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College Students' Views on Interacting with a Robotic Dog to Reduce Stress
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Dog-visiting programs may be helpful in reducing stress in college students. However, practical difficulties (e.g., student allergies, complexity of scheduling teams of dogs and handlers) may limit their use. The increased commercial availability of socially interactive robots may offer a solution, but it is essential to know if students view this as an acceptable way to manage their stress. This study assessed college students' views on the acceptability of interacting with a robotic dog as a stress reduction strategy and compared students' views to other stress management approaches. College students (N = 323; M[age] = 21.60 years; 53.6% female, 45.5% male, 0.9% another gender) completed an online survey. Participants were assigned randomly to a written description of one of three stress reduction strategies: (1) interacting with a robotic dog, (2) interacting with a trained therapy dog, or (3) independently managing stress (i.e., identifying and using strategies without guidance). After reading the description, they rated the acceptability of their assigned strategy. Results indicated that students viewed the strategies differently (F(2, 320) = 30.29, p < .001). Students rated interacting with a therapy dog as more acceptable than interacting with a robotic dog (p < .001) and independently managing stress (p < .001). However, interacting with a robotic dog was viewed as more acceptable than independently managing stress (p = .02). These results are promising for programs integrating robotic dogs into stress reduction programs. Additional work is needed to explore how acceptability varies across different specific robots with varying designs and features.