The Relationship between Pet-owner Personality Traits and Interpersonal Communication Competence - The Mediator of Pet Attachment

Han- Mei Kao, Doctoral Candidate of Department of Finance, National Changhua University of Education; Lecturer, Department of Business Administration, National Chin-Yi University of Technology, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Some scholars implemented qualitative researches to examine the communicative relationship between pets and specific others, such as veterinarian, elders, and patients needed assistance. This study aims at discussing the issue of improving the interpersonal communication by the mediating role of pet attachment. This study addressed that pet owners’ personality traits except neuroticism positively influence interpersonal communication competence and pet attachment, and pet attachment positively influences interpersonal communication competence. In addition, pet owners’ pet attachment is partially mediated by pet owners’ personality traits and interpersonal communication competence. The results may conceptualize that pet attachment may be a way of animal-assisted method could lead sufferers of social phobia to interact and communicate with others. Hopefully, this study may contribute to avert the state of neglect among people.

Keywords: Personality Trait, Pet Attachment, Interpersonal Communication Competence

INTRODUCTION

Using electronic products for communication becomes a part of people’s daily life now. According to “2015 Digital Lifestyle & Habit Survey” conducted by Herbalife-Taiwan in 2015, digital technology addiction is correlated to interpersonal alienation. Interpersonal alienation and personality traits affect interpersonal communication. Sentiments of alternative pet attachment offer intimate emotional experiences that not only touch one’s heart (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988) and enable a person to expand the range of his interpersonal relationship; they also provide comforting companionship in moments of hardship (Sable, 1995). The act of taking a pet dog out for a stroll by the owner actually increases the chances for the owner engaging in conversations with others (Veevers, 1985). As such, owner attachment that stems from pet companionship is likely to be a factor that influences pet owners’ interpersonal communication competence.

Personality traits dictate how a person thinks, feels, acts and response in life (Magnusson, 1989). Personal traits are characteristics of people and reflected through one’s behavior, ought to affect one’s interpersonal communication competence. Dogs provide a focal point of attention and a topic of conversation that functions as a bridge between people, thereby developing relationships between unacquainted people (Robins, Sanders, & Cahill, 1991). Pets also serve as a mediator for communication between veterinarians and their colleagues (Robers, 2004). When pets involve in owners’ social circles, they have a indirect influence on owners’ interpersonal communication. Therefore, this study will explore the mediating effect of pet attachment on owners’ personality traits and interpersonal communication competence.
The Relationships of Personality Trait and Interpersonal Communication Competence

Personality traits refer to the qualities of characteristics, motives, emotions, self-values that people possess (Ryff, Kwan, & Singer, 2001) and affect one’s behaviors or thoughts (Monte & Sollod, 2003). The behavior of an individual derives from the unique personality traits and can be detected in many different circumstances and are known as “personality traits” (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Big Five Personalities is derived from trait theory. Five Factors Model includes agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism and openness to experience (Costa & McCrae, 1985, 1992). This study adopts the five factors of personality trait.

Interpersonal communication competence refers to both two individuals determine how to communicate with each other, how to adhere to the correct communication behaviors and how to respond to the other (Daniel & Michael, 1998). Communication skills include verbal, non-verbal, self-expression, listening and response and skills to influence and create atmospheres (Verderber & Verderber, 1995). Interpersonal communication competence comprises oral expression, written communication and ability to handle interpersonal relationships (Speitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997). Interpersonal communication competence of the study includes the capacity for expression, the capacity to listen and empathize and the capacity for social interaction.

Individual’s interpersonal relationships are influenced by intrinsic personality traits (Stokes, 1985). Agreeable people are more likely to foster friendships with others (Digman, 1990). Extrovert people usually possess better communication competence (Hogan, Curphy, & Hogan, 1994). Conscientious people are more willing to communicate with others (Huang and Hsu, 2006). Neurotic people tend to be more hostile towards others (Chamorro-Premuzic, Ahmetoglu, & Furaham, 2008) and are passive in their interpersonal interactions. Someone with open to experience will seek opportunities to learn new things (LePine & VanDyne, 2001). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H1: Pet owners’ personality traits may positively impact interpersonal communication competence.**

The Relationships of Pet Attachment, Personality Trait and Interpersonal Communication Competence

Attachment is a continuous emotional connection whereby the individual seeks proximity and sense of security from the target of his attachment (Lpoez, 1995). It emphasizes the emotional connection between an individual and his caretakers (Sroufè, & Waters, 1977). Attachment transcends relationships between people and can be formed between any individual and specific objects (Kleine III et al., 1993; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Schultze et al., 1989) and this means pets can also become targets for attachment. Pet owners form attachments with pets, the experience makes them to feel sense of security, confidence and recognition (Kongable, Buckwalter, & Stolley, 1989). Pet attachment refers to individual seeks for proximity with his pet in order to feel secure, acquire comfort and support, and affects individual’s perception, emotions and behaviors. Attachment is strongly correlated to personality traits (Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H2: Pet owners’ personality traits may positively impact pet attachment.**

Pet companionship increases the frequency of interactions with other pet owners (Barba, 1995). Taking his dog to a park, pet owners can attract the attention of others, expand his interpersonal relationships, and make friends with the same hobby (Robins, D. M., Clinton R. S., & Spencer E. C., 1991). Children in wheelchairs with service dogs receive more smiles and greetings than others without
service dogs in a strange environment (Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989). People with physical disabilities that are assisted by service dogs, as the presence of service dogs helps to shape positive first-impression, and people would appear to be more agreeable (Eddy, Hart, & Boltz, 2001; Mader, Hart, & Bergin, 1989). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H3: Pet attachment may positively impact interpersonal communication competence.**

Pets as the topic of conversation, it would assist pet owners to communicate and interact with others (Serpell, 2000). Dog owners have gotten different groups of friends due to their pet ownership (Hirschman, 1994). At veterinarian clinics, pets play the role of communication mediator for veterinarians and their colleagues (Roberts, 2004). Pet owners are able to restore their self-dignity, rebuild their independence and increase their interaction with others through pets (Carmack, 1998; Barish, 2002; Dembicki & Anderson, 1996; Pan, Ye, & Chang, 2007). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

**H4: Pet attachment is the mediator between personality trait and interpersonal communication competence.**

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Framework and Sample**

Research frame of this study is shown as figure 1. This study questions pet owners in Taiwan because Topics on dogs extend to friend groups and facilitate interpersonal communication (Hirschman, 1994). Issued a total of 526 questionnaires, collected 500 valid questionnaires, and the effective rate is 95%.

![Figure 1: Conception of Framework](image)

**Reliability and Validity Analysis**

This study uses Cronbach's α to measure data consistency. Personality trait, Pet attachment, and interpersonal communication competence of Cronbach’s α value are 0.90, 0.98, and 0.95, and these values are higher than 0.9. It indicates that the questionnaires in this study have good reliability.

This study uses convergent validity and discriminant validity to inspect questionnaire validity (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The evaluation criteria of convergent validity adopts of the proposed combination of composite reliability, CR, is greater than 0.6 by Bagozzi and Yi (1988). In this study, CR value of personality trait, pet attachment, and interpersonal communication competence are 0.76, 0.82, and 0.80, and these values are greater than 0.6 to express each variable has with good convergent validity. Capron (1999) is taken as the criteria for assessing discriminant validity, when the absolute value of the
The coefficient of roots and other value AVE is greater than the dimensions of the correlation coefficient, which is to support the existence of discriminant validity. The findings show that personality trait, pet attachment, and interpersonal communication competence of the AVE values are greater than the correlation coefficient, such as the absolute value of other factors of Table 1. Therefore, this mode has considerable discriminant validity after the test for the overall mode fit. This mode has considerable discriminant validity. In this model, RMR = 0.02, and low than 0.05. GFI = 0.94, AGFI = 0.90, NFI = 0.95, RFI = 0.93, CFI = 0.97, and these values are great than 0.90. PNFI = 0.68, PGFI = 0.74 and two values are great than 0.50. The above indicators show that the mode has a good degree of adaptation.

### Table 1: Validity Analysis of Each Variable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Personality trait</th>
<th>Interpersonal communication competence</th>
<th>Pet attachment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality trait</td>
<td>0.44 (0.66)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>0.53** (0.76)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet attachment</td>
<td>0.40** (0.84)</td>
<td>0.66**</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note 1: Diagonal digital is the value of AVE and brackets digital is the values of AVE roots.*

*Note 2: **The correlation coefficient between variables reached the significant levels in a significant level $\alpha = 0.01$.*

### Hypothesis Testing

The findings show that personality trait except neuroticism have a significant positively impact on pet attachment and interpersonal communication competence. Pet attachment have a significant positively impact on interpersonal communication competence. It is shown as table 2.

### Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path Relations</th>
<th>t- value</th>
<th>Support to Hypothesis</th>
<th>Path Relations</th>
<th>t- value</th>
<th>Support to Hypothesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personality trait to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>10.34***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Agreeableness to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>13.28***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conscientiousness to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>11.27***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extraversion to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>11.84***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neuroticism to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>-0.52</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Openness to experience to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>13.09***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality trait to pet attachment</td>
<td>7.72***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Agreeableness to pet attachment</td>
<td>9.54***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conscientiousness to pet attachment</td>
<td>6.80***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Extraversion to pet attachment</td>
<td>7.49***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Neuroticism to pet attachment</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Openness to experience to pet attachment</td>
<td>8.02***</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pet attachment to interpersonal communication competence</td>
<td>2.47**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Mediating Role of Pet Attachment

This study examines the mediating effect of pet attachment, referring to Baron and Kenny (1986) proposed intermediary way, take Williams, Edwards, and Vandenber (2003) with SEM mode verification, it shall meet the following four conditions: (1) Independent variables need to have a significant relationship for intervening variables; (2) Independent variables need to have a significant relationship on dependent variable; (3) Intervening variables need to have a significant relationship on the dependent variable; (4) Independent variables and intervening variables need to have a relationship to the dependent variable and the effect of independent variables must be weak than the second effect.

The results find that personality trait has a significant relationship to pet attachment which satisfy the first condition, personality trait has a significant relationship to interpersonal communication competence which satisfy the second condition, pet attachment has a significant relationship to interpersonal communication competence which satisfy the third condition, and personality trait and pet attachment have a significant relationship to interpersonal communication competence which satisfy the fourth condition. The standardized regression coefficients of the fourth condition 0.58 are less than the second condition 0.71. Thus informed, the mode of pet attachment variables partly mediated.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The sample data showed that 59.9% were female and 40.1% were male. 88% of the respondents fell under the age and 94.3% were unmarried, 95.6% were no children, single and living in solitary. They wished to keep pets for company and pets would satisfy pet owners’ needs for social interaction and emotional bonding. 78.9% of the respondents had a monthly salary below NT$ 20,000 and 42.4% of the respondents spend less than NT$ 1,000 on their pets per month. Pet owners could afford to keep their pets despite earning wages that are barely sufficient to accommodate basic living needs. The reason may be pet owners as the Z generation who grown up in an affluent background, they shoulder little to no financial burden and as such, and they would prioritize the fulfillment of their desires. The other reason may be families might offer partial economic support for young pet owners to make up for familial interaction and learning of communication skills because the effects of low birth rate.

The study showed that personality traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, and openness to experience are positively related to pet owners’ interpersonal communication competence. Namely, pet owners with more confident and extrovert, a sense of responsibility, thoughtfulness for others and open mind are more likely to establish friendly communication relationships with others. Personality trait of neuroticism is not related to pet owners’ interpersonal communication competence. However, pet owners with neuroticism are more anxiety, depression or hostility toward others, and they would suffer from poor interpersonal communication competence. Keeping a pet might improve one’s interpersonal communication competence, and the study explores the mediator of pet attachment late. Therefore, personality traits such as agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion and openness to experience have positive influence on pet owners’ attachment. Pet owners with neuroticism have no influence on their pet attachment, and they will have limited attachment to their pets. When an individual experiences higher degree of unsecured attachment, and he is more likely to demonstrate neurotic personality traits (Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Noftle & Shaver, 2006). Sibley and Overall (2010) showed that neurotic personality traits and unsecured attachment were positively related to intimate companion. In the study, pet attachment is shown by pet owners would be categorized as secured attachment.

Pet companionship increases an individual’s sense of security, confidence and frequency of
interaction with others (Barba, 1995). Through the behavior of pet attachment, pet owners benefit from positive emotions and feelings of security, as they are able to expand the scope of their social interaction through their pets (Sable, 1995). The study explored that pet owners’ personality traits would partially affect their interpersonal communication competence depending on their pet attachment. Pet owners can expand their social interaction and improve their interpersonal communication competence through their attachment to pet companionship. McNicholas and Collis (2000) showed that dogs could function as the catalyst for interpersonal interaction and that through pet keeping, taking pets out for strolls, pets could draw the attention of others and elicit topics of communication and thereby operate as a method to resolve interpersonal alienation. Nevertheless, future studies can focus on pet owners’ inclination to communicate and their expectations for in-depth social interaction.

REFERENCES


