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RESTRUCTURING THE PET-FRIENDLY SERVICESCAPE: A MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF SERVICE GAPS

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of the pet economy, pet-friendly dining has become an increasingly common service expectation rather than a niche offering. However, conflicts between pet owners and non-pet-owning customers remain widespread due to unresolved service gaps in restaurant environments. Drawing on Servicescape Theory and the Service Gap Model, we analyze the physical, social, and organizational challenges facing pet-friendly restaurants. By reviewing recent research, national thesis databases, and industry reports, we identify core operational failures in spatial zoning, sensory control, and policy communication. We then present an integrated restructuring framework designed to minimize customer friction, reduce frontline employee stress, and improve the overall dining experience for all patrons.

Keywords: Pet-Friendly Dining, Servicescape, Service Gap Model, Multidimensional Analysis, Consumer Experience, Human-Pet Coexistence.

1 INTRODUCTION

Demographic shifts—particularly declining birth rates and aging populations—have gradually reshaped household structures and public consumption habits in recent years. Companion animals are now frequently treated as core family members, reflecting a broader trend toward "pet humanization." This shift has driven rapid expansion in the pet market, prompting the hospitality sector to introduce innovative service models. Among these, pet-friendly restaurants have become a key strategy for market differentiation.

Despite their growing popularity, establishing shared human-pet dining spaces often creates operational challenges. Restaurant managers must balance the open environment expected by pet owners with the health, comfort, and personal boundaries of non-pet-owning customers. Recent observations indicate that vague policies and unstructured spaces frequently lead to misaligned expectations between venues and their guests (NCCU UOnline News, 2025). When non-pet owners encounter strong odors, unexpected barking, or hygiene concerns, customer satisfaction drops, increasing the risk of negative reviews and brand erosion.

Existing hospitality literature largely focuses on pet owner preferences and animal welfare, leaving a noticeable gap regarding how shared dining spaces handle service breakdowns. To address this issue, we adopt a multidimensional servicescape approach to deconstruct service gaps in pet-friendly dining and propose a practical restructuring framework for sustainable human-pet coexistence.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Servicescape Theory and Social Dynamics

The conceptual foundation of physical service environments stems from Bitner (1992), who defined the "Servicescape" as the built environment that influences human behavior, emotional responses, and cognitive evaluations. In traditional restaurant settings, servicescape factors focus on ambient conditions (temperature, noise, air quality), layout, and functionality. In pet-friendly settings, however, the physical presence of animals substantially changes these dynamics.

Tombs and McColl-Kennedy (2003) expanded this perspective by introducing the "Social Servicescape," highlighting how customer-to-customer interactions (CCI) and social density influence individual satisfaction. Pets can serve as "social lubricants" that encourage friendly interactions among pet lovers (Symons, 2013; Wilkin et al., 2016). Yet, without clear physical boundaries, pets can also trigger interpersonal friction, particularly when non-pet owners feel their personal space is invaded or suffer allergy symptoms (Huang, 2023; Li, 2024).

2.2 Service Gap Model in Shared Environments

The Service Gap Model introduced by Parasuraman et al. (1985) offers a useful framework for identifying discrepancies between customer expectations and actual service delivery. In pet-friendly restaurants, these gaps take distinct forms:

- Gap 1 (Management Perception Gap): Managers often assume that simply allowing pets satisfies market demand, failing to realize non-pet owners' expectations for clean, quiet dining spaces.
- Gap 2 (Service Standards Gap): Venues fail to turn pet-friendly intentions into concrete operational rules, such as clear policies on pet seating, leash usage, or waste handling.
- Gap 3 (Service Performance Gap): Frontline staff receive little training on managing animal disruptions or enforcing guidelines, leading to inconsistent rule enforcement and employee fatigue.
- Gap 4 (Communication Gap): Marketing messages promoting "pet-friendliness" often conflict with actual venue restrictions, frustrating both pet owners and non-pet owners alike (NCCU UOnline News, 2025).

Building on recent empirical work by Chiu (2024), Wu (2023), and Huang et al. (2025), we argue that addressing these gaps requires a structured three-dimensional restructuring plan.

3 DECONSTRUCTION OF SERVICE GAPS

Drawing on the literature, we classify service failures in pet-friendly dining into three primary dimensions: Physical, Social, and Organizational.

3.1 Physical Dimension (Environmental & Spatial Failures)

Physical gaps centered around sensory discomfort and spatial congestion. Strong animal odors mixed with food smells, unmanaged barking, and shedding hair are major sources of dissatisfaction for diners (Li, 2024). In addition, slippery floor materials and poor spatial planning that fails to separate sensitive diners from pet movement create both safety and sanitation issues (Huang, 2023).

3.2 Social Dimension (Interpersonal & Behavioral Friction)

Social gaps arise from unmanaged customer interactions and unwanted pressure to interact. Non-pet owners often feel uncomfortable when animals wander near their tables or when pet owners expect them to pet their animals. Without clear pet etiquette guidelines, pet owners tend to become defensive and non-pet owners grow frustrated.

3.3 Organizational Dimension (Policy & Execution Failures)

Organizational gaps reflect internal management shortcomings. Frontline staff are rarely trained in animal behavior or conflict resolution. When hygiene issues or pet aggression occur, staff hesitation delays service recovery and worsens customer experiences (Wu, 2023).

4 RESTRUCTURING THE SERVICESCAPE: STRATEGIC SOLUTIONS

To resolve service gaps and foster a balanced dining ecosystem, we outline targeted strategies across all three dimensions, summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Integrated Servicescape Restructuring Framework

Dimension	Gap Diagnosis	Strategic Solutions & Managerial Actions
Physical	Sensory discomfort (odor/noise), pet hair, and collision risks.	Install high-efficiency HEPA filtration and active deodorizing systems. Implement "Bio-Zoning" (separating Pet-Preferred and Pet-Free Zones). Use non-porous, anti-slip flooring and acoustic sound-dampening panels.
Social	Inter-customer conflict and unwanted interaction pressure.	Post clear visual signage outlining pet etiquette and owner responsibilities. Apply "Nudge Theory" by offering designated pet seats and stroller spots. Establish standard mediation protocols for staff to handle complaints fairly.
Organizational	Vague service standards, untrained staff, and policy misunderstandings.	Run regular staff training drills on hygiene SOPs and pet emergency handling. Use digital reservation tools to collect pet information (size/number) upfront. Adopt transparent, tiered pet-friendly certification displayed at entrances.

4.1 Physical Upgrades: Spatial Zoning and Sensory Control

Restaurants should move away from open, unstructured layouts toward intentional "Bio-Zoning". Creating dedicated "Pet-Free Zones" with independent ventilation systems helps protect guests with allergies or sensitivities. Furthermore, installing anti-slip flooring and acoustic panels helps reduce noise reverberation caused by barking.

4.2 Social Management: Nudge Theory and Etiquette Norms

Instead of relying solely on rigid restrictions, managers can apply "Nudge Theory"—using subtle environmental cues to encourage responsible pet ownership. For instance, providing fixed leash hooks or dedicated pet chairs at tables prevents pets from wandering or jumping on dining surfaces. Clear, welcoming signage near entrances sets expectations before guests are seated.

4.3 Organizational Readiness: Digital Filtering and Tiered Certification

To close Gap 4, restaurants can adopt reservation tools that ask guests to record pet details (e.g., breed, weight, stroller use) during booking. This allows staff to arrange suitable seating before guests arrive. Additionally, introducing a "Tiered Pet-Friendly Certification" system clearly communicates the level of pet access (e.g., Level 1: Carrier only; Level 3: Full pet-inclusive dining), ensuring transparency for all patrons.

5 CONCLUSION

The rise of pet-friendly dining highlights a growing shift toward inclusive social spaces. However, long-term business sustainability requires a fair balance between pet owner inclusion and non-pet owner comfort. By addressing service gaps through spatial redesign, social nudging, and clearer operational standards, managers can turn potential conflicts into a valuable market advantage.

Moving forward, future empirical studies could test this bio-zoning framework using structural equation modeling (SEM) to evaluate its effect on customer revisit intentions. Scholars may also explore how smart IoT tools—such as real-time air quality monitors and automated noise sensors—can assist in managing shared service scapes.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this manuscript.

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