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Public attitudes and views on bringing reptile pets into pet-friendly spaces

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Abstract

The pet economy has grown rapidly, alongside a rise in pet-friendly venues. However, these spaces generally accommodate cats and dogs, excluding exotic pets such as reptiles. As the number of reptile keepers grows, tensions arise between owners' demand for access and existing management frameworks. This study uses three-level coding to analyze 79 online comments and six interviews, exploring public attitudes toward reptiles in pet-friendly venues. Findings identify four types of public opinion, revealing perspectives beyond simple support or opposition. Attitudes vary by setting: hygiene, safety, and consumer rights dominate discussions of commercial spaces; community spaces highlight tensions between individual freedom and public morality; and themed leisure sites raise concerns about animal welfare and operators' professional capacity. Accordingly, the study proposes differentiated governance measures, including checklist-based management, spatial and temporal zoning, and standardized rules. These findings offer practical guidance for developing and optimizing pet-friendly public spaces.

Keywords

Reptile Pets; Pet-Friendly Spaces; Public Attitudes; Third-Level Coding.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

In recent years, the number of urban pet-friendly spaces has expanded alongside the booming pet economy. Venues such as pet-themed cafés, pet-friendly parks, and pet-friendly campsites have proliferated, becoming popular spots for pet owners to socialize and relax. However, both public perception and industry practice have long narrowed the definition of "pet-friendly" to mean "friendly to cats and dogs." Regulations and facilities at most pet-friendly venues cater exclusively to traditional companion animals like cats and dogs, while excluding reptiles such as lizards and geckos.

Yet, as China achieves a moderately prosperous society, its pet economy is entering a critical transitional phase marked by a significant shift in the composition of pet ownership; the rise of exotic pets is driving an increasingly diverse range of pet categories [1]. Compared to cats and dogs, reptiles require less space and offer flexible interaction styles, making them increasingly popular among young people. The issue of reptile owners bringing their pets into public spaces designated as "pet-friendly" warrants growing attention. At the same time, the conflict between the needs of exotic pet owners and the current state of pet-friendly spaces is becoming increasingly apparent.

1.2. Literature review

1.2.1. Limitations in the scope of research on pet-friendly spaces

Current academic discourse largely focuses on traditional companion animals—specifically cats and dogs—giving rise to three primary perspectives. While these offer diverse viewpoints,

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they generally equate "pets" solely with cats and dogs, failing to account for the increasingly diverse landscape of pet ownership. From the perspective of spatial planning and design, the argument is that the development of pet-friendly spaces should not exist as a system separate from urban public spaces but should instead be integrated into strategic urban planning [2]. The second perspective is that of commercial operations, which primarily analyzes customer demographics and the service management challenges faced by pet-friendly establishments such as hotels and restaurants. The third perspective focuses on social impact. Here, researchers explore how pet-friendly spaces shape community interaction and the human-pet relationship, suggesting that spatial design interventions can harmonize these elements, foster the positive and sustainable development of humans, pets, and spaces, and promote the symbiosis of these various components [3].

1.2.2. Research gaps regarding "exotic pets"

Academic research on exotic pets remains relatively limited, with existing studies falling into two main categories. The first focuses on the owners themselves, examining their behavioral motivations, psychological needs, and cultural perceptions. The second approaches the subject from the standpoint of ecological security. Amidst globalization and the trend of consumption upgrading, exotic pet ownership has rapidly emerged as a personalized lifestyle choice; however, the latent risk of biological invasion poses a significant threat to China's ecological security [4]. Research in this category addresses issues such as potential biological invasions and the disruption of local ecosystems caused by exotic pets.

1.3. Research questions

Based on the research background outlined above, this paper proposes two research questions:

1. What are the core attitudes held by the public regarding the practice of bringing reptile pets—such as lizards and geckos—into pet-friendly spaces?

2. Do these core attitudes differ significantly across three distinct types of pet-friendly spaces: commercial/retail, community/public, and themed leisure spaces?

2. DEFINITION OF KEY CONCEPTS

2.1. Reptile Pets

This paper defines "reptile pets" as reptile species kept as companions—distinct from traditional pets like cats and dogs—focusing on the order Squamata (scaled reptiles), such as lizards, geckos, and corn snakes. These animals are characterized by unique physical appearances and behavioral traits that differ significantly from those of traditional pets. Their owners are predominantly young people, and the primary motivations for keeping them are personal interest or emotional attachment.

2.2. Pet-Friendly Spaces

Pet-friendly spaces are areas that welcome pets rather than excluding them. Based on a review of online reviews and interview data, and drawing upon the study *Research on Community Public Space Planning from a Pet-Friendly Perspective* (2024), this research categorizes pet-friendly spaces into the following three types based on leisure contexts and spatial attributes:

1. Commercial Consumption Spaces: Privately operated commercial venues, such as cafés and restaurants. These spaces typically establish clear rules; operators independently set pet access standards and provide basic amenities.

2. Community Public Spaces: Public-service venues managed by the government or the community and open to all citizens, such as community parks and urban green spaces. These venues possess a strong public character and serve a diverse user base—including pet owners

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and children—requiring the consideration of various stakeholders' interests in their management.

3. Themed Leisure Spaces: Recreational venues designed specifically for pets and their owners, such as pet parks and pet playgrounds. These spaces center their services on pets and feature specialized facilities for pet activities; their users are primarily individuals seeking leisure experiences with their pets.

Table I. Spatial Classification

Space Type	Management entity	Admission rules	Target user group
Commercial and consumer spaces	Private operator	The operator independently establishes admission criteria.	Average consumers, pet-owning consumers
Community public spaces	Government/Community	Open to all citizens and characterized by universal public accessibility.	all citizens
Themed Leisure Space	Themed venue operating organization	Centered on pet services and equipped with professional facilities.	Primarily targeting pet-owning consumers

3. Research Design and Process

3.1. Research Methods

This study employs three-level coding to analyze data, exploring—from multiple perspectives—public attitudes toward bringing pet reptiles into pet-friendly spaces based on online comments. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with six participants to gain insight into the formation of individual attitudes and the underlying contradictions involved.

3.2. Data Collection

This study began by collecting data from multiple platforms—including Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Zhihu, and Tieba—using keyword combinations such as "lizard," "snake," "café," "park," and "outing." After scraping numerous posts and filtering out advertisements and duplicate content, 79 posts were selected for analysis.

To gain a deeper understanding of individual attitudes toward this topic, interviews were conducted between June 20 and June 23, 2026. The participants were young adults aged 18 to 25 who were familiar with or had experience regarding the practice of bringing pets into public spaces and were willing to discuss the subject. A total of six individuals were interviewed (coded B1 through B6).

The interviews were structured around five thematic areas: basic information and experiences with pets; emotions and aesthetics; perceptions of risks and consequences; the rationale behind behaviors; and expectations regarding rules and spatial differences. Each participant underwent a one-on-one in-depth interview; all participants were informed of the study's purpose and consented to the use of their data on an anonymized basis.

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By the fifth interview, few new concepts or perspectives were emerging. No new coded concepts arose after the sixth interview; consequently, the study was deemed to have reached information saturation.

3.3. Data Analysis Procedure

This study first labeled raw text from online comments and interview transcripts by spatial type, providing a basis for comparing public attitudes across contexts. Using three-level coding, the study analyzed meaningful statements and terms sentence by sentence to identify initial concepts. These concepts were then grouped and integrated into sub-categories according to semantic similarities and related meanings. For example, "I jump when I see a snake" (A20) generated the concept of "fear," classified under "instinctive fear and physiological aversion." Similarly, "Don't you think they're dirty and covered in bacteria?" (A39) generated "perceived lack of hygiene," categorized under "concerns regarding hygiene."

The study subsequently integrated related sub-categories into four core categories based on their underlying connections. Specifically, "instinctive fear and physiological aversion," "tension and unease," "neutral attitude," and "curiosity and aesthetic interest" were grouped under "emotional and aesthetic responses," as they reflect immediate emotional reactions and aesthetic judgments toward reptile pets. Following the same logic, the remaining sub-categories were consolidated into three core categories: "perception of risks and consequences," "assessment of behavioral rationality," and "expectations regarding social concepts and rules."

4. Research Findings

Through an analysis involving three-level coding of online comments and interview data, this study identifies four core dimensions within public discourse. Further analysis reveals that the emphasis and expression of these attitudes are closely linked to the specific spaces involved; distinct differences in public focus are evident across various types of pet-friendly spaces.

4.1. Emotional Acceptance

Emotional responses shape public attitudes toward reptiles, but vary across settings.

In commercial spaces, reactions are largely negative, with expressions such as "scared to death" and "goosebumps" indicating intense fear. Such responses may stem from personal experiences. Respondent B4 developed a lasting fear after a gecko crawled across her leg in childhood. Although she could tolerate contained reptiles from a distance, her fear persisted. In enclosed dining and entertainment venues, reptiles may therefore be perceived as intrusions into personal space, causing discomfort and avoidance.

In community public spaces, fear often coexists with curiosity. While some remain fearful, others enjoy observing or touching reptiles. B3 remarked, "I'm afraid of snakes, but I think lizards are cool," while B2 also described reptiles as "cool." This suggests that reactions vary by species rather than applying uniformly to all reptiles. Open spaces also allow people to maintain distance, reducing direct conflict, although flexible management remains necessary.

In themed leisure spaces, responses are generally calmer, focusing on curiosity, animal behavior, and affection rather than intense fear. Trust is important: B2 felt uneasy approaching a stranger's reptile but more comfortable in professional themed venues, while B6 expected suitable facilities in reptile-friendly establishments. Clear themes prepare visitors for encounters, while confidence in professional management and animal control reduces uncertainty and perceived risk.

Overall, emotional responses depend on personal experiences, species, and spatial context, highlighting the need for management that accommodates different comfort levels.

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4.2. Risk Perception

Public perceptions of risk vary across different settings.

In commercial consumer spaces,concerns mainly involve hygiene,safety,and psychological comfort. References to"bacteria"and"Salmonella" as well as discomfort with reptiles being on dining tables, reflect strong cleanliness expectations. Respondent B5 raised food safety concerns, while pet owner B6 noted that startled reptiles may defecate and produce strong odors. She recommended that owners ensure their pets have relieved themselves beforehand or carry tissues for immediate cleaning. These responses show that perceived risks extend beyond bites to include environmental hygiene.

In community public spaces, concerns focus on disrupting public order, threatening personal safety, causing panic, scattering crowds, and potentially requiring police intervention. These reflect expectations for peaceful surroundings and harmonious neighborly relations. The possibility of being bitten is also a prominent safety concern.

In animal-themed leisure spaces, attention shifts from potential harm to humans toward animal welfare. Comments frequently mention "stress,""discomfort"and "poor welfare."Respondent B6 explained that taking reptiles outdoors was inadvisable because they might become frightened. This reflects an animal-centered perspective in which welfare becomes the primary evaluation criterion. Across all settings, interviewees also emphasized physical separation during transport. Respondents B1 and B2 believed that securely enclosing reptiles in carriers could reduce perceived risks.

Overall, risk perceptions differ by setting, ranging from hygiene and personal safety in commercial and community spaces to animal welfare in themed leisure venues. Nevertheless, physical separation remains a common measure for reducing perceived risks across different environments.

4.3. Rationality of Behavior

Disputes in commercial spaces often revolve around business autonomy and consumer rights.While opponents argue that businesses should prioritize the majority's experience, proponents view cat-and-dog-only"pet-friendly"policies as unfair. Some advocate bans or physical separation. Respondent B2's remark,"To each their own,"highlights consumer choice.With clear signage,market self-regulation may therefore be preferable to mandatory restrictions.

Community spaces raise a different question: how to balance individual freedom with public morality. Proponents emphasize equal rights for humans and animals, whereas opponents stress respect for others. Respondent B2 questioned restrictions on taking snakes outdoors: "We are all animals; why distinguish between high and low status?" Similarly, Respondent B5 supported outdoor activities when reptiles are caged, comparing this to leashing dogs. Both perspectives endorse outdoor access alongside responsible management to prevent disturbance.

For themed leisure spaces, particularly those frequented by reptile enthusiasts, animal welfare and humane practices take precedence. Public expectations consequently focus on higher industry standards and improved welfare protocols.

However, not all interviewees considered public access appropriate for reptiles. Respondent B6 argued that animals'natural needs should outweigh human preferences. Most reptiles have little need for social interaction or outdoor activity, and snakes naturally prefer dark, secluded environments, unlike more adaptable domesticated dogs. Although she understood owners'desire to take their "babies" outdoors, she questioned the necessity. She also condemned using animals as attention-seeking props as "nothing short of torture," warning that owners' personal gratification may come at the expense of their pets' actual needs.

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4.4. Social Perceptions and Expectations Regarding Rules

Despite divergent public attitudes, discussions ultimately converge on the need for specific rules, a demand that is highly context-dependent.

Across various settings, people seek clear rules to minimize uncertainty. Whether advocating for owners to "keep pets leashed and under control" or suggesting they be "transported in carriers," the underlying desire is for predictable behavior and risk mitigation. Interview data further illuminate these expectations regarding rules; respondents emphasized different priorities depending on the type of public space—such as demanding higher hygiene standards in dining establishments or prioritizing animal welfare in themed leisure spaces. This demonstrates that rules cannot be formulated in a vacuum, divorced from their specific contexts.

Interviews also revealed a lack of trust among respondents toward individual owners of reptile pets, contrasting with greater confidence in professional institutions that operate under established, comprehensive protocols. This implies that "pet-friendly" venues must possess professional expertise and have robust contingency plans in place. Such measures ensure that issues involving either privately or institutionally owned reptiles can be promptly resolved, thereby safeguarding the rights of general consumers.

Online discussions indicate that reptile pets remain a niche interest and that their cultural image fosters societal prejudice against animals of the order *Squamata*. However, this study also found that while public comments made online prior to actual interaction tend to be heated and driven by fear, such prejudices often diminish after direct contact, allowing for a more objective view of these pets. This insight offers a positive perspective on the potential for shifting public attitudes, suggesting that firsthand experience and education can serve as vital bridges for communication.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

5.1. Research Conclusions

Focusing on the emerging practice of bringing pet reptiles into pet-friendly spaces, this study employed three-level grounded theory coding to analyze online texts and in-depth interviews, exploring public attitudes toward this phenomenon.

The findings identify four core themes. Emotional and aesthetic reactions capture immediate responses to reptiles, where instinctive aversion and curiosity may coexist. Perceptions of risk and consequences encompass concerns about potential impacts on humans, the environment, and animals. Critiques of behavioral legitimacy reflect judgments about the appropriateness of taking reptiles outdoors, owner responsibility, and animal nature. Social perceptions and expectations regarding rules reveal public demands for clear management systems to ensure appropriate safeguards.

Public attitudes also vary significantly across settings in their discussion focus, emotional intensity, and underlying judgment logic, highlighting their contextual nature. In commercial consumer spaces, concerns center on hygiene, safety, and consumer rights. In community public spaces, debates focus on balancing individual freedom with public morality, maintaining community order, and preserving neighborly harmony. In themed leisure spaces, attention shifts toward animal welfare and operational professionalism, reflecting higher ethical expectations for these venues.

These findings suggest that debating whether pet reptiles should be allowed in public spaces without considering specific contexts has limited practical value. Conflicts fundamentally arise from differing understandings of spatial functions, implicit social contracts, and expectations

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for space use. Ultimately, the controversy reflects tensions between emerging niche pet-keeping practices and established public space management systems across different settings.

5.2. Research significance

Using a three-level coding method, this study focuses on reptile pets to analyze public attitudes toward their presence in pet-friendly spaces, as well as the underlying preferences and concerns associated with these attitudes. It is hoped that this will provide a reference for decision-making by operators and management authorities, helping to make pet-friendly spaces more inclusive and diverse, while also contributing to the creation of a harmonious urban leisure environment.

5.3. Recommendations

Based on the findings, this study proposes three recommendations.

1.Commercial Consumption Spaces: Public concerns mainly involve hygiene, safety, and balancing consumer rights. Businesses should adopt checklist-based management, replacing vague "pet-friendly" claims with clear, publicly displayed admission criteria that do not exclude pets other than cats and dogs. Rules for pet transport and isolation should protect both pet owners and other customers, reducing conflicts. Food and beverage venues admitting reptiles or other exotic pets should disclose cleaning and disinfection procedures and provide dedicated disinfection stations for pet carriers to reassure customers about hygiene standards.

2.Community Public Spaces: Management should balance individual pet ownership rights with neighborhood order through spatial and temporal zoning and collaborative governance. Large community parks could establish designated pet activity areas or time slots, supported by clear signage, to promote orderly coexistence. Neighborhood committees, property managers, homeowner representatives, and pet owners should jointly develop practical guidelines through consultation. These should specify pet transport methods, activity areas, and conflict resolution procedures, encouraging shared responsibility and compliance.

3.Thematic Leisure Spaces: Given public concerns about animal welfare, managers should establish and publicize clear standards. Venues should implement animal welfare protocols and environmental guidelines exceeding ordinary home-keeping practices and accept public oversight to demonstrate professionalism. They could also organize educational activities, including science presentations, safe interactive experiences, and responsible pet ownership training. These initiatives could correct misconceptions about exotic pets, promote scientific pet-care knowledge, and gradually improve social acceptance of exotic pet culture.

5.4. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

This study has several limitations. Its data came mainly from online comments and in-depth interviews, which may involve subjectivity. The interview sample included only young adults aged 18–25, limiting age diversity. Moreover, pet reptiles such as snakes and lizards are a niche topic, and limited public discussion meant the sample could not represent the wider population, restricting the generalizability of the findings. The study also focused on squamates, so whether the findings apply to other exotic pets, such as arthropods, remains unclear.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding samples across age groups and locations and using surveys to collect public opinions. Longitudinal studies could compare the effects and public responses to different management strategies in public spaces. Additionally, frameworks such as human-pet relationship studies and the "right to the city" could deepen understanding of interactions between exotic pets and urban spaces, helping create harmonious environments for both people and pets.

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