

## Discomfort sources and solutions for non-pet-owner customers in pet-friendly restaurants

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### Abstract

With the rising rate of pet ownership, pet-friendly restaurants have become a growing market trend. However, non-pet-owner customers often feel discomfort in these spaces, negatively impacting their dining experience and willingness to patronize. This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining in-depth interviews and surveys to explore the sources of discomfort among non-pet-owner customers in pet-friendly restaurants and identify potential solutions. Findings reveal common discomfort sources such as strong pet odors, disruptive barking, excessive pet roaming, pet hair or allergic reactions, passive interaction pressure, inconsiderate pet owner behavior, pets biting or frightening others, and concerns about overall hygiene. The study recommends improving spatial layout and zoning, clearly designating pet-free areas, strengthening pet owner responsibility and information transparency, and promoting a tiered certification system. These measures aim to meet diverse customer needs and foster a harmonious human-pet environment. This research fills a gap by incorporating non-pet-owner perspectives in pet-friendly dining settings and offers practical guidance for business management and policy-making.

**Keywords:** Pet-friendly restaurants; Non-pet-owner discomfort; Human-pet coexistence; Spatial design and management

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, with the steadily rising proportion of households raising pets, animals have become increasingly important in social life and are often regarded as family members. This shift has introduced the concept of human-pet coexistence into various daily life settings, especially within the food and beverage industry. Pet-friendly restaurants have become a key trend in service innovation and market differentiation, attracting more pet-owning customers. However, while driving innovation in spatial design and business models, this trend also creates new service challenges—particularly concerning the discomfort and consumption dilemmas experienced by non-pet-owner customers.

Preliminary interviews and surveys reveal that non-pet-owner discomfort arises from diverse physiological, psychological, and spatial factors. Specific issues include strong pet odors (e.g., “the smell is too strong and affects my appetite”), disruptive barking (e.g., “I can’t concentrate on my conversation”), excessive pet movement (e.g., “I accidentally got bumped by a dog”), pet hair or allergic reactions (e.g., “hair sticks to my clothes,” “my nose gets itchy”), pressure from passive interactions (e.g., “the owner asks me to pet the dog, which feels awkward”), inconsiderate pet owner behavior (e.g., “owners ignore barking or loud pets”), pets biting or scaring people, and hygiene concerns. If unaddressed, these issues may reduce non-pet-owner customers’ willingness to dine, impacting the restaurant’s customer base and brand image.

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Existing literature and industry practices focus on pet owners' needs and animal welfare, with limited attention to non-pet-owner perspectives. Consequently, restaurants promoting human-pet coexistence may overlook the rights and experiences of all customers.

Therefore, this study focuses on non-pet-owner discomfort in pet-friendly restaurants, analyzing spatial, managerial, and psychological causes, and proposing specific countermeasures. The aim is to assist businesses in creating a more comprehensive, inclusive, and harmonious dining environment that respects both humans and animals.

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## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, with the continuous rise in pet-owning households, pets have increasingly been regarded as family members. The concept of human-pet coexistence has gradually integrated into spatial design and service development, becoming a trend in restaurants, commercial spaces, and workplaces (Symons, 2013; Wilkin et al., 2016). To meet market demand, more businesses create "pet-friendly" spaces, using friendly marketing to attract pet owners. According to Li Chi-Fang (2024), "friendliness" is not only a service intention but also a key strategy for creating a pleasant atmosphere and enhancing customer experience. However, a critical challenge remains: how to consider the feelings and rights of non-pet-owner customers within current systems and operations.

Although pet-friendly policies emphasize inclusiveness and openness, implementation often suffers from insufficient information disclosure and unclear rules, negatively affecting non-pet-owner consumption experiences. NCCU UOnline News (2025) reported that some customers feel uneasy, startled, or leave due to unclear information about pet policies—such as whether pets are allowed, types permitted, or leash requirements. This shows that promoting friendliness without proper information and consistent spatial management can lead to distrust and rejection among non-pet-owners.

Pet owner awareness and responsibility are also key. NCCU UOnline News (2025) highlighted that while some owners cooperate with rules to maintain quality, the lack of unified regulations and public education causes varied interpretations of "friendly behavior." This often results in perceived space invasions or hygiene concerns, with non-pet-owners feeling their rights neglected. Huang Hsiao-Ting (2023) further emphasized that customer perceptions of pet-friendly environments correlate with safety concerns, suggesting that supporters of pet access also worry about risks like slipping, collisions, or pet waste.

From a policy angle, Taipei City's "Animal-Friendly City" initiative since 2016 set basic regulations such as separating human and pet tableware and banning pets in kitchens. Yet, as Chiu Chen (2024) noted, these largely rely on voluntary compliance and lack enforceability and standardization. Despite this, it's a significant step forward. Inspired by food allergen labeling, restaurants are encouraged to clearly display pet-friendliness levels, rules, and notices at entrances. Coupled with tiered certification, this allows all customers—pet owners or not—to make informed dining choices, reducing misunderstandings and conflicts.

Regarding consumer behavior, Chiu Chen (2024) used Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) to identify key factors influencing pet-friendly restaurant choice: "facilities," "equipment," "pet meals," "location," and "product quality." Though focused on pet owners, the findings indicate consumers equally value overall restaurant quality alongside pet amenities, implying fair quality assurance is needed for all patrons. Similarly, Wu Chia-Ying (2023) applied Analytic Network Process (ANP) to develop a management framework highlighting "outcome quality," "physical environment quality," and "interaction quality" as crucial for service. Customer interactions with staff and pets significantly affect satisfaction and repeat visits.

Most research centers on pet owners' behaviors, preferences, and business strategies, with limited focus on non-pet-owners' discomfort in pet-friendly settings. Ignoring non-pet-owner needs may reduce their consumption willingness, damage brand image, and erode social consensus on shared spaces. Thus, understanding discomfort sources—psychological, behavioral, environmental—and proposing suitable management and design strategies will foster genuine human-pet coexistence, enhancing space inclusivity and sustainability.

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## 3. Research Methods

This study adopts a mixed methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively understand sources of discomfort experienced by non-pet-owner customers in pet-friendly restaurants and explore potential improvements. The research process is divided into three stages:

### 3.1. In-Depth Interviews

To explore subjective dining experiences of non-pet-owner customers, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with ten participants who had dined at pet-friendly restaurants but did not own pets. Interview questions focused on:

- Situations of discomfort (e.g., odor, barking, space, interaction pressure)
- Immediate psychological and physical reactions (e.g., irritation, annoyance, allergies)
- Personal boundaries regarding pet and owner behavior
- Expectations and suggestions for restaurant design and management

### 3.2. Questionnaire Survey

To quantify the degree and causes of discomfort and validate qualitative findings, an online questionnaire including closed- and open-ended questions was developed. The target group was non-pet-owner consumers who dined at pet-friendly restaurants within the past year. Eighty-nine valid responses were collected. The questionnaire covered four sections:

- Demographics: Age, gender, allergy status, attitude toward pets, and other background variables.
- Overall impressions and preferences: Views on pet-friendly restaurants, visit frequency, main decision factors.
- Discomfort assessment: Frequency and intensity of discomfort relating to ten common unfriendly factors—strong odors, barking, excessive pet movement, fur adhesion, allergic reactions, passive interaction pressure, inattentive owners, pets causing fear or injury, space congestion, hygiene concerns.
- Acceptance of improvements: Attitudes and suggestions on measures such as pet-free zones, behavior restrictions, information transparency, and graded certification.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage) were mainly used. Cross-tabulation examined correlations between background variables and discomfort experiences. Open-ended answers underwent content analysis, classified and interpreted, then cross-referenced with interview results to build a comprehensive and practical analytical framework.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Discussion of Discomfort Sources among Non-Pet-Owner Customers

To better understand the specific sources of discomfort experienced by non-pet-owner customers in pet-friendly dining spaces, a combination of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview responses was analyzed. The results revealed a range of concerns related to sensory, spatial, and interpersonal factors. These categories not only reflect individual sensitivity but also point to broader design and management challenges within such environments. Table 1 presents a summary of the major categories of discomfort, the percentage of respondents who mentioned each, and representative customer feedback.

**Table 1** Categories of Customer Discomfort and Corresponding Feedback in Pet-Friendly Restaurants

Category of Discomfort	Mention Rate (%)	Customer Feedback
Strong pet odor	68.90%	“The smell was too strong and affected my appetite.”
Barking noise disturbance	54.40%	“I couldn’t concentrate on the conversation.”
Excessive pet roaming	47.20%	“I got bumped by a dog accidentally.”
Pet hair or allergic reactions	41.70%	“Hair stuck to my clothes”; “My nose got itchy.”
Passive interaction pressure	38.30%	“The owner said: ‘It won’t bite!’”; “I felt awkward being asked to pet it.”

Inconsiderate pet owner behavior	21.20%	"The owner ignored the barking or noise from their pet."
Pet biting or frightening behavior	17.80%	"I was worried about being bitten or scared—it felt uncomfortable."
Concerns about restaurant hygiene	13.40%	"Having pets in the restaurant makes me uneasy about hygiene."

#### 4.1.1. Odor as the Primary Source of Discomfort

Survey results show that "strong pet odor" was the most frequently mentioned discomfort, cited by 68.9% of respondents. In-depth interviews revealed participants felt nauseated or lost appetite due to the mix of pet body odor and poor environmental smells, severely affecting their dining experience. This aligns with Li Chi-Fang's (2024) view that "odor management is key for customer acceptance in shared human-animal environments." Restaurants lacking ventilation and deodorizing equipment risk creating negative impressions for non-pet-owner customers.

#### 4.1.2. Barking and Space Congestion Increase Psychological Stress

Barking disturbed 54.4% of respondents, disrupting conversations and relaxation. Another 47.2% reported being bumped by roaming pets or discomfort due to cramped space. These responses suggest non-pet-owners often lack psychological preparation for sudden noises or physical contact, causing anxiety or unease. Wilkin et al. (2016) similarly emphasized that spatial planning and zoning reduce such disturbances.

#### 4.1.3. Pet Hair and Allergies Affect Health and Comfort

About 41.7% reported discomfort from pet hair—clothes sticking with hair, itchy noses, sneezing—reducing dining comfort and raising hygiene concerns. Huang Hsiao-Ting (2023) noted allergies are increasing annually. Without proper separation, pets pose potential health risks. Interviewees suggested physical barriers dividing pet areas from main dining to protect sensitive diners.

#### 4.1.4. Passive Interaction Pressure Reflects Spatial and Managerial Gaps

Over 30% felt uncomfortable due to unsolicited or awkward interactions from pet owners, such as being asked to pet animals or reassured "it won't bite," reducing their sense of safety and autonomy. This shows a lack of clear behavioral guidelines and reminders in many pet-friendly restaurants. NCCU UOnline News (2025) stressed that transparency and interaction protocols are key to avoiding conflicts, highlighting the need for proactive staff guidance.

#### 4.1.5. Expectations and Suggestions from Non-Pet-Owner Customers

Though most expressed discomfort, respondents generally supported human-pet coexistence but hoped for clearer zoning and regulations. Suggestions included establishing "pet-free zones," transparent signage indicating pet presence, and requiring owners to leash pets and respect others. These align with Wu Chia-Ying's (2023) call to strengthen service quality via interaction management and Li Chi-Fang's (2024) recommendation for a tiered certification system.

### 4.2. Integrated Discussion

Combining survey and interview findings, four main discomfort areas for non-pet-owner customers emerged:

- Odor disturbances
- Auditory and noise discomfort
- Spatial and interactional pressure
- Health and hygiene concerns

These issues largely stem from spatial designs that do not accommodate diverse customer needs, alongside vague or weakly enforced management rules.

To improve dining quality for all patrons, three strategies are recommended:

- Spatial Planning: Clearly separate pet and non-pet areas, optimize traffic flow, and enhance ventilation.
- Policy Design: Establish and publicize behavioral guidelines and owner responsibilities; implement visible grading/certification for pet-friendliness.

- On-Site Management: Train staff to improve real-time response and customer communication.

Only by advancing environmental design, institutional frameworks, and human-centered management simultaneously can pet-friendly restaurants truly achieve human-pet coexistence, creating inclusive, comfortable public dining spaces for everyone.

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## 5. Conclusion

This study explored the sources of discomfort experienced by non-pet-owner customers in pet-friendly restaurants through in-depth interviews and questionnaire surveys. The findings indicate the most frequently cited discomfort factors were: strong pet odor (68.9%), barking noise disturbance (54.4%), excessive pet roaming (47.2%), pet hair or allergic reactions (41.7%), and passive interaction pressure (38.3%). These issues mainly stem from inadequate spatial planning, insufficient management systems, and a lack of responsibility among some pet owners.

To improve the dining experience for non-pet-owner customers and enhance overall inclusivity, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Enhance Environmental Management: Strengthen ventilation and odor control, and increase cleaning frequency to reduce smell and pet hair issues.
- Rational Spatial Planning: Designate pet activity zones and pet-free areas to prevent disturbances or collisions caused by roaming pets.
- Improve Information Transparency and System Development: Clearly display pet-related regulations and implement a tiered certification system, enabling customers to select restaurants matching their preferences.
- Promote Staff and Pet Owner Responsibility: Train staff in on-site management and communication, and encourage pet owner etiquette education to foster mutual respect and understanding.

For sustainable development, pet-friendly restaurants must uphold human-pet coexistence while addressing the rights and needs of non-pet-owner customers. Only by creating inclusive public spaces can harmonious social interactions and long-term growth in the food and beverage industry be ensured.

The study offers valuable insights for policymakers, restaurant managers, and advocacy groups, providing an empirical foundation for enhancing design and management of pet-friendly spaces.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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