

The Influence of Emotional Attachment and Situational Factors on Consumers' High Spending Intention Toward Pets: Evidence from Shanghai

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of emotional attachment and situational factors on consumers' high spending intention toward pets in Shanghai, with emotional compensation serving as a mediating variable. Based on Attachment Theory and Situational Theory, the study examines how internal emotional motivation and external environmental stimuli interact to influence the premium pet consumption behavior. The quantitative research design was used and 300 owners of pets in Shanghai were surveyed using questionnaires. The results show that emotional attachment positively impacts high spending intention significantly, and situational factors are also important to stimulate premium pet consumption. Moreover, emotional compensation has a considerable partial mediating effect between emotional attachment and spending intention. The direct effect contributes 24% of the total effect and the indirect effect through emotional compensation is 76%. This implies that emotional attachment affects high spending intention not only via emotional compensation but also via a direct route. The paper adds to the theoretical synthesis of the attachment and situational behavior theories in the context of the pet economy and offers practical implications of pet-related marketing and brand strategies in high-pressure urban areas like Shanghai.

Keywords

pet economy, emotional attachment, situational factors, emotional compensation, high spending intention

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, pets have become more of a family member rather than a functional animal. This change has been especially noticeable in Shanghai, where the pet economy has been growing by leaps and bounds. Shangguan News [1], indicates that consumption of pets in Shanghai is highly concentrated regionally with high levels of premium spending, particularly in the core urban areas.

Nevertheless, the psychological motivation of consumer behavior cannot be explained only by the market growth. Although Attachment Theory [2], human-pet bond is a motivator of premium expenditure, consumer choices in highly commercialized and fast paced urban settings such as Shanghai are also influenced by situational factors such as promotional environments, social influences, work pressures, and scarcity of

companionship time. Even though the literature on pet attachment exists, the interaction between emotional attachment and situational factors in the development of high spending intention is still unclear in the Shanghai context.

This study aims to investigate the joint effects of emotional attachment and situation on high spending intention of consumers on pets. This study aims to further develop the theory of consumer behavior by offering empirical data to offer theoretical strategic support to the pet service industry and brand development in Shanghai.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pet Consumption Behavior

Pets in modern society have become more than useful animals; they are part of the family and important providers of emotional comfort. This change in perception has changed consumption patterns to more high-quality and experience-based spending than the simple needs to survive, including food and medical care.

Shanghai is an example of such a trend. The Shanghai Pet Consumption Index Report from Shangguan news [1] indicates that pet consumption in Shanghai is marked by high expenditure rates and increased demand of high-quality pet products and services such as grooming, pet insurance and smart pet products. This strong consumption intention is the result of anthropomorphic perceptions [3], as pet owners grow more and more anthropomorphic and rely on spending to obtain emotional gratification and lifestyle identity. As a result, the study of the current pet consumption involves a combined inquiry into the inner emotional attachment and the outer consumption setting.

2.2 Emotional Attachment

Emotional attachment is based on the Attachment Theory by John Bowlby and defines the strong psychological connection between a person and a certain object. Pets in big cities such as Shanghai have moved beyond species functions to be family members or emotional anchors which reduce the loneliness of urban life [4, 5]. In the context of consumer behavior, pets are considered as an extended self (Belk)[6]. The close attachment creates anthropomorphic perceptions, which make owners consider the needs of the pets as their own and provide them with material care on the human level.

Psychological connections practically changes decision making. The unavailability of substitutes to the pet renders the price very inelastic, and the luxurious services, such as customized food or luxury grooming, become the type of emotional investments that are required. Besides, guilt due to lack of presence of people in the busy cities is another primary factor that drives compensatory consumption whereby purchasing costly products is a method of addressing the lack of emotions. Thus, human-pet relationship richness is a driving force of change towards high-end consumption, quality-based consumption and thus in that line of reasoning, the research hypothesizes:

H1: Emotional attachment toward pets has a significant positive effect on consumers' high spending intention toward pets.

2.3 Situational Factors

The situational theory of consumer decision making, as proposed by Belk [7] holds that consumer decisions are the combination of individual characteristics as well as the environmental circumstances and that has been reflected in Shanghai in several aspects.

First, physical environments and sensory stimulation are crucial. Pet-friendly locations within central Shanghai districts, including Xuhui Riverside, Moon Bay in Hongkou district and pet-friendly luxury shopping malls, which offer immersive consumption experiences related to luxury and high-quality products. This enhances the value and consumers are more ready to pay high prices on customized products and high-end pet services.

Second, symbolic consumption is motivated by social settings and reference groups. Pet consumption in Shanghai, where lifestyle consumption is very prominent on websites like Xiaohongshu and WeChat Moments,

could become more expensive to obtain social acceptance or to demonstrate a specific lifestyle identity, making pet consumption a symbolic identity and lifestyle expression.

Lastly, consumption behavior is also influenced by task definition and temporal factors. Consumers can change their price-oriented mindset to a meaning-oriented mindset during pet birthdays, holidays, shopping festivals (e.g., Double 11), or promotional events, and perceive spending as a kind of emotional reward or ritual creation. Moreover, the presence of antecedent states like work-related stress can also enhance the willingness of consumers to consume premium pet under certain circumstances.

Generally, situational factors play a major role in enhancing the willingness of consumers to make premium expenditures on pets in various ways of psychological influence and therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2: Situational factors have a significant positive effect on consumers' high spending intention toward pets.

2.4 Theoretical Integration

Within this framework, high spending intention is motivated by emotional attachment (internal motivation) and situational factors (external stimuli) working together via the process of emotional compensation [8]. According to this mechanism people who are in a state of psychological stress or shortage recover their balance by buying products that have high emotional value.

To begin with, the compensation process is initiated by emotional attachment. The competitive nature of Shanghai may restrict physical companionship due to long commutes and work pressure. According to Rucker and Galinsky [9], this lack leads to the urge to have symbolic products. The tension between strong attachment and low presence brings about guilt, which turns high expenditure into emotional self-reparation. The owners of pets therefore classify high-quality products such as luxury food or high-end grooming as alternatives to love and companionship, and material investment to ease the conscience.

Second, this process is enhanced by situational factors. The atmosphere of care that is produced by festive or social settings triggers the emotions of attachment. Park et al. state that strong attachment is a combination of cognition and emotion that drives high-level consumption [10]. Within the sophisticated business environments of Shanghai or the effects of demonstration via social media, owners may associate high spending with high-quality love, which supports emotional compensation as a major mediating variable. Emotional compensation is therefore a psychological intermediary giving reason and incentive to spend high. That is the reason why the highly attached owners will feel relieved psychologically and not the pain of paying when they have to pay high bills and thus this study proposes:

H3: Emotional compensation plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between pet emotional attachment and consumers' high spending intention toward pets.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative research approach and collects data through a questionnaire survey. The variable of emotional attachment is measured with the help of Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS) that determines the emotional intimacy through the dimensions of general attachment and animal rights. The purpose of the study is to examine the influence of emotional attachment and situational factors on Shanghai pet owners' high spending intention toward pets. Shanghai, China, was chosen as the research location because of its dominating economic size and high consumer purchasing power, which made it a perfect location to explore the fast development of the pet economy and the psychological processes underlying it. The research builds a systematic research model through which internal emotional motivations and external environmental stimuli interact to affect consumer decision-making via the mediating effect of emotional compensation.

3.2 Sample Distribution

The respondents were required to be pet owners residing in Shanghai, and data was collected through an online questionnaire survey. This study collected and screened 300 valid questionnaires. Regarding demographic factors, the respondents were fairly balanced in terms of gender, with 46.00% of males and 47.00% of females, and 7.00% of those who did not want to disclose it. The sample was significantly skewed towards a younger and well-educated population: respondents aged 18-44 years constituted almost 75.40% of the sample, and the population with college education or higher was about 77.4%. In terms of consumption, 42.00% of the pet owners stated that their average monthly spending was 150-450 RMB and high-spending consumers with spending of 900 RMB and above constituted 27.00%. On the whole, the sample is rational and representative, as it is a good representation of the core consumer profile of the high-end pet market in Shanghai. Shanghai, being a national standard of high-end pet consumption, is extremely pertinent to the research theme.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	138	46.0
	Female	141	47.0
	Prefer not to disclose	21	7.0
Age	Below 18	53	17.7
	18–24	78	26.0
	25–34	74	24.7
	35–44	74	24.7
	45 and above	21	7.0
Education Level	High school or below	68	22.7
	College diploma	116	38.7
	Bachelor's degree	54	18.0
	Master's degree or above	62	20.7
Monthly Income (RMB)	No income	82	27.3
	Below ¥1,500	57	19.0
	¥1,500–¥4,500	82	27.3
	¥4,500–¥9,000	48	16.0
	Above ¥9,000	31	10.3
Pet-raising Duration	Less than 6 months	59	19.7
	6 months–1 year	91	30.3
	1–3 years	70	23.3
	More than 3 years	80	26.7
Monthly Pet Expenditure (RMB)	Below ¥150	34	11.3
	¥150–¥450	126	42.0
	¥450–¥900	59	19.7
	Above ¥900	81	27.0
Marital Status	Single	120	40.0
	In a relationship	79	26.3
	Married	101	33.7

3.3 Measures

In this research, a number of well-established scales were used to measure the variables. The emotional attachment scale was based on the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS) that was created by Johnson et al [11], whereas the situational factors scale, emotional compensation scale, and high spending intention scale were also based on the relevant literature and adjusted to the Shanghai pet consumption context. The scales used in this study are all well-validated and have been used extensively in previous studies. Table 2 shows the measurement scales in this study.

Table 2: Measurement Scales Used in the Study

Variable	Role in Model	Number of Items
Emotional Attachment	Independent Variable	19
Situational Factors	Independent Variable	7
Emotional Compensation	Mediating Variable	4
High Consumption Intention	Dependent Variable	5

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The descriptive statistical analysis of demographic variables, such as age, income, time of raising pets, and education level, were analyzed to give an overview of the sample characteristics. Data processing and analysis of the research was done using SPSS. The analysis involved three fundamental steps: Firstly, a descriptive statistical analysis was performed in order to give a preliminary picture of the sample background. Secondly, Pearson Correlation test was used to confirm positive relationships between emotional attachment, situational factors, emotional compensation, and high consumption intention. Thirdly, multiple linear regression analysis was performed to test the predictive power of each variable on consumption intention. Moreover, the SPSS Process Model 4 plug-in along with the Bootstrap sampling method was used to confirm the significance of the mediating effect of emotional compensation between emotional attachment and high consumption intention.

4. Results

4.1 Reliability and Validity Analysis

The findings revealed that the total Cronbach 0.936 of the questionnaire was achieved. Table 3 contains the results of the reliability analysis. The reliability values were all more than the generally accepted level of 0.70, which showed acceptable internal consistency among all dimensions.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis Results

Number of Cases	Cronbach's Alpha	Number of Items
300	0.936	35

In terms of validity, the KMO value was 0.932, and Bartlett Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). These results suggest that the measurement scale possessed an acceptable construct validity and could be further statistically analyzed.

Table 4: Validity Analysis Results

KMO and Bartlett's Test	Approx. Chi-Square	df	Sig.
0.932	5631.033	595	0

4.2 Correlation Analysis

This paper used Pearson correlation matrix to conduct a preliminary investigation on the strength of the relationship between the core variables. The results proved a strong positive correlation between pet emotional attachment and high spending intention ($r = 0.341$, $p < 0.01$) which proved that there is a positive correlation between emotional attachment and high spending intention. Meanwhile, the situational factors were also significantly positively correlated with high spending intention ($r = 0.267$, $p < 0.01$).

Moreover, both emotional attachment and high spending intention had a significant correlation with the mediating variable emotional compensation at the 0.01 significance level. These statistical correlations were a good empirical basis of the following regression analysis and mediation tests.

Table 5: Correlation Analysis

Dimension	Index	Emotional Attachment	Situational Factors	High Consumption Intention	Emotional Compensation
Emotional Attachment	r	1	.318**	.341**	.407**
Situational Factors	r	.318**	1	.267**	.336**
High Consumption Intention	r	.341**	.267**	1	.308**
Emotional Compensation	r	.407**	.336**	.308**	1

4.3 Hypothesis Testing and Path Analysis

The research used multiple linear regression to test the hypothesized causal relationships. The high spending intention variance explained by the regression model was 16.7% ($R^2 = 0.167$). The explanatory power is relatively small but is acceptable in consumer behavior studies since large spending intention is frequently determined by numerous psychological, economic, social, and situational elements that are not covered by the variables in this model.

Table 6: Regression Analysis

	Unstandardized B		Standardized Beta	t	Sig.	95%CI	
	B	Std. Error				Lower	Upper
(Constant)	7.977	1.454		5.487	0	5.116	10.838
Emotional Attachment	0.071	0.018	0.229	3.851	0	0.035	0.108
Situational Factors	0.101	0.042	0.137	2.384	0.018	0.018	0.184
Emotional Compensation	0.205	0.073	0.169	2.819	0.005	0.062	0.348
F	19.739						
Sig.	.000b						
R ²	0.167						
Adjusted R ²	0.158						

The studies on consumer behavior would normally yield a small R² rate due to the fact that the intentions of consumers to spend are subject to many other psychological, economic, cultural, and personal factors that do not fit in any single model. It is also acceptable that an R² of 0.167 still reflects meaningful variance in a behavioral study because again there are other unmeasured factors, such as income stability, household structure, and personal personality that also influence consumption choices.

4.3.1 The driving effect of emotional attachment:

The regression findings showed that emotional attachment positively influenced the high spending intention with a very significant effect (0.229, $p < 0.001$). This implies that the more psychological attachment that pet owners have with their pets, the more they would be willing to spend on the costly products and services related to their pets. Thus, Hypothesis H1 was accepted.

4.3.2 The catalytic effect of situational factors:

The results also showed that situational factors played a significant positive role on high spending intention ($\beta = 0.137$, $p = 0.018$). This finding shows that the developed pet business climate and social environment in Shanghai can efficiently trigger the buying urge of consumers. Thus, Hypothesis H2 was accepted.

4.3.3 The effect of emotional compensation

The regression results also revealed that emotional compensation significantly positively impacted high spending intention ($\beta = 0.169$, $p = 0.005$). This observation indicates that pet owners who have stronger emotions of emotional compensation have higher chances of indulging in increased amounts of pet-related expenditures. This result indicates that emotional compensation is a strong predictor of high spending intention, which gives the analysis of high spending intention a statistical foundation to the further mediation analysis.

4.4 Mediation Effect of Emotional Compensation

It is necessary to mention that the mediation analysis in this section is specifically aimed at H3 which analyzes whether emotional compensation mediates the correlation between emotional attachment and high spending intention. In H2, situational factors were tested independently as an external stimulus variable that has a positive direct effect on high spending intention. To further understand the psychological mechanism behind the effect of emotional attachment on high spending intention, this research performed a Bootstrap mediation analysis by using SPSS Process Model 4 with 5,000 Bootstrap samples.

Table 7: Bootstrap Mediation Test Results of Emotional Compensation

	Effect	se	LLCI	ULCI	Effect Size
Total Effect	0.1062	0.0169	0.0728	0.1395	1.00
Indirect Effect	0.0805	0.0182	0.0447	0.1164	0.76
Direct Effect	0.0257	0.009	0.0094	0.0448	0.24

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

The findings indicated that the indirect influence of emotional attachment on high spending intention via emotional compensation was significant as the 95% bootstrap confidence interval did not contain zero (LLCI = 0.0447, ULCI = 0.1164). The direct effect contributed 24% of the overall effect, and the indirect effect contributed 76%, which means that there is a significant partial mediation mechanism. These results suggest that emotional compensation is a key mediating factor in the model. In other words, when pet owners are strongly emotionally attached, this leads to compensatory motivations in the first place, which includes feelings

of guilt due to lack of companionship, which in turn makes pet owners more accepting of costly pet products and services. Thus, Hypothesis H3 was accepted.

5. Discussion

5.1 Emotional Attachment as an Internal Emotional Source of High Spending Intention

The findings of this study confirm that emotional attachment toward pets has a significant positive effect on consumers' high spending intention. This observation is in line with the earlier research indicating that more intense emotional attachment between pet owners and their pets is related to a higher propensity to spend money on pet products and services (Rucker, D. D., and Galinsky, A. D) [9]. The finding also confirms the Attachment Theory of Bowlby [2] and the extended self-theory of Belk [6] in highly developed cities like Shanghai where pets are now considered as irreplaceable family members and significant elements of self-identity of their owners.

The strong emotional bond changes consumers' spending decisions. Rather than pet-related spending being viewed under discretionary expenses, strongly bonded owners will tend to view the spending as an investment that they must make to guarantee the health of their pets. Emotional attachment, therefore, increases the willingness of consumers to purchase high quality goods and services especially where the attachment provides emotional compensation such as guilt, sense of perceived deficiency and desire to compensate the deficiency of companionship.

5.2 The Catalytic and Stimulating Effects of Situational Factors on Consumer Decision-Making

The research results also verify that situational variables have a positive significant effect on high spending intention. This was observed to be consistent with other research studies on consumer behavior that had shown that environmental stimuli and social factors can have a significant influence on the intentions to purchase and willingness to pay of consumers (Belk; Kotler) [7, 12]. In the developed pet business environment of Shanghai, both the physical and social environment can be seen as the situational effects. First, premium store atmospheres and sensory stimulation often create luxury perceptions, encouraging consumers to accept higher price levels. Second, the effects of social media and reference-group pressure can make consumers more willing to spend money on purchasing costly pet-related products to gain social status and express their identities. The purchases that are related to pets are often more emotional and symbolic as compared to the purchase of ordinary consumer products. Hence, situational cues might be more sensitive to consumers and they will be more inclined to consume high-value pets.

5.3 Emotional Compensation: The Psychological Bridge Between Emotional Attachment and Consumption Behavior

One of the key findings of this study is that emotional compensation plays a significant mediating role within the research model. This observation enhances the perception of consumption motivation of pet owners. Unlike previous studies that mainly emphasized the direct relationship between attachment and pet consumption [9], this study identifies emotional compensation as an important psychological mechanism linking emotional attachment to high spending intention. Close emotional attachment does not have a direct effect on high spending intention; rather, it has a significant impact on high spending intention via emotional compensation. High attachment may cause guilt and a feeling of psychological inadequacy in cases where the owners feel that they do not get enough companionship, further promotional spending on high quality pet products and services which is in line with the Compensatory Consumer Behavior Model, which postulates that consumers tend to have compensatory consumption to reduce emotional discrepancies [8].

In major metropolises such as Shanghai, pet owners tend to bear the lack of companionship due to the amount of work they have and the schedules. The contrast between the great emotional bonding and paucity of real-life companionship creates potent compensatory impulses. Pet owners balance their emotional lack with material compensation psychologically by buying high-end pet food, luxury services or other high-cost pet products. The process can be used to understand why most of the highly attached people do not feel much

pain of payment when they encounter high bills. Rather, these consumption habits can offer psychological solace and emotional alleviation, which is experiential and emotional consumption suggested by Holbrook and Hirschman [13].

5.4 Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

Theoretically, the study combines the attachment and situational behavior theories into a single framework, which is a critical gap in the knowledge of the mediation processes in the pet economy. It offers a more solid psychological framework of how to study consumer behavior in the future by explaining how emotional attachment leads to high spending by emotional compensation. Practically, the brands are to move beyond the functional descriptions and anthropomorphic stories in order to enhance emotional connections and minimize price elasticity. As the lifestyles in such cities as Shanghai are highly pressured, the companies can position high-quality services as emotional compensation tools with the help of specific themes of love and atonement. Moreover, commercial districts can be used by businesses to create a competitive edge in the high-value pet market by capitalizing on immersive offline experiences to initiate situational spending.

5.5 Limitations

The study has three limitations despite its insights. To begin with, the geographic concentration in Shanghai could restrict the generalizability of findings to areas with other economic characteristics. Second, the sample bias on young and highly educated individuals may overlook the varying consumption pattern of the older pet owners. Finally, the research model is rather simplified as the following aspects were overlooked, detailed financial burden, pet health condition, and household structure. Future research should consider these control factors in order to enhance the predictive power of the model and provide a more muted view of the pet consumption intentions.

6. Conclusion

The study confirms that emotional attachment is an important internal emotional antecedent of high pet-related consumption and the external environmental antecedents are commercial environment and fast city lifestyle in Shanghai. The rationale behind this is that when the emotional attachment is high and companionship is lacking the emotional compensation might succeed and thereby inspire pet owners to achieve psychological balance by spending a lot of money on their pets. Indeed, the high pet consumption phenomenon in Shanghai is basically an emotional expression and psychological self-repair among consumers in the city. The pet industry needs to continue to investigate the psychological needs of the pet owners in the future and develop more integration of emotional value into the consumption situation to balance between the commercial and emotional values.

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Conflicts of Interest

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