



What's in a tip? The creation and refinement of a restaurant-tipping motivations scale: A consumer perspective



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ABSTRACT

According to [Segrave \(1998\)](#), since the late 1800s, the study of tipping has provoked debate in a range of abstract dimensions such as economics, sociology, and psychology. To date, the research on the topic has been largely qualitative in nature, while addressing motivating themes (service, social norm, and future service considerations) in isolation from one another. Following a thorough examination of the literature, there is a definite lack of research on the development and testing of a more holistic quantitative scale aimed at identifying the motivational Gestalt driving actual consumer tipping behavior. Therein lies the major theoretical contribution of this study, namely the development and testing of a Tipping Motivations Scale, which over two separate analyses, supports a number of drivers of consumer tipping motivation.

In this study, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to test the empirical dimensions of consumer tipping motivations. The results obtained indicate a reasonable fit between the data and the proposed model across both analyses. This was repeated on two separate occasions and the results largely remained consistent. The findings point to the key role of service in driving the consumer's decision to tip. Other important factors included social conformity, the issue of future visitation, and server actions. Further research is needed to explore whether these dimensions remain constant among other sample groups and across different tipped professions.

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1. Introduction

Motivations that drive restaurant tipping behavior are a much researched yet little understood phenomena in the hospitality domain as well as the wider service fields. The act of tipping is a commonly accepted and highly evolved custom in many countries and remains vital to the livelihood of service professionals. Tipping is the main source of income for millions and therefore is closely related to overall compensation in the restaurant industry ([Azar, 2007a](#)). In cultures such as the United States (US), most customers understand and conform to the custom of tipping. An annual estimate of tips earned by restaurant servers in the US accounted for \$27 billion ([Azar, 2007b](#)). From a purely economic perspective, tipping is perceived as a rather strange or illogical economic action ([Saunders and Lynn, 2010](#)), given that consumers tip through choice, rather than because they are legally or ethically bound as patrons to tip. Further, the act of tipping is contradictory to normal economic exchange theory in that gratuities signify buyer determined values for services and voluntary expenditures that escalate the costs of amenities already received ([Lynn et al., 1993](#)). These

factors imply that other less understood motivational influences are at play when it comes to the voluntary act of leaving a tip for service received.

It is therefore not surprising that academicians are fascinated with tipping and, while there are no definitive answers regarding why consumers support the desired behavior, a body of previous research does provide plausible theories that might help explain these underlying factors driving the practice. For example, research suggests that consumers tip for a variety of reasons, such as social norms and pressures, social approval, equity in exchange relationships, and to acknowledge service received ([Lynn and Grassman, 1990](#)). A significant portion of the body of literature on tipping motivation research thus far has addressed motivational concepts in isolation, and mostly from a qualitative perspective. Further, the literature on tipping reviewed for this study used methods commonly employed in social and behavioral sciences research which includes the direct observations of server/guest interactions and self-reported questionnaires.

The study described here reports on the creation and testing of the tipping motivation scale (TMS), a multi-dimensional, quantitative measure of tipping from the perspective of restaurant consumers. Using theoretical support from extant tipping literature, this scale was developed to represent a broader range of motivations that may potentially drive the consumer's decision

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to tip restaurant servers. By employing a series of qualitative and quantitative methods over four phases of the scale development process, the resultant TMS was achieved after the following phases: (1) item generation from the existent literature and item selection using the card sort technique in phase 1; (2) exploratory principal components analysis of TMS-1 items in phase 2; (3) focus group session and face-to-face interviews on the refined TMS-2 instrument in phase 3; and (4) scale purification and confirmatory analysis of TMS-2 in phase 4.

2. Literature review

2.1. What is a tip?

Tipping is a custom that can be described in several different ways. For example, a tip can be defined as a gift, as a way of monetarily rewarding or punishing a service provider, or as an obligation for services received. As Shamir (1984) explained, “a price can be fixed on a hotel room, on a meal, or on a distance traveled by taxi or bus, but not on the smiles, the friendly gestures, the hospitable attitudes, etc.” (p. 62). When considering the evolution of tipping, there appear to be two dominant schools of thought: the first where the practice can be described as employer-driven whereas the second is consumer-led. From the employer-driven perspective, Segrave (1998) asserts that the practice of tipping has afforded more personal wealth to those socially irresponsible employers who cut labor costs and play on the emotions of customers who are sympathetic toward struggling low wage servers. The consumer-driven perspective on the other hand speaks to the exchange theory argument where tipping evolved as a system by which customers were freely able to monitor a company’s services and reward employees directly (or not) for the quality of service actually rendered. This perspective was further supported by Azar (2004) who suggested that the act of tipping servers was not only to reward good service but to promote better future service by giving employees “an incentive to do their best to satisfy the customer’s needs” (p. 761).

While it is hard to say with any certainty when and where the custom originated, tipping as an economic activity and the motivations that drive it have frustrated fair wage and labor rights advocates, social scientists, economists, and reporters alike for more than a century (Segrave, 1998). A review of the extant literature does highlight a number of economic and psychological motives (Saunders and Lynn, 2010) such as rewarding good service delivery while at the same time guaranteeing future service delivery (Azar, 2005; Bodvarsson and Gibson, 1999; Lynn, 2003), pressure to conform to societal norms and a closely related need for social approval (Azar, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007a,b; Boyles et al., 2006; Conlin et al., 2003; Lynn, 2001; Shamir, 1984), and out of empathy for service workers. Given these previously mentioned studies that support the overall complexity of tip-giving behavior, literary support provides the theoretical foundation for scale development in this study. Plausible tip-influencing themes found in this study are tipping and service, tipping and social norms, tipping and future service considerations, and tipping as the act relates to daily operations processes.

2.2. Tipping and service

Perhaps the most widely researched motive is related to the provision of quality service and investment in future service (Azar, 2004; Strohmets and Rind, 2001). Saunders and Lynn (2010) suggest that tipping serves as a quality control lever where consumers assume control over the determinants of good service. Poor service generally produces meager tips and results in little to no

income for the server, lending support to the belief that the main justification for tipping is that it promotes better service, by giving the workers an incentive to satisfy the guests’ needs (Azar, 2004). Paradoxically, service workers may strategically tailor the actual service provided according to the size of tip received from a previous service encounter. This view was also supported by Bodvarsson et al. (2003), who found that “service quality significantly affects tip size and when servers expect higher tips, customers rank service quality higher” (p. 1659).

There are two underlying dimensions of service quality to consider; the technical and the functional aspects of service. The technical dimension of service refers to the more tangible and objectively measurable elements of the product or service being supplied. For example, in the context of a restaurant, technical elements of the service encounter might include the number of visits to the table (order taking, food delivery, and menu knowledge), the timeliness of the service delivery process, the accuracy of the menu description (promise) and whether it measures up in terms of what was served (delivery) – in other words, processes and/or systems the server utilizes in order to complete the task.

The functional dimension, on the other hand, refers to the softer and/or more personal elements of the service exchange; or what might best be described as the more intangible, subjective, and/or relational elements of the service encounter – in other words, service delivery. Interestingly, research suggests that when a company fails in relation to the more technical aspects of service, the functional, more relational aspects of delivery may trump the breakdown in systems (O’Neill, 2000). Indeed evidence clearly suggests (Israeli and Barkan, 2004) that when a technical failure does occur the degree of satisfaction felt as a consequence of the recovery effort can sometimes lead to a greater degree of satisfaction and a larger tip than had the service been completed right first time.

A number of studies support the proposition that the more functional aspects of service delivery permit real service differentiation and are highly correlated with actual tipping behavior. For example Speer (1997) and Jewell (2008) propose that a light touch, a warm and friendly smile, or direct eye contact enhance service delivery. Videbeck (2004) suggests that a server nonchalantly touching guests when returning change may increase the tip size, and that “squatting at the table, drawing a smiley face on the bill, forecasting good weather, telling a joke, and wearing a flower in your hair” (p. 40) can also influence tipping behavior. Further, Parret (2006) found that servers from the Netherlands who mimicked customers improved tips. The act of mimicking provided a way by which individual servers could build similarity and familiarity with the customers thereby breaking down any perceived formal service barriers. Whether mimicking facial expressions or attitudes, these actions were found to create an over-all influence with guests.

2.3. Tipping and social norms

Although not as widely discussed in the literature as other motives, the desire to conform to social norms and/or acquire social approval while avoiding disapproval are increasingly being addressed by the research community as potential motives for tipping (Azar, 2004; Bodvarsson and Gibson, 1999; Fehr and Falk, 2002; Saunders and Lynn, 2010). Tipping can be described as a social norm driven practice. As Fehr and Falk (2002) explained, social condemnation was a primary contributor in the implementation of societal customs. Social norm theory suggests that many individuals tip out of pressure to conform, ultimately striving to avoid feelings of guilt or shame. Where tipping is required for services, consumers generally want to feel positive about giving rather than withholding a tip thereby avoiding those negative feelings associated with not tipping.

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