



Would you like fries with that? The roles of servers' personality traits and job performance in the tipping behavior of customers ☆



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 16 May 2015

Keywords:

Personality
Extraversion
Conscientiousness
Job performance
Tipping behavior

ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to expand what is known about how the personality traits of servers are associated with their job performance ratings and the tips they receive from customers. Personality traits were measured in 259 restaurant servers who were evaluated by their actual customers. Conscientiousness was associated with the average job performance ratings of servers. Extraversion was found to moderate the association that job performance had with the tips that servers received such that tipping behavior was associated with job performance for servers with high levels of extraversion but this association did not emerge for servers with low levels of extraversion. These findings are discussed in the context of understanding the connection between personality traits and job-related outcomes.

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1. Introduction

The service industry is an important part of the economic structure of many industrialized countries. For example, nearly 80% of employed individuals in the United States work in some aspect of the service industry with nearly 9 million individuals working as servers in restaurants and bars. Although there is considerable variability between establishments, servers are generally paid by their employers but a large portion of their income usually comes in the form of *tips* from customers (i.e., voluntary payments to servers beyond the amount of the bill; Lynn, 1988). Tipping is believed to have originated in 18th-century English pubs where customers would provide servers with small amounts of additional money "To Insure Promptness" (T.I.P.). The nature of restaurant service

makes it difficult for employers to monitor or control the interactions between servers and customers so tipping serves as an efficient way to provide servers with an incentive or reward for good service (e.g., Conlin, Lynn, & O'Donoghue, 2003). As explained by Shamir (1984), "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). The amount of money that servers earn from tips is difficult to measure precisely but it is believed to be more than \$44 billion each year in the United States alone with tips serving as a major source of income for millions of servers (Azar & Tobol, 2008; Wessels, 1997).

Although there are clear social norms concerning tipping behavior (e.g., 15–20% tips are common in the United States; Azar, 2004; Fehr & Falk, 2002; Saunders & Lynn, 2010), tips are not obligatory and customers decide for themselves how much to tip servers. As a result, the amount of money that servers earn from their tips can vary quite dramatically (e.g., Lynn & Latané, 1984). Tips are an important aspect of the livelihood of servers because they comprise over half the income of most servers in the United States (Wessels, 1997). Thus, knowledge about the factors that contribute to the tipping behavior of customers is valuable (e.g., Saunders & Lynn, 2010; Whaley, Douglas, & O'Neill, 2014). It has been suggested that the factors that influence tipping behavior can be grouped into three basic categories (Rind & Bordia, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999). The first category concerns the *characteristics of the customers* which includes the number of customers at the table (with larger parties leaving smaller percentage

☆ Thanks are due to the research assistants from Sapir Academic College, Israel and from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Eilat Campus, Israel, for their invaluable assistance in gathering the data, the participants who completed this study without compensation, and the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions and comments on an earlier draft of this paper. We are also highly indebted to the owners, managers, and staff of the restaurants for their cooperation in making this study possible.

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tip; Freeman, Walker, Borden, & Latané, 1975), sex of the customers (with all male groups tipping more than all female groups; Stillman & Hensley, 1980), method of payment used by the customers (with customers using credit cards tipping more than those using cash; May, 1978), and amount of alcohol consumed (with customers consuming more alcohol providing larger tips; Lynn, 1988). The second category concerns *characteristics of the server* that are not directly tied to job performance such as his or her attractiveness (with more attractive female servers receiving larger tips; Hornik, 1993; Lynn & Simons, 2000) and style of dress (with more attractively dressed servers receiving larger tips; Stillman & Hensley, 1980). The third category concerns the *interactions that occur between the server and the customer such as servers* briefly touching their customers (Crusco & Wetzel, 1984; Hornik, 1993), squatting during their initial interaction with customers (Lynn & Mynier, 1993), giving their first names to customers during their initial contact (Garrity & Degelman, 1990), smiling at customers during their initial interaction (Tidd & Lockard, 1978), writing messages (e.g., “Thank you”) or drawing happy faces on the back of the check (Rind & Bordia, 1995; Rind & Bordia, 1996; Rind & Strohmetz, 1999), and performing their job well (e.g., attentiveness, speed of service; e.g., Lynn, 2001; Lynn, 2003).

Given the importance of tips to the incomes of servers and the role that the behavior of servers play in the tips that they receive from customers, we were interested in examining whether the personality traits of servers were associated with the tips they received. The Big Five personality dimensions (i.e., extraversion, emotional stability, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience; e.g., John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999) have been the dominant framework for examining the associations between personality traits and job performance (e.g., Hurtz & Donovan, 2000; Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998). The Big Five personality dimensions are believed to encompass the most important personality traits in most contexts including employment. Previous research has often found extraversion and conscientiousness to be associated with the job performance of employees in the service industry (e.g., Hurtz & Donovan, 2000). These personality traits may be linked with job performance when interacting directly with customers because they contribute to service that is friendly, attentive, and efficient (Frei & McDaniel, 1998; Hogan, Hogan, & Busch, 1984).

Individuals with high levels of extraversion have an energetic approach to their interactions with their social environments which leads to them being described by themselves and others as assertive, active, positive, and sociable (John & Srivastava, 1999). Extraverted individuals tend to have a large number of friends and display strong social skills (McCrae & Costa, 1999). In light of these attributes, it is not terribly surprising that extraversion is positively associated with performance during employment interviews (Cardwell & Burger, 1998) as well as their actual performance in jobs that require effective interpersonal interactions (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Chi, Grandey, Diamond, & Krimmel, 2011; Lynn, 2008). Within the service industry, extraversion has been found to be positively associated with the tips received by servers who engage in surface acting (i.e., modify their superficial expressions rather than their inner feelings) when interacting with customers (Chi et al., 2011). The link between extraversion and the tips that servers receive may be due to the fact that servers with high levels of extraversion are more interpersonally engaging and better at managing their self-presentation than other individuals (e.g., Judge & Ilies, 2002; Judge, Woolf, & Hurst, 2009).

The benefits of extraversion in employment contexts appear to be influenced by moderating variables such as context and other personality features. For example, Witt (2002) found that conscientiousness moderated the association that extraversion had with job-related outcomes. Conscientiousness is the personality trait

that is most strongly and consistently linked with job performance (e.g., Barrick, Mount, & Judge, 2001). Individuals with high levels of conscientiousness show increased job performance because they are better at controlling their impulses (e.g., thinking before they act, delaying gratification, planning, prioritizing, and following rules and norms; John & Srivastava, 1999). Witt (2002) found that conscientiousness moderated the association that extraversion had with the probability of being hired as well as actual job performance across four samples of participants. More specifically, individuals who had high levels of both extraversion and conscientiousness were viewed as the more attractive job candidates and were perceived by their managers as being the top performing employees. Witt (2002) argued that employees with high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness are likely to excel in jobs requiring interpersonal interactions (e.g., the service industry) because they are likely to spend the time necessary to identify and address the needs of their customers (due to their high levels of extraversion) and get the details right (due to their high levels of conscientiousness).

2. Overview and predictions

The purpose of the present study was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the connections that personality traits have with job performance and the tips received for servers working in restaurants. This was accomplished by asking servers to complete self-report measures that assessed their personality features and recruiting some of their customers to rate their job performance and report the tips they left for the servers. This allowed us to examine whether the self-reported personality features of the servers were associated with the perceptions that the customers had of the servers. In particular, we were interested in the possibility that servers with high levels of extraversion would receive especially large tips when they performed their jobs relatively well. The rationale for this prediction was based on the results observed by Witt (2002) which found that individuals with high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness were viewed most favorably in employment contexts. Conscientiousness and job performance are linked with each other (e.g., Hurtz & Donovan, 2000) so we decided to examine the extent to which both were tied to the tips that servers received. We expected that customers would provide larger tips to servers with high levels of extraversion if they perceived these servers to be performing their jobs effectively because these servers would be the most likely to have invested the time and energy to forge a connection with their customers at the same time they were attending to the details of the interaction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were 259 Israeli community members (87 men, 172 women) who were currently working as servers at 25 restaurants in the southern region of Israel. The managers at these 25 restaurants allowed us to contact their employees about the possibility of participating in this study. These servers who agreed to participate (i.e., 90% of those we approached) were asked to complete measures concerning their personality traits – along with other measures that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., self-esteem level) – during individual sessions. The mean age of the servers was 23.30 years ($SD = 4.05$). The servers were required to have been working for at least nine months in their current place of employment with the average number of months being 12.0 ($SD = 1.23$).

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