tourism and hospitality

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To Touch or Not to Touch: Navigating the Ethical and Monetary Dilemma in Giant Panda Tourism

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Abstract: Tourists consistently demonstrate the need to touch wildlife, although policies often deny these experiences because of the psychological and physiological impacts on animals. However, philosophers contend that humans can learn to empathize with animals by feeling their way into the plight of animals through touch. Facing this dilemma, the paper asks if human touch can be ethically experienced in tourist interactions with animals by employing animal health warning labels. Using the case of "holding a panda" at the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, Sichuan, China, the study investigates this dilemma through Johann Gottfried Herder's philosophy on empathy and touch against the no-touch policies. A survey containing four scenarios shows that the use of payment can serve as a more effective tool than ethical appeal in reducing people's decision to hold a panda through its inclusion of additional factors in the decision process. However, ethical touch building on animal health warning labels demands spaces for mutual respect, conservation awareness, and the recognition of health risks through a direct confrontation of the established emotional and sensual aesthetic appeal of cuteness between visitors and the panda. It is found that a combined use of payment and ethical appeal is necessary to restructure visitors' willingness to hold a panda.

Keywords: ethical touch; willingness to pay; panda tourism; Johann Gottfried Herder; giant panda; animal health warning labels

Citation: Guo, Y.; Fennell, D. To Touch or Not to Touch: Navigating the Ethical and Monetary Dilemma in Giant Panda Tourism. *Tour. Hosp.* **2024**, *5*, 1309–1326. https://doi.org/10.3390/tourhosp5040073

Academic Editors: Brian Garrod and Lewis Ting On Cheung

Received: 21 October 2024
Revised: 25 November 2024
Accepted: 27 November 2024
Published: 2 December 2024

1. Introduction

Wildlife tourism exists as a strong sector in global tourism [1], where hunting, ecotourism, and activities at captive wildlife tourism venues represent approximately one-third of all tourism revenue in some countries [2]. However, visitors' fascination with animals has led to several impacts. For example, Moorhouse et al. [3] found that hundreds of thousands of animals have their conservation status and individual welfare compromised because of unregulated tourism. Tourists do not know their impacts on species because of an absence of regulation and proper standards to control behavior, preventing the creation of a green market [4]. These issues occur even though tourists from several countries believe animal welfare and conservation standards are paramount for the protection of animals [5].

China's captive giant panda industry is an evocative part of the global animal-based tourism industry. In an article written for Guardian Travel, Freeman [6] captured her panda-holding experience in China in these words:

> *Just next to the main enclosure is a little villa where, for a fairly hefty fee (about £95), you can hold a panda. As far as I know, this is the only place in the world where you can do this: I would have paid three times that. The one-year-old I already thought of as "my panda" was sitting on a wooden bench, like a small round emperor upon a throne, chewing on bamboo. I nervously sat down and immediately felt his heft and warmth as he leaned up against me. He continued to munch his bamboo thoughtfully and soon turned*

> *slowly, sweetly towards me, and I looked into his panda face. We have our moment. I have my Panda Watch. And, as an experience, it was more than compelling and rich.*

In the quote above, Freeman provides testimony to the importance of an embodied connection with pandas through the sense of touch, which is often at the center of the animal tourist experience [7–10]. Freeman [6] captured this essence in her "Panda moment", which transcended mere physical touch toward a profound essence that deeply moved her.

At the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding (the Panda Base), one author, a research scientist, consistently receives the following questions from tourists: "Where can I hold a panda?" Despite the hands-off policy that has prohibited contact between tourists and pandas since 2018, the insatiable desire of tourists to interact with this iconic animal has raised numerous questions. Why would visitors continue a prohibited practice? What do visitors hope to gain from such experiences? What does it mean for visitors to hold a panda? Indeed, if tourism is foremost about novelty (and escape), as Iso-Ahola [11] argued, should tourism justify the need to hold a panda if touch is an avenue toward greater empathy?

Drawing from case studies of panda–visitor touch at the Panda Base, the paper discusses Johann Gottfried Herder's philosophy on touch and empathy as a paradigm for approaching the shared animal–human experience in contemporary society. As Monsó and Wrage [12] suggest, studying how animals engage in and navigate touch can broaden the scope of the animal morality debate. In this study, "touch" and "hold in my arms" are not treated distinctively but are considered interactions collectively places under the broader framework of human–animal physical engagement. The study further scrutinizes this animal–human touch in the context of two types of care—constructed care and ethical care—distinguished by different ethos, pathos, and logos at a captive animal site like the Panda Base [13]. The paper also investigates whether new research on animal health warning labels [14] is useful as a novel system to investigate the dimensions of touch at the Base through four scenarios, including the following:

1. Hold a panda for free.
2. Hold a panda for RMB 2000 (USD 291).
3. Hold a panda for free after being presented with a panda health warning label.
4. Pay RMB 2000 (USD 291) to hold a panda after being presented with a panda health warning label.

The purpose of the designated scenarios is to understand how willingness to pay [15–17], ethical consideration [4,18,19], and the two combined influence people's willingness to hold a panda. While these factors can certainly alter people's interest in holding a panda, there is little empirical evidence to suggest which one might be more impactful. The four scenarios were hence tailored based on one author's long-term fieldwork and insights into daily interactions observed at the Panda Base. In doing so, this paper attempts to explore the compelling and rich dimension of touch, seeking to unravel the nuanced aspects of these encounters. The study discerns how these experiences can, in turn, lay the foundation for a more ethical form of interspecies connection.

2. Literature Review

This section focuses on three areas related to this study's aim. First, it stretches the boundaries of animal-based tourism by expanding the discussion on the sense of touch as a fundamental element of animal–human interactions. Second, a brief survey of research on tactile interaction in tourism based primarily on studies emphasizing the commodification of WTAs and impacts on animal welfare is provided. Third, it discusses ways to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism on animal welfare through the concept of animal health warning labels.

2.1. Touching: Human–Animal Interactions

The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) made considerable progress in extending empathy to animals in European society at a time when these

sentiments were contrary to a norm of entrenched cruelty [14]. A central theme in Herder's philosophy was that sentiment (emotion) is more critical than cognition in moral decision-making [20]. Herder argued for an inversion of the senses, such that touch was more important than the gaze in feeling one's way into the world of other beings because "Feeling in general is. . .the foundation of all knowledge. The sense of touch is simply the very first way in which the soul comes to feel" [20] (p. 41). Thus, a connection exists with feeling-in, which allows a person to know themselves as a conduit to know what others are feeling. DeSouza [20] refers to this as an interplay between *self-feeling* (what Herder referred to as Selbstgefühl) and *feeling-with* (Mitgefühl) as the basis of empathy [13]. In his most celebrated work, *Treatise on the Origin of Language* [21], Herder reinforces the importance of touch in feeling empathy for the other:

> *To be sure, the whole moving visual drama of this miserable, shaking creature is masked from him. But all examples testify that precisely through this masking, the sense of hearing becomes less distracted, more attentive, and greatly more penetrating. There he listens in darkness, consequently, in the stillness of his eternal night, and each moan penetrates his heart that much more deeply and sharply, like an arrow! Now let him, in addition, take in aid the touching, slowly embracing sense of feeling, let him touch the shakings, feel the breaking of the suffering machine for himself in their entirety—horror and pain shoot through his limbs, his inner nerve structure feels the breaking and destruction in sympathy; the death rattle sounds. That is the bond of this natural language!*

In this quote, Herder captured the experience of feeling with the other, opening a channel for a shared life experience with the animal. According to Haraway [22], species meet when touch takes place. In the human–animal contact zone, touch inaugurates the "multispecies knots", and ultimately, "touch ramifies and shapes accountability" [22] (p. 36). In animal therapy, where the effect of touch between humans and animals is well captured, Rowan and Beck [23] point out that evidence has proven the significant benefit of animal touch. From this point of view, the need for touch between species has a sound philosophical foundation, suggesting that interspecies contact is valuable, meaningful, and even fundamental to human life—the innate connection people have to the natural world [24].

2.2. Tactile Interaction in Tourism

Besides labs where animals are kept for experimental purposes, agricultural husbandry, and families where animals are kept as pets, studies show that tourism provides a powerful platform for people to interact with animals. Animals and experiences frequently sought at wildlife tourism attractions include tigers, lions, dolphins, gorillas, civet coffee farms, rehabilitated or rescued animals (e.g., orangutan sanctuaries), and wildlife-based shows (e.g., "snake charming") [3]. In addition, recent studies have begun to explore emotions, affect, agency, and empathy in animal-based tourism [25–32]. Other studies have focused on the importance of proximity to animals in building empathy and pro-environmental behaviors [33,34]. Still other analyses have found that close interactions with animals characterized as non-consumptive can ultimately be classified as consumptive. For example, D'Cruze et al. [35] (p. 1563) studied non-consumptive wildlife tourism involving close interactions (such as feeding, swimming, and petting) with wild animals across Latin America and found "altered feeding and reproductive behavior, stress and other physiological responses, injury, disease or death".

A recent and expanding animal touch phenomenon in tourism is "wildlife selfie tourism" [36]. This practice involves the desire to approach or touch an animal to photograph the animal with the tourist. Scholars argue that this behavior is a form of social capital in which tourists obtain value from their social networks, which may hold more value than actually being with the animal [37–39]. The case of the Franciscan dolphin calf (one of two) is germane. Tourists at an Argentinian beach removed the dolphins from the water and passed them around to take selfies, with one dying because of dehydration [40].

Moorhouse et al. [3] argue that such cases demonstrate a lack of knowledge on the part of tourists about the conservation and welfare needs of animals.

In applying Herder's philosophy on empathy to the use of animals in tourism, Fennell [13] suggests that touch in tourism departs from its philosophical and ethical soundness because of the "institutional use" of animals in tourism. He argues that the field has yet to advance much further than Herder in expressing empathy toward animals. He identifies different types of empathy (affective, cognitive, and empathetic concern) and has applied these at captive animal sites like aquaria [41]. However, many of these initiatives use captive animals as conduits for pleasure and profit. Fennell [13] described these venues as instances of "constructed care", where a carefully crafted sense of compassion is projected onto others, such as tourists, with the intent of establishing authority. This approach operates within an institutional framework that is fundamentally practical and serves specific, utilitarian purposes. Based on such a mindset, touch becomes mechanic and reinforcing, losing its bonding power in the face of profit (industry) and pleasure (tourists) motives. As such, it becomes difficult to ascertain whether empathy in contemporary wildlife tourism venues exists as authentic and benevolent in their efforts to satisfy touristic demand and commercial ends.

Due to the tourism industry's inherent distortion of the touch experience, characterized by constructed care, it appears that the crucial animal–human touch, once valued by philosophers like Herder, has received little coverage in animal-based tourism. Common measures used to help mitigate negative impacts on animals used in tourism include, for example, codes of ethics [42], certification schemes [43], and regulations [44]. However, studies have shown that these approaches are not always successful in limiting the effects on animals used in tourism [45,46], especially in cases where there are extreme impacts from such encounters [47,48].

Based on the case of panda-holding, this paper illustrates how institutional frameworks in tourism can undermine genuine human–animal bonding. It aims to bridge the gap by offering insights for mitigating the negative impacts of animal interactions in tourism, with a focus on exploring the terrain of empathy toward animals as more authentic rather than constructed for commercial appeal or entertainment.

2.3. Ethical Tourism and Health Labels

Health warning labels are used liberally in society and have helped reduce the harmful habit of smoking [49], as well as food consumption, where packaging includes messages on fats, calories, and other essential food components [50]. Clarke et al. [51] suggest that graphic health warning labels can significantly influence emotional arousal and can effectively suspend the consumption of food and alcoholic drinks. Brennan et al. [52] used emotional responses, engagement, and behavioral intentions to measure the effectiveness of these labels.

Fennell [14] introduced the concept of animal health warning labels in animal-based tourism to communicate with tourists in a language they are exposed to daily (as noted above) and to convey knowledge on animal welfare and conservation status. Fennell [14] used the example of overtourism involving Burrunan dolphins (*Tursiops australis)* in Port Phillips Bay, Australia, and the unwillingness on the part of the industry to practice caution when approaching this species [53]. The proposed animal health warning label for the Burrunan dolphin includes three icons. The first is a pictorial label with the species' IUCN Red List Status (critically endangered). The second icon is a text label pertaining to research on the impacts of swim-with tours on cetaceans like the dolphin. The third icon is a pictorial label indicating the pressure level on the species. As observed by Fennell [14], "High numbers of tourists placing continuous pressure on a species can compromise the health of these animals, recognizing that different species respond differently to higher and lower levels of demand" (p. 3). Configured as such, animal health warning labels provide a way to revisit tourist–panda touch (Figure 1) by communicating with tourists

the health risks, pressure, and vulnerable status of pandas and allowing them to make an informed decision.

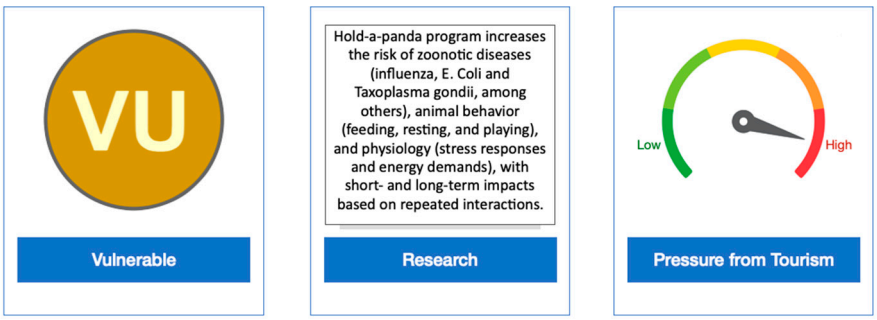

Figure 1. Ethical touch: Giant panda health warning labels.

Outlawing animal touch through policies and rules within the tourism industry represents a well-intentioned yet moderately effective effort to assert institutional authority. The study proposes that the introduction of animal health warning labels could suggest a significant departure from the prevailing paradigm of constructed care endorsed by the industry. This paper explores whether an animal health warning label can serve to deconstruct the prevailing notion of care by bringing visitors' emotions, engagement, and intentions to the forefront of the experience. The assumption is that the label introduces an element of autonomy into the otherwise rigid framework of constructed care, encouraging tourists to assess the consequences of their actions independently rather than blindly succumbing to desires. In doing so, it empowers visitors to make informed choices and recognize the ethical implications of their interactions with animals in tourism settings.

3. Method

3.1. Research Context

Holding a panda was a popular activity at Chengdu Panda Base until 2018, before the Sichuan government banned visitors from approaching pandas, including paying to hold a panda for the purpose of taking pictures. Because of the practice's current unavailability and outlawed status, little or no official documents can be easily retrieved. This study extensively searched for the keyword "holding a panda" on the internet and found three stages of texts where this practice evolved in the public's recorded past.

The first stage (2004–2014) welcomed the practice when it marked a new commercial attempt to attract customers' attention. Government regulations were few during this phase, and the practice gained popularity among celebrities and the public. The second stage (2015–2018) is marked by a more consistent debate, with government control initiated. As reported by both government officials and the media, the need for controls started to emerge in recognition of reverse zoonosis, or the transmission of human diseases to pandas, leading to the latter's death. The last phase (2018–present) is discernable by the legal removal of the practice of human contact with pandas and the growing public awareness of giant panda protection. Despite its illegal status, it is notable that reviewers on Tripadvisor and Chinese websites are still requesting information about holding pandas at the Panda Base.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

In conducting daily fieldwork at the Panda Base, tourists consistently asked one of the authors of this paper, "Where can I hold a panda?" When informed about the practice's unavailability at the Base, tourists would ask, "What if I pay?" These questions prompted the research team to investigate the desire to hold a panda through a three-part questionnaire.

The first part included nine questions addressing the basic demographic information of the participants (gender, age, origin, education), visiting experience (visiting purposes,

first/repeated visit, panda encounters), and panda fandom (self-identification, social media subscription). The second part contained ten questions to test panda knowledge at the Panda Base. The third part was based on four hold-a-panda scenarios, including (1) visitors could hold a panda for free; (2) visitors could hold a panda for RMB 2000 (USD 291); (3) visitors could hold a panda for free, but only after being presented with a panda health warning label (Figure 2); and (4) visitors had to pay RMB 2000 (USD 291) to hold a panda while being presented with a panda health warning label. Not all participants were required to evaluate all four scenarios, as displayed in the flowchart (Figure 2). Instead, the four scenarios were constructed progressively based on the participant's decision regarding holding a panda. For instance, if participants chose not to hold a panda in Scenario 1 (679 participants), they were not required to assess Scenarios 2, 3, and 4. Only participants willing to hold a panda in the first three scenarios could proceed to Scenario 4. Furthermore, all participants were instructed to provide reasons for their decision if they chose not to hold a panda after making their choice, except for Scenario 2. In Scenario 2, the evident reason for quitting the practice was the unwillingness to pay the high price.

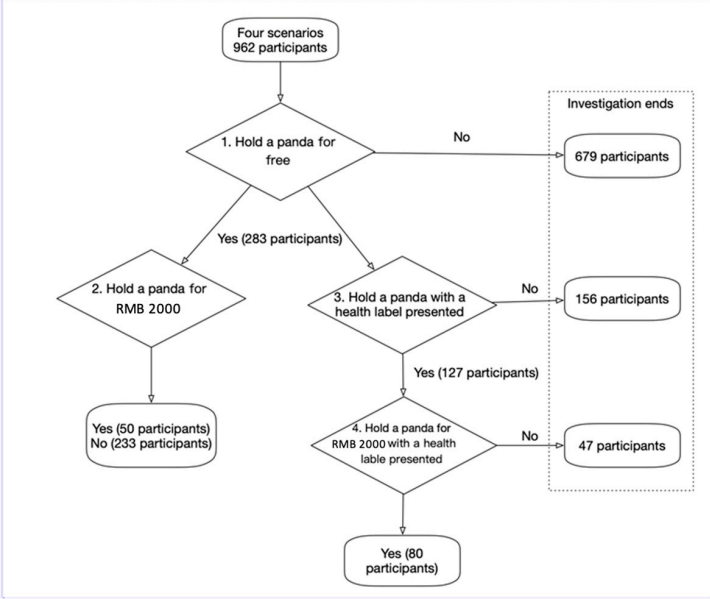

Figure 2. Four scenarios and the surveying process.

3.3. Questionnaire Collection

The questionnaire was designed and published on Wenjuanxing, which issued a QR code for participants to access through their mobile phones. The research team printed out the QR code and invited visitors to participate in the survey voluntarily and randomly. Near to the exit of the Panda Base, the research team established a survey stall (Figure 3), which helped draw visitor attention. In total, 1000 questionnaires were collected from 13 March to 5 April 2023. All participants in the questionnaire were compensated with a gift (a panda magazine or snacks). As the Panda Base is visited by more female tourists (the researcher's note), the questionnaire attracted more female than male participants. This paper focuses on younger participants rather than older-generation visitors because of the need for mobile phone literacy for QR code usage and the elderly's health issues (e.g., poor eyesight). All questionnaires were collected anonymously. According to Chinese law, an anonymous survey not reporting critical personal information does not require approval from an ethics committee. Wenjuanxing ensured that all questionnaires were fully answered before submission. The median time for completing the questionnaire was 106 s, and the average time was 116.84 s. To ensure the overall quality of the answers, 33 questionnaires submitted in under 55 s were deleted. In addition, five questionnaires with unrealistic ages were excluded, leaving 962 valid questionnaires.

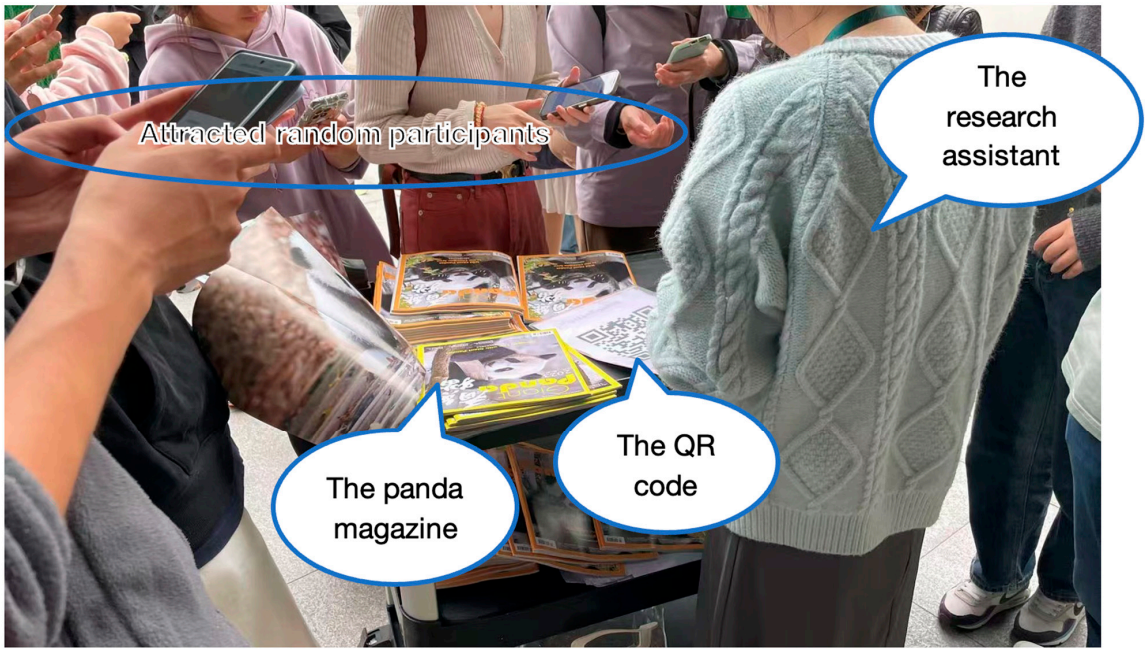

Figure 3. The research team and the survey stall.

3.4. Questionnaire Analysis

In order to understand and group the collected data, this study employed analytical approaches from the repertoire of statistical and data-mining techniques: (1) simple descriptive analysis and (2) decision tree analysis (DTA). Employing descriptive analysis allows researchers to gain a better overview of a collected sample. DTA enables researchers to simplify the measurement level of dependent variables into true/false categories, avoiding the assumption of a linear relationship between variables. This approach efficiently reduces uncertainty in data interpretation and has been commonly utilized in studies related to motivation, intention, and decision-making. DTA is especially useful when participants skip specific scenarios, as the method adapts to the available data and reduces the complexity of the analysis. Researchers have used DTA as a data-mining method for understanding people's decision-making [54,55], intention [56,57], motivation [58,59], and behavior [60,61] under various conditions. In this study, the chi-squared automatic interaction detection (CHAID) algorithm-based decision tree is employed to provide a comprehensive analysis of rule characteristics and classification results [62]. Unlike other algorithms, such as support vector machine (SVM) and random forests, CHAID is one of the three most commonly applied techniques for classification predictions with easily interpreted results. Díaz-Pérez and Bethencourt-Cejas [63] suggest that the CHAID algorithm can serve as an appropriate analytical method for tourism market segmentation, showing that CHAID matches the nature of the problem studied better than those provided by discriminate analysis. Cyelan, Çizel, and Karakaş [64] used CHAID in a study of destination image perception patterns of tourist typologies to filter out irrelevant demographic variables and to explore the hierarchy of factors affecting the dependent variable. CHAID allows a greater number of significant segments and variables to emerge [63] while indicating their importance in the segmentation process [65]. These terminal nodes represent distinct segments. More specifically, the current study aims to explore and determine focal factors that inform visitors' decisions to hold a panda in the given scenarios.

Pitombo et al. [66] describe the output of a CHAID analysis as a tree-like diagram, starting with a root node that branches out into homogeneous terminal leaf nodes, which cannot be further subdivided. The CHAID decision tree models were constructed starting with a single root node representing the hold-a-panda decision or not for free, without any predefined branches. Eleven determinants, identified through existing studies and the questionnaire, were then inputted to pinpoint the key factors for each tree model

and to assess their prioritization. The process of prioritizing and splitting determinants involved grouping the categories of exogenous variables (the 11 determinant candidates) based on their significant association with the endogenous variable of holding or not-holding behavior. This process continued until the branched nodes became statistically insignificant [67]. At each stage of prioritization and branching, two branch nodes were generated per tree. Following established guidelines, the tree models were allowed to grow to an optimal depth of three levels, ensuring clarity and comprehensibility [68].

4. Results

Table 1 offers an overview of the demographic characteristics, visitation experiences, and panda knowledge test results of the 962 participants in ten categories. All categories were listed as independent variables in the CHAID decision tree and coded according to their sub-categories. Figure 4 shows that questionnaire part 2 generated data that followed a normally distributed pattern. Confirming the reliability and credibility of the test, the skewness (−0.111) and kurtosis (−0.257) statistics of the curve further affirm the normal distribution of the quiz results. The mean score of all tests was 62.02, with a standard deviation of 15.937. The normality of the test results demonstrates that questionnaire part 2 effectively evaluated the participants' knowledge about pandas.

Table 1. Independent variables.

Variable Name and Symbol	Values (Modalities)	Code	Structure		Type of Variable *
			f_i	%	
Age (X_1)	6–67	Mean = 27.43; SD = 8.35	962	100.0	SV
Gender (X_2)	Male	1	305	31.7	NV
	Female	2	657	68.3	
Level of education (X_3)	Less than undergraduate	1	222	23.1	NV
	Undergraduate	2	434	45.1	
	Postgraduate and above	3	306	31.8	
Place of residence (X_4)	First-tier cities	1	181	18.8	NV
	Second-tier cities (Chengdu included)	2	398	41.4	
	Third-tier regions	3	383	39.8	
Visiting purposes (X_5)	Holiday and relaxation	1	700	72.8	NV
	Socializing with family/friends	2	174	18.1	
	Scientific education	3	30	3.1	
	Business	4	18	1.9	
	Other	5	40	4.2	
First-time/returning visitor (X_6)	First-time visitor	1	829	86.2	NV
	Returning visitor	2	133	13.8	
Have you met pandas already? (X_7)	Yes	1	875	91.0	NV
	No	2	87	9.0	
Do you have panda-related subscriptions on social media? (X_8)	Yes	1	669	69.5	NV
	No	2	293	30.5	
Do you consider yourself a panda fan? (6-point Likert scale: 1 = absolutely not; 6 = absolutely yes) **(X_9)**	1	1	42	4.4	OV
	2	2	73	7.6	
	3	3	183	19.0	
	4	4	228	23.7	
	5	5	163	16.7	
	6	6	275	28.6	
Panda knowledge scale (X_{10})	0–100	Mean = 62.02; SD = 15.937	962	100	SV
The panda is cute rather than aggressive (X_{11})	Yes	1	205	21.3	NV
	No	2	757	78.7	

* Note: Acronyms in the table mean the following: NV = nominal variable; OV = ordinal variable; SV = scale variable; f_i = frequency.

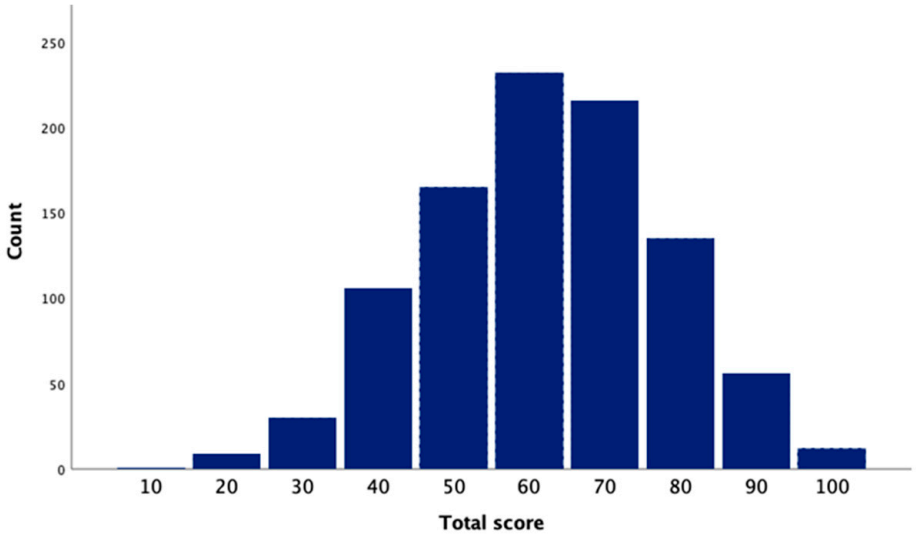

Figure 4. Distribution of total scores from the questionnaire part 2.

Table 2 lists the four scenarios in the decision tree. The table shows that 29.6% of participants wanted to hold a panda if the experience was freely available. Fifty participants (5.2% of 962 participants) were willing to hold a panda given the charge of RMB 2000. In contrast, 127 participants (13.2% of 962 participants) wanted to hold a panda in Scenario 3, where animal health labels were offered. Finally, 8.3% of participants believed they would be willing hold a panda if they needed to pay RMB 2000 and were exposed to the animal health warning label.

Table 2. Dependent variables.

Variable Name and Symbol	Values (Modalities)	Code	Structure		Type of Variable *
			f_i	%	
Hold a panda for free (Y_1)	Hold	1	283	29.6	NV
	Not hold	2	679	70.4	
Hold a panda for RMB 2000 (Y_2)	Hold	1	50	17.7	NV
	Not hold	2	233	82.3	
Hold a panda for free with health labels presented (Y_3)	Hold	1	127	44.9	NV
	Not hold	2	156	55.1	
Hold a panda for RMB 2000 with health labels presented (Y_4)	Hold	1	80	63.0	NV
	Not hold	2	47	37.0	

* Note: Acronyms in the table mean the following: NV = nominal variable; f_i = frequency.

All four scenarios of holding a panda are analyzed with the same CHAID decision tree (Table 3), separately providing four dependent variables (Y1, Y2, Y3, Y4). Eleven independent variables in Table 1 were entered in all trees, which allowed for a maximum tree depth of 4. The minimum cases in the parent node are 100, and the minimum cases in the child node are 50. The model chooses Person's chi-squared test based on the most acceptable significance level (p = 0.05) for node splitting and independent variable category merger. Table 3 shows that the first scenarios (Y1, Y2, and Y3) generated decision trees with different independent variables included and depth built. However, the last scenario fails to build a decision tree based on the same conditions. The chi-squared test generated no significant difference for node splitting with all independent variables.

Table 3. Models summary.

Dependent Variable	Independent Variables Included	Number of Nodes	Number of Terminal Nodes	Depth
Hold a panda for free (Y_1)	X_{11}, X_8, X_2	7	4	2
Hold a panda for RMB 2000 (Y_2)	X_{10}	4	3	1
Hold a panda for free with health labels presented (Y_3)	X_{11}	3	2	1
Hold a panda for RMB 2000 with health labels presented (Y_4)	No independent variable included	1	1	0

Figure 5 shows whether the participants believed the panda's cuteness and aggressiveness (chi-squared = 26.33, p = 0.000) were critical in deciding whether to hold a panda for free or not. Also, social media subscriptions (chi-squared = 5.246, p = 0.022) and gender (chi-squared = 4.042, p = 0.044) further influenced the decision process. Male participants who suggested the pandas were cute and unaggressive were most likely to want to hold a panda, showing that gender and the aesthetic "cutification" of the animal were influential factors triggering people's decision to hold a giant panda. Social media subscription was found to negatively influence people's interest in holding a giant panda. Understandably, subscribers of social media on giant pandas can have a greater exposure to giant panda welfare messages. Factors contributing to participants' decision to hold a giant panda, hierarchically, were aesthetics of the animal, social media subscriptions, and gender, whereas other demographic features such as age, education, place of residence, and knowledge about the giant panda had limited influence on the decision.

Furthermore, 679 participants who decided not to hold a panda in Scenario 1 provided their reasons, which are categorized into six groups. More than half of the participants said they would refrain from holding a panda because they believed it was aggressive and potentially dangerous. In addition, conservation, awareness of relevant regulations, and other reasons stopped the participants from wanting to hold the animal. Fifty participants refused to hold the panda because they showed respect toward the animal. Also, the health risk for either the panda or the human participant was the concern of a small group of participants.

Figure 6 shows that panda knowledge (chi-squared = 18.134, p = 0.002) was a critical threshold when participants were invited to hold a panda for RMB 2000. Participants who scored less than 40.0 had the greatest likelihood (34.5%) of wanting to hold a panda. Interestingly, participants with above-average test results (>70.0) also tended to want to hold the panda more often (24.0%). The payment served as an effective threshold preventing visitors from holding the giant panda.

Figure 7 demonstrates that the panda health warning label (chi-squared = 6.084, p = 0.014) stopped 55.1% participants from holding the giant panda, compared to 82.3% in Figure 5. Figure 6, shows that the aesthetic cutification of the giant panda, again, became the main cause triggering visitors' interest in holding a giant panda. In Scenario 3, 156 participants who declined the offer of holding a panda had their reasons listed, with one-third of them believing that the panda was aggressive. The study notes that the health warning labels helped participants better acknowledge the health risks, tourist pressure, and the animal's vulnerable status. With the presence of the health labels, more participants demonstrated respect toward the animal (ranked no. 2).

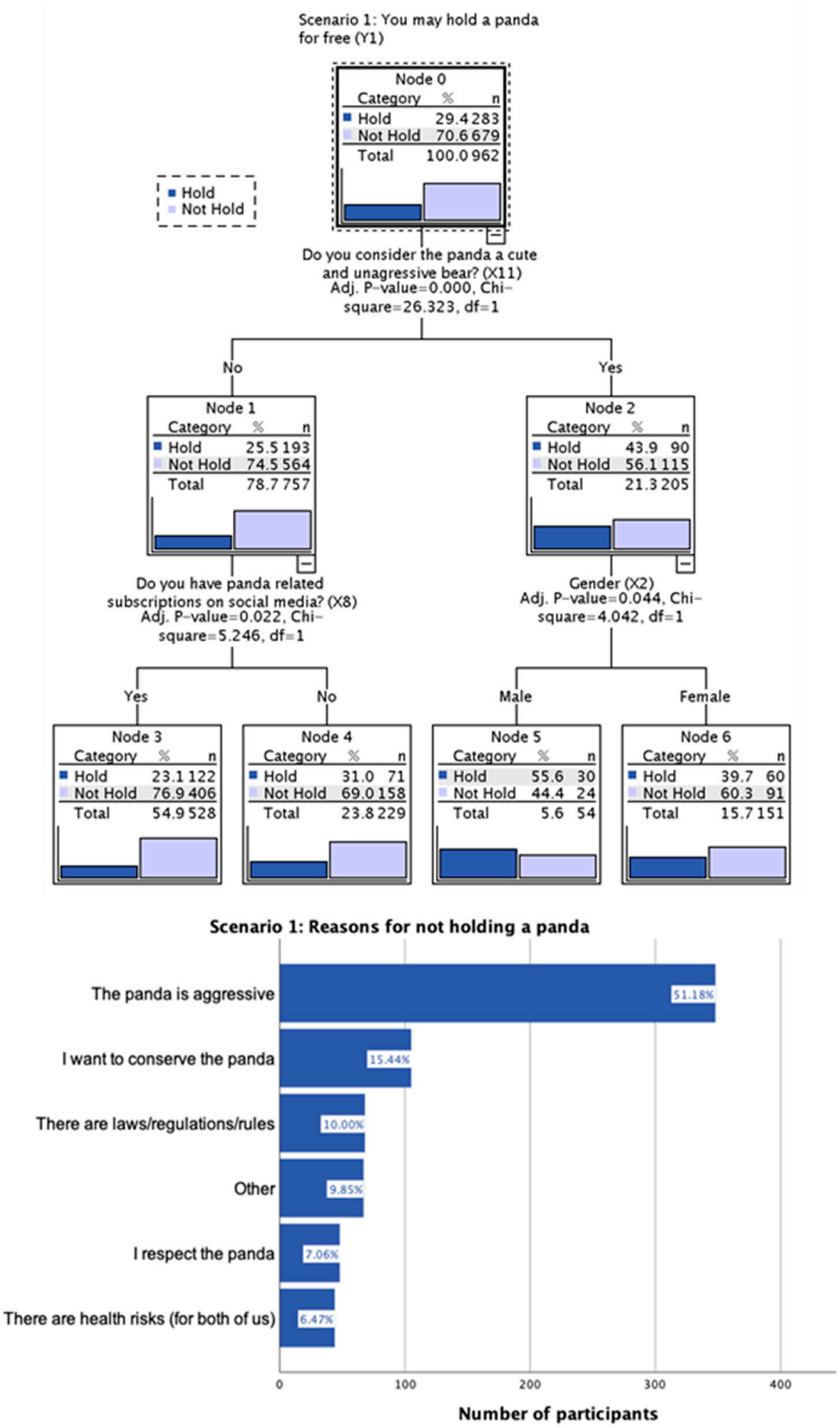

Figure 5. CHAID decision tree and bar chart for "Not hold" reasons in Scenario 1.

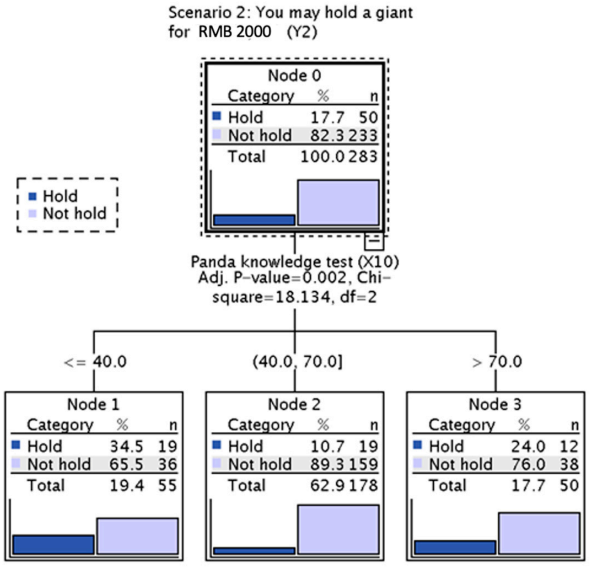

Figure 6. CHAID decision tree for Scenario 2.

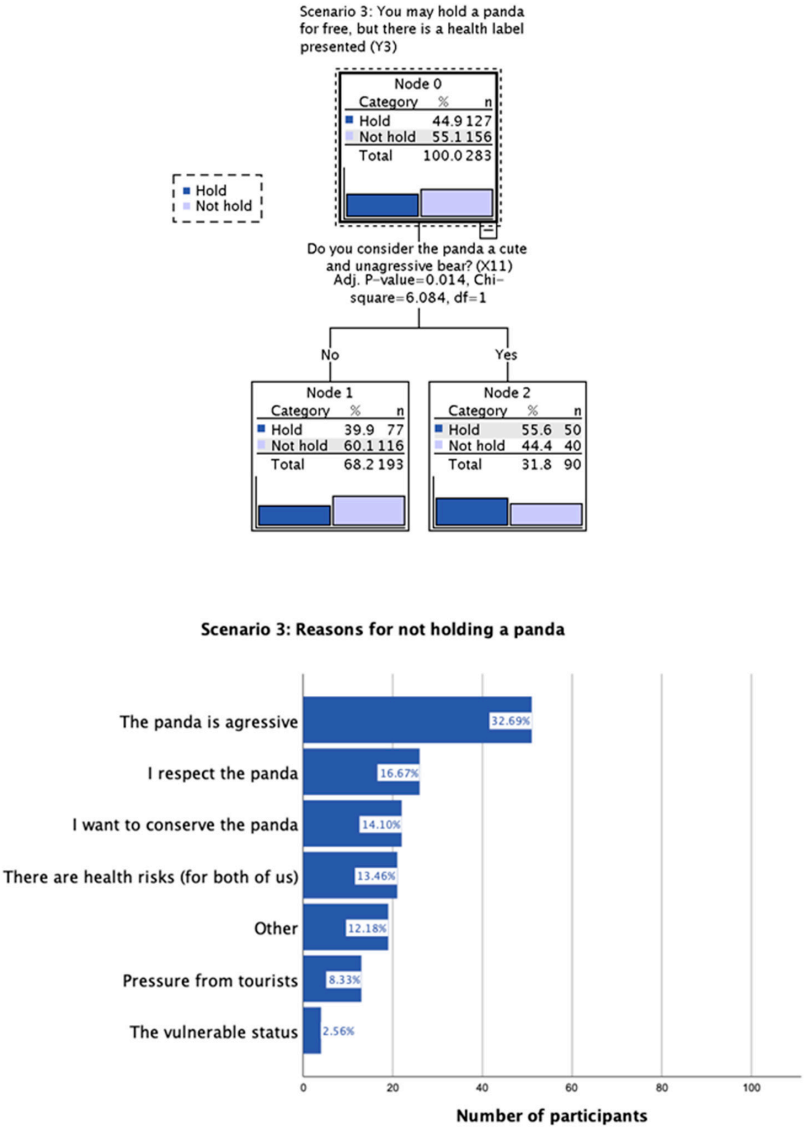

Figure 7. CHAID decision tree and bar chart for "Not hold" reasons in Scenario 3.

In summary, this exploration of participants' willingness to hold a giant panda was significantly determined by primary influencers, including the aesthetic of the animal (cute or not), the social media impact, and the gender of the participants. When price interfered as a threshold, knowledge about the giant panda became important to segment participants more willing to hold a giant panda from those who were unwilling. The animal health label, serving as an ethical mediator, was most relevant to the aesthetic value of the giant panda according to participants. This suggests that the ethical threshold, represented by the animal health label, is closely tied to value and aesthetic factors like the cuteness of the giant panda. When ethical concerns came into play, they did not introduce new determinants but instead amplified or reinforced one of the primary influencers. Instead, the use of price as a threshold suggests the inclusion of new determinants such as the knowledge of the giant panda, showing that participants were making more evaluated and complex decisions when a cost was concerned in this study.

5. Discussion

5.1. Constructed Care

The study identified constructed care as empathy and emotion (pathos) that acts as a form of legitimacy that influences tourists based on an ethos (credibility) of a logos (discourse) that is often utilitarian and instrumental by nature. Such an approach paves the way for an aesthetic appeal for the panda premised on pleasure as an important motivator to experience pandas. Scenario 1 allows for a close look at the sense of touch before incorporating the panda health warning labels (Figure 5). First, tourists' aesthetic appreciation of the panda, the animal's cuteness, was found to be a cornerstone for the concept of constructed care. The results show that tourists who have aestheticized the panda through a cute and unaggressive image are more likely to want to hold a panda. The results also show that other factors (e.g., social media subscription and gender) significantly impact the relationship between visitors and pandas, which is catalyzed by the emotion, credibility, and discourse presented by the Panda Base. Second, tourists' tendency to avoid touch builds not on the aesthetic of the panda's cuteness but instead on the animal as aggressive and fearful (51.18%). Figure 3 shows that conservation awareness (15.44%), legislative enforcement (10.00%), and other (9.85%) factors also prevent visitors from touching the animal.

Following these results, studies offer further insights into the image of cuteness and its consumption and a connection to the concept of constructed care. For example, scholars [69–71] argue that the capitalist market is the birthplace of the aesthetic of cuteness. Hence, the characterization of animals as cute becomes embodied in consumption. Genosko [69] links people's interest in cute animals to the "proprietary right to possess, nurture, and display the pedomorphic treasures of one's personal menagerie" (p. 3). Harris [70] believes the market creates cute products that can be grasped entirely through the senses. The desire to dominate and control the other, therefore, is the central drive in people's need to consume the cute.

Despite Ngai [72] believing that the aesthetic experience of the cute is visual, Harris [70] further suggests that it is not just the visual aspect that defines the relationship with cute animals. In a study on autonomous animals on the Appalachian Trail, Marx [73] observed that an overwhelming number of hikers considered animals cute and made further attempts to touch or feed them. Steinnes et al. [74] suggested that the aesthetic of cuteness and desire for touch can reinforce each other to the extent that the experience of affectionate touching can further cultivate the appreciation for cuteness. The need to touch as a function of cuteness can mean a request to invest more in the senses, while the sensual stimuli would, in turn, strengthen the appreciation for the animal. Scott and Nenkov [75] suggest that cuteness induces indulgent consumption, and consumer responsibility reminders are necessary to help consumers curtail the desire for cuteness.

This study demonstrates, therefore, that constructed care has emerged to be a function of cuteness which, in turn, is a response to tourism's institutionalization and commercial-

ization of captive wildlife venues. In this case, the perception of cute pandas is followed by the visitors' increasing desire to touch and hold the animal. While Marx [73] (2019) suggests that the perception of cute animals can be meaningful for human participants, animals frequently experience negative consequences (e.g., being touched, fed, and so on) due to this aesthetic appeal. This is why, increasingly, scholarly work as well as policy and practice generally steer clear of the acceptability of tourists handling wildlife [76].

5.2. Ethical Care?

Scenario 2 (Figure 6) and Scenario 3 (Figure 7) contributed to reconfiguring touch in panda–visitor encounters. Scenario 2 used a monetary barrier as the threshold, and Scenario 3 demanded that participants make an ethical decision. It is noted that in Scenario 2, the aesthetic of cuteness ceased to exhibit a significant impact on the panda–visitor touch. Instead, visitors' command of panda knowledge became a more important signifier. Hypothetically, price, as an essential extension of the market, took control in determining visitors' need to hold a panda and reduced the impact of cuteness as a market-oriented aesthetic experience. It is notable that the introduction of price complicated the decision tree of the participants by introducing a different factor (e.g., knowledge about the giant panda) for their consideration. Classical economic utility theory [77] suggests that consumers tend to make decisions based on maximizing utility. The result shows that giant panda knowledge, in Scenario 2, entered as another factor against which the participants measured when making the holding decision. The inclusion of the additional factor, hence, effectively reduced the participants' willingness to hold the giant panda.

In contrast, Scenario 3 demonstrated that cuteness still served as the dividing line between the intention to hold or not hold a panda despite the presence of the panda health warning label, showing that the sensual appeal and the constructed value of cuteness was intimately related to the ethical threshold. This suggests that the ethical threshold challenges the constructed and commodified appeal of cuteness, positioning it as a point of tension within the interplay between moral considerations and consumer-driven perceptions of aesthetic value. While this confrontation addresses the emotional and sensory allure of cuteness, it ultimately proved less effective than the price threshold in influencing decisions related to the hold-a-panda issue.

In fact, it is notable that reasons offered for not holding the panda changed significantly after the introduction of the animal health warning label. Respect for the animal (16.67%), conservation awareness (14.10%), and the recognition of the health risks (13.46%) became the three main reasons following visitors' direct perception that the panda was aggressive (32.69%). Figure 5 shows that after viewing the animal health warning label, tourists were capable of showing more respect toward the animal and would make decisions to hold the panda based on the newly acquired knowledge (e.g., the panda's health risks). Even on appearance, the ethical threshold did not function more effectively when compared to the financial barrier; the ethical threshold held the potential to expand the dimensions of constructed care.

It would be irresponsible of us to argue for a change in the touch policy at the Base without a thorough understanding of the science behind this interspecies relationship, part of which is explained in the panda health warning label. Ethical transgressions in the form of selfies and other close encounters consistently lead to problems for animals [39,78]. Nevertheless, if people are to follow the philosophy, Herder [21] argues that touch is the more critical sense because it allows for feeling with an animal in a way that the gaze fails to realize. Taken a step further, if people intend to build more empathy for animals like pandas, the question remains whether or not a personal connection is essential in making this happen.

What is encouraging is the embryonic cultivation of mutual respect, conservation, and knowledge on the part of some tourists, which suggests that efforts to plan, develop, and manage wildlife tourism attractions would benefit not only from the cognitive (e.g., codes of ethics, education, policies, and so on) but also from the sensual through programs designed

to build empathy. The paper suggests that profit and pleasure, although central to the practice of tourism, should not override the interests of pandas. The challenge in moving the touch empathy and ethical care agenda forward in captive settings is the continued separation of humans and animals when there is an innate need (at least on the part of the former) to fully complete the experience through more of an embodied connection with the animal or animals. While studies are now investigating animal-informed consent to participate in the arena of animal-based tourism [79], the industry must tread lightly and use a precautionary approach to ensuring the health and wellbeing of animals first and foremost in touristic endeavors.

As such, how transformative the experience is for visitors in inducing more empathy for pandas and building a more vital willingness to help conserve [34] is a question demanding more work. In light of the findings, the instrumental and utilitarian nature of the experience between pandas and humans also deserves more attention. Not unlike tourists in search of a "quick fix" that goes along with the selfie interaction [37,39], more research needs to take place on how significantly the lack of personal touch contributes to a poorer overall experience. Consequently, the field has a long way to go in assessing whether knowledge and awareness at a distance are good experiential proxies for the chance to get up close and personal with an iconic species.

6. Conclusions

At this paper's outset, Freeman [6] wrote of a deep connection to the panda, "her panda", at least for a short moment in time. Coming close to such an iconic animal in a new setting provides value to the experience of "being there and being with". Ours is the first extensive study on "holding a panda", a practice that was actively consumed by visitors to panda enclosures in the past. While government authorities regulated the practice as it became more prevalent, it is seen that the need to hold a panda has remained with visitors, who continue to inquire about opportunities to participate in this practice. The survey of this study shows how the cuteness of the animal has been sensually organized, where the social media impact and the gendered experience can most decisively determine participants' interest in holding a panda. The price and the ethical threshold introduced two means to alter people's decision in holding the animal, while price, with an added dimension for further evaluation, seemed to be more effective than the presence of the health label. However, the inclusion of the health label presents a significant opportunity for visitors to re-organize their relationship with the animal.

This empirical fieldwork indicates that the philosophical viewpoint sustains the need for an intimate human–animal experience through the sense of touch. This experience has psychological and physical meaning for humans. While it is difficult to determine the degree to which pandas benefit from the experience, the captive animal industry, as an institution, must be mindful of the difference between constructed care and ethical care. Findings indicate that building an ethical awareness of the animal, such as through the presence of health warning labels, can influence the public's decision to hold the panda. Although ethical awareness might not be as effective as a price threshold, ethical messages can influence how people perceive their relationship with an animal. The study notes that aesthetic experience, particularly cuteness, can also be essential to the participants' ethical awareness.

In conclusion, the question of "To touch or not to touch" could not be fully answered solely through the use of payment mechanisms or ethical appeals. Instead, an integrated approach that combines both strategies appears to be the most effective solution at this stage. Future research could expand this inquiry to penguins, koalas, tigers, and other iconic species, which have similarly been subjected to human holding or touching experiences in tourism contexts. Science will, and should, dictate decisions regarding whether tourists come into close contact with pandas and other animals. What is at risk, however, is the inability to build a stronger bond with pandas through the sense of touch, which may induce a stronger connection to the plight of these animals and their species in the

manner that Herder was after: Touching allowing us to feel with and feel into the welfare and conservation challenges of the day. There are many science- and philosophy-based questions to address in moving the animal-based tourism agenda forward. Empathy, constructed care, ethical care, and animal health warning labels are emerging layers from which to derive both empirical (thinking) and sensual (empathy) answers to some of these vexing issues.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.G. and D.F.; methodology, Y.G.; software, Y.G.; validation, Y.G. and D.F.; formal analysis, Y.G.; investigation, Y.G.; resources, Y.G.; data curation, Y.G.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.G.; writing—review and editing, Y.G. and D.F.; visualization, Y.G.; supervision, D.F.; project administration, Y.G.; funding acquisition, Y.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study due to Measures of People's Republic of China (PRC) Municipality on Ethical Review (https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/zhengceku/2023-02/28/content_5743658.htm, accessed on 26 November 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent for participation was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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