of pets on the pet tourism experience. Finally, future studies might explore other variables influencing pet tourism experience, such as pet tourism and perceived fairness (Girish et al., 2022) and pet tourism value co-destruction (Arıca et al., 2022).

References


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