Just the tip: exploring the tipped restaurant employee perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – This research aimed to fill several gaps in the tipping literature which has overlooked the server's perspective in identifying and understanding variables that influence a tip amount and therefore where they concentrate their efforts during the service encounter. Furthermore, the extant literature has theorized how or why certain variables influence the tip amount, but these studies fail to capture insight from server's which would supplement the theory and provide a more in-depth understanding of the mechanisms at play.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts a grounded theory approach using semi-structured one-on-one interviews with tipped restaurant employees who were identified and selected using snowball sampling. Content analysis is employed to code and categorize the data.

Findings – The content analysis revealed five categories where servers focus their time and effort to earn tips: service quality, connection, personal factors, expertise and food quality. The server's personality was identified as a variable the tipping literature has largely ignored as a determinant of the tip amount. Server's shift their style of service for groups of eight or more people, and for regular customers, who must dine in the restaurant at least once per week. Lastly, despite the many drawbacks associated with working for tips, servers would not want to replace it with any other method of compensation.
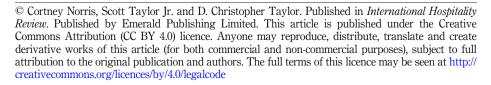
Originality/value – This is the first qualitative study focused on understanding the server's role in the service exchange relationship since McCarty *et al.* (1990) study. The results provide new insights on the often-studied variables from the tipping literature.

Keywords Tipping, Tipped employee perspective, Service-exchange relationship, Relationship theory, Personality

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In the United States, restaurant operators rely on customers to subsidize the below minimum wage ($2.13 in most states) paid to the front-of-house service staff in the form of tips. There is no standard tip percentage customers can choose to leave any amount of money, including not leaving anything. However, a normative range of 15-20% of the bill has been the practice since the mid-1980s (Emily Post Institute, 2018). This normative range still leaves a lot of guesswork for customers to calculate what they believe they should pay their server.

However, customers are not the only ones left guessing. The server is also left to guess if their efforts will be rewarded with a desirable tip amount.

Most of the tipping literature examines the salient variables that influence the tip amount from the customer's perspective. This makes sense given they are the ones who leave the tip; however, the customer is only half of the service exchange relationship. Hoaas and Bigler (2012) explain that tipping involves two economic agents, the tipper (customer) and the tippee (server) and the tip amount is dependent on both agents. Further, relationship theory explains, a relationship is comprised of two people and has properties that cannot be predicted from the assessment of just one individual in the relationship (Hinde, 1995).

The current literature is heavily skewed in favor of the customer's perspective and largely ignores the server's influence on variables that have been found to influence the tip amount such as patronage frequency and group size. Although the extant literature theorizes how and when a server may shift their approach for large parties or regular customers, none have sought the server's perspective to identify the mechanisms at play and at what point the shift may occur. Furthermore, failure to engage the server's perspective implies that there may be variables of interest not yet explored in the tipping literature. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to extend the current literature by exploring the server's perspective on the determinants of a tip amount, thus how and where their efforts are focused when attempting to earn tips. Overall, this study aims to fill these gaps in the tipping literature and contribute meaningful insights by expanding the literature to include a more holistic view of the server's role in the service exchange relationship.

Literature review
Relationship theory and service exchange relationships
Hinde (1979) describes interpersonal relationships, such as service exchange relationships, as intermittent interactions between two individuals highlighted by an exchange that occurs over an extended period. The interaction refers to a sequence of events, where individual A performs behavior X for individual B and B responds with behavior Y. Additionally, the exchange has a degree of mutuality; one person's behavior in the relationship takes some account of the other individual's behavior (Hinde, 1979). Specifically, there is a reflexive response to the other person's decisions/actions.

Using relationship theory as the lens to understand tipping behavior, the server is an equal partner in the relationship and makes reflexive decisions based on the customers' decisions/ actions which influence the tip amount. As an example, a server may recognize that the customer is not in the mood for conversation, thus, limiting conversation and focusing solely on fulfilling the customer's needs. Other times a customer may want to indulge in conversation and the server recognizes this and engages. Each time the initial approach to the table may be the same but what happens from there is derived from the customer's actions. Thus far, the literature has only captured the customer side of this relationship and the variables used to determine the tip amount. The following section will provide a detailed breakdown of the literature that has explored the role of the server.

Tipped employee perspective
The literature on tipping identifies a relationship between the server and the customer; however, most of this research is dominated by identifying salient variables that influence the amount of money left as a tip and focus only on the customer side of the relationship. Hoaas and Bigler (2012) also identified this gap noting that the customer side of the relationship has been thoroughly discussed but the server side was noticeably lacking, stating that "no systematic attempt is made to inquire of servers what activities they deem important in determining or increasing tip rates" (pg. 19).

The studies that have sought to engage the server can be broken down into seven categories (1) Server's preference for and opinions on tipping systems, (2) Server's ability to predict tip amounts, (3) Techniques servers can employ to increase tip amounts, (4) Discriminatory tipping and service, (5) Influence of tipping on firm and employee-related outcomes, (6) Social relations and labor experience of tipped employees and (7) Server's insights on working for tips. Table 1 provides an overview of the tipping literature that focuses on the server's perspective, specifically studies where servers were the sample population or subject of the research.

Of these categories, only servers' insights on working for tips, focus on the dynamic relationship with customers and provide insights on servers' feelings, perceptions and opinions about working for tips. In this category, only five studies could be found where servers were directly questioned on their perceptions of tipping and relationships with customers.

The first study focuses on a qualitative approach to understanding the tipped employee perspective. McCarty, Shrum, Conrad-Katz, and Kanne (1990) conducted interviews with servers to understand the dynamics at work between themselves, customers and tip amounts. Through the interviews, they identified six themes. The first was tipped restaurant employees have a shared culture. Tipping was a topic of conversation during and after scheduled work hours focusing on customers' tipping behavior, commonly held beliefs and how their experiences differ. The second theme was factors affecting tipping, noting that servers believe tips are a function of their performance and the customer's willingness to tip

Category	Studies
Server's preference for and opinions on tipping systems	Casey (2001), Lin and Namasivayam (2011), Namasivayam and Upneja (2007), Roe (2011)
Server's ability to predict tip amounts	Barkan and Israeli (2004), Dombrowski, Namasivayam, and Bartlett (2007)
Techniques to increase tip amounts	Dyussembayeva, Viglia, Nieto-Garcia, and Mattila (2022), Fernandez *et al.* (2020) , Garrity and Degelman (1990), Gueguen (2002), Guéguen (2012), Guéguen and Legoherel (2000), Hornik (1992), Hsiao, Chien, Yeh, and Huan (2022), Kinard and Kinard (2013), Lynn (1996, 2009, 2018), Lynn and Mynier (1993), Lynn and Simons (2000), Lynn, Le, and Sherwyn (1998), Lynn, Giebelhausen, Garcia, Li, and Patumanon (2016), McCall and Belmont (1996), Parrett (2015), Rind (1996), Rind and Bordia (1995, 1996), Rind and Strohmetz (1999, 2001a, b), Seiter, Givens, and Weger (2016), Seiter and Dutson (2007), Seiter and Gass (2005), Seiter and Weger (2013, 2018), Strohmetz, Rind, Fisher, and Lynn (2002), Strohmetz and Rind (2001), van Baaren, Holland, Steenaert, and van Knippenberg (2003)
Discriminatory service/tipping	Brewster (2013, 2015), Brewster and Mallinson (2009), Brewster, Gourlay, and Nowak (2022), Hall (2018), Lynn and Thomas-Haysbert (2003), Lynn *et al.* (2008)
Influence of tipping on firm and employee-related outcomes	Azar (2012), Clotildah (2014), Curtis, Upchurch, and Severt (2009), Grandey, Chi, and Diamond (2013), Kim, Nemeschansky, and Brandt (2017), Kwortnik, Lynn, and Ross (2009), Lynn, (2017, 2022), Lynn, Kwortnik, and Sturman (2011), McAdams and Massow (2017), Mensah, Azila-Gbettor, and Appietu (2020), Miller (2010), Wang, Baker, Kim, and Ma (2021)
Social Relations and Labor Experiences of Tipped Employees	Brewster and Wills (2013), Gatta (2009), Medler-Liraz (2014, 2020), Wilson (2019)
Server insights on working for tips	Harris (1995), Hoaas and Bigler (2012), Hunt (2016), McCall and Lynn (2009), McCarty *et al.* (1990)

Note(s): [1]Studies prior to 1990 omitted
Source(s): Table by authors

(or not). The third theme was beliefs about customers and focused on who servers felt were good or bad tippers. The fourth theme was relationships with customers specifically that receiving a tip did not make servers feel inferior to customers. The fifth theme centered on quality of service and tipping and was broken down into two subcategories. First, servers noted service quality would decline if tipping was replaced with other forms of compensation. Second, servers believed the tip amount was related to the quality of service. The sixth theme was servers as customers and primarily dealt with how servers tip when they are customers.

In a study to determine if servers were aware of the variables researchers have found to affect tip size, Harris (1995) compiled a list of 15 variables from the literature and asked whether each factor increased, decreased or had no effect on tip amount. Hoaas and Bigler (2012) executed a similar study to survey servers and determine what they thought affected the tip amount. They identified several variables that servers believe positively influenced tips (customer frequency and gender, split checks, promptness and smiling) and some that negatively influenced tips (wait time for food/drink, wrong orders, spills and customer's attitude).

Harris (1995) also asked servers who they thought were likely to leave larger and smaller tip amounts. Larger tip amounts were more likely to be left by service industry employees, rich people, men and business professionals. Servers believed that African Americans, older customers, women and those dining with children left smaller tips. In a similar vein, McCall and Lynn (2009) found that servers perceived nonwhite individuals and teens as the worst tippers while regular customers and males were considered the best tippers.

Hunt (2016) addresses the multitude of negative effects associated with customers subsidizing servers' income through tips. Drawing on server's narratives Hunt (2016) highlights the working conditions, abuse and exploitation that tipped employees must endure to make a living. These five studies encompass the literature that specifically deals with the server's relationship with and understanding of customers and tipping. The most in-depth perspective is over 30 years old (McCarty et al., 1990). Additionally, other variables that have been found to influence the tip amount also lack the server's perspective, including group size, patron frequency and tip amount.

Group size

The number of people dining together and the influence this has on the tip amount has been the subject of inquiry for many studies, generally finding that as group size increases, tip amount decreases. Snyder (1976) contended that this phenomenon existed due to equity theory, the balance of inputs and outputs. He argued that as group size increased, servers reduced their inputs (effort), and in response, customers to maintain equity, reduced their inputs (tip amount). Equity theory has remained a foundational theory in the study of tipping behavior, and the idea that servers reduce their effort for large groups has been carried forward in the literature (Bodvarsson & Gibson, 1997; Ineson & Martin, 1999; Lynn & Latané, 1984; Parrett, 2006). However, none of these studies have inquired with servers if there is a reduction in effort when it comes to serving larger groups of people and why.

Additionally, missing from the explanation of equity theory relates to the number of people dining together where a shift in effort occurs and why? The extant literature has relied on either previous studies or the limitations of their data to determine what is and is not a large party thus the point where tip amounts decrease. Snyder (1976) based his application of equity theory on four people dining together. Parrett (2006) only considered tables of one, two, three and six persons, and others have data where most data points are clustered between one and six people (Bodvarsson & Gibson, 1997; Lynn & Sturman, 2010; Sánchez, 2002). Understanding how group size influences the effort exerted by the server and how many people dining together triggers this shift would provide a greater understanding of why studies have found that as group size increases, tip amount decreases.

Patronage frequency

How often a customer dines out at a specific restaurant, has been a focal predictor in numerous studies examining the amount left as a tip. Lynn and Grassman (1990) proposed that people tip to buy future good service, especially for "regulars," people who patronize a specific restaurant frequently. Several studies over the years have found that people who regularly visit a restaurant tip more (Conlin, Lynn, & O'Donoghue, 2003; Ineson & Martin, 1999; Lynn & McCall, 2000; Mok & Hansen, 1999). However, how often a person dines in a restaurant to be classified as a regular varies from study to study. For example, Lynn and Grassman (1990) classified a person who visits a restaurant five or more times per year as a regular, and several others use once per month (Azar, 2007; Conlin et al., 2003; Sánchez, 2002). Further McCall and Lynn (2009) found that servers believe regular customers are better tippers but fail to identify who (in terms of frequency) is classified as a regular.

Although these studies provide evidence that regulars tip more than nonregulars, none have sought to understand the relationship servers have with regulars or establish how often a customer must dine at a particular restaurant to be considered a regular. Like group size, patronage frequency triggers a response in servers. In this case, a customer may consider themselves a regular of a particular restaurant, but the server must also recognize the person as a regular for a shift in service style to occur, one that is befitting of larger tip amounts.

Tip amount

The extant literature has relied on the social conventions of tipping, specifically the norm of tipping 15–20% of the bill amount. Past research has concluded that the customer understands and follows social norms if a tip amount falls within or above this range. If the tip amount is below 15%, the customer is less acquainted with the social norm of tipping (Lynn & Thomas-Haysbert, 2003). While most people conform to the norm of tipping, the amount tends to vary (Lynn & Grassman, 1990).

Most studies focus on the 15-20% normative range because this is what customers are expected to do. However, the tip amount is the outcome of the server's input in the service exchange relationship. No previous research has sought to understand the outcome from the person affected by it the most, the server. Therefore, identifying how servers classify a desirable versus undesirable tip amount based on the normative 15-20% guideline is an aim of this study.

The following research questions guide this research:

(1) What do servers believe influences a tip amount?

(2) Are there unexplored variables of interest that pertain to the server's perspective?

(3) How do tipped employees classify (1) a large party, (2) a regular customer and (3) a desirable tip amount?

(4) Do servers alter service performance/effort for (1) a large party and (2) a regular customer?

(5) What is the nature of the relationship with regular versus nonregular customers?

Methodology

Data collection/participant profile

Participants for this study were recruited in a snowball sampling approach, starting with individuals known by the author. Individuals who have been employed in a tipped restaurant position, specifically as a bartender or server within the last three years, were invited to participate. Interviews were held over a virtual meeting platform, phone call, or in person.

With the consent of participants, interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semistructured and continued until data saturation occurred.

In total, 20 individuals were interviewed; all were conducted by the lead author and had an average length of 21 minutes and 9 seconds. Participants all work(ed) in casual dining restaurants and reside in different parts of the country. Table 2 provides demographic information for respondents.

Data analysis
Conventional content analysis was used to analyze the information collected from the interviews. This approach enables the information to be coded and analyzed in terms of the principal concepts or themes presented. The four-step process of content analysis includes: (1) data immersion, (2) derive codes from the data, (3) sort coded data into categories (4) develop definitions for each category (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The lead author conducted and transcribed the interviews serving as data immersion. Following this step, all authors read the transcribed interviews and responses to each question were coded. Following the coding of the interviews, the authors then compared codes, reaching a consensus. The codes were then sorted into categories. The authors then compared and discussed the derived categories, reaching an agreement.

Results
To answer research questions one and two, servers were asked, "what do you think the guest bases their decision on when determining how much money to leave as a tip," "what are some of the things you do that you believe increases the amount left as a tip" and "do you think you have a direct influence over the amount left as a tip." The answers to these three questions were coded, resulting in 29 codes that were then sorted into five categories.

Participant pseudonym	Gender	Age	Position	Tenure in tipped position (years)
Andy	Male	29	Server/Bartender	6
Beth	Female	50	Server/Bartender	30
Brendan	Male	28	Server	4
Brittany	Female	31	Bartender	8
Marie	Female	38	Server	1.5
Delilah	Female	19	Server	0.167
Sebastian	Male	21	Server	2
Jacqueline	Female	20	Server	2
Jordan	Female	35	Server/Bartender	20
Carrie	Female	49	Server	31
Kristin	Female	30	Bartender	8
Lisa	Female	55	Server	40
Logan	Male	25	Server	2
Michaela	Female	28	Bartender	5
Elizabeth	Female	67	Server	40
Patrick	Male	39	Bartender	15
Peter	Male	21	Server	5
Anthony	Male	40	Bartender	21
William	Male	31	Bartender	9
Alex	Male	42	Server	15
Average		*34.5*		*13.2*

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 2.
Demographic profile of respondents

The five categories and subcategories are shown below in Table 3. Although several of these categories and subcategories have been the subject of inquiry in many previous studies regarding tipping, these results provide insight into how and where servers concentrate their efforts to ensure the best experience for the customer and ultimately earn tips. Furthermore, some of the factors mentioned have not yet appeared in the tipping literature and may go unnoticed by customers but are seen by servers as influential to their success.

Service quality
Service quality was mentioned frequently (17 of 20 interviews) and was described by many as being attentive, prompt and accurate, as well as being timely and in the proper sequence. A quote from Andy best summarizes this category's main components "promptness to their needs, getting their order in a timely manner, getting their drinks out and executing it all on time". Brendan said, "service is really important. It involves a lot of different factors, like speed, how quickly you greet them and get the drinks, how quickly you take the order and how fast the food comes out, checking on them frequently and refilling their bread or drinks, and responding to their needs and requests, it's a lot." Across the interviews, speed of service and timeliness were mentioned frequently, specifically not leaving the guest waiting for anything, which required them to be highly in tune with the sequence of service and the table's rhythm.

Food quality
Food quality was mentioned less frequently (12 of 20 interviews), with all participants noting it is a factor in the customer's determination of a tip amount; however, it is a factor that is out of their control. Brendan says, "unrelated to the server is the product being delivered. If the food is cold, it's not exactly the server's fault, but they're not going to be happy with you." Elizabeth said, "unfortunately, food quality does influence the tip amount. It shouldn't because you didn't cook it, but it does." Many also noted that some guests are aware of the server's inability to control these errors and understood when they occurred.

Errors were mentioned by all respondents in terms of preventing mistakes and correcting mistakes. Patrick said, "If I have a table with special requests or substitutions, I keep an eye on the window and when I see my orders coming up, I'll go over and check to make sure everything is right, that way I ensure the customers get exactly what they ordered". Others noted that when they have special requests, they will go speak to the chef to ensure the message is conveyed to avoid any errors before the food is prepared.

In terms of correction, they all highlighted the need to rectify the problem as quickly as possible and sometimes work outside set policies to placate guests. Following a food error, servers said they will grab food items (fries, soup, etc.) that they have access to take to the guest. They also noted that they were fully aware the company considered this theft of

Service quality	Food quality	Expertise	Personal factors	Connection
Promptness	Cold food	Menu knowledge	Appearance	Establish rapport
Timeliness	Poor Quality	Recommendations	Attitude	Compliments
Sequence of orders	Prevention	Anticipating needs	Personality	Introduce yourself
Accuracy	Correction	Bill amount	Confidence	Learn their names
Attentive			Read customers	Create an experience
Speed of service			Eye contact	Celebrate special occasions
			Communication	Remember names/orders

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 3.
Determinants of a tip
amount

product that could potentially lead to their termination. Others said they went about it more officially and would ask the manager to comp a dessert for the table, reduce the price of the meal or take it off the bill altogether. In each instance, the servers are actively working to preserve a tip so that their time/effort does not go unrewarded. The next category developed has to do with the expertise of the server.

Expertise

Many participants noted that overall expertise associated with training and knowledge were key determinants of a tip amount (11 of 20 interviews). A quote from Marie summarizes it nicely, "menu knowledge is really important, that's the selling point and just the little extras like bringing them what they need without them having to ask for it. Going above and beyond is what will get your tip from 15% to 20%." Menu knowledge was reiterated by Patrick, who said, "A thorough knowledge of the menu is crucial. If you're able to answer any question a guest asks that puts them at ease, and they feel that you are knowledgeable and you're going to take care of them."

On making recommendations, Elizabeth said, "you suggest to them the things that you feel will enhance their meal, like certain sauces or side dishes". Overall servers noted that making recommendations on food or pairings goes a long way in enhancing the experience leading to a better tip. Regarding anticipating the needs of the guest, Carrie said, "anticipating what the table is going to need and getting it before they know they need it." Beth said, "it is not just about getting them the things they request quickly. It is also about having the foresight to consider what they might need based on what they order like extra napkins or ketchup."

Bill amount falls into this category because it was apparent that a server who knows the menu is more adept at upselling. According to servers, upselling is not just for the company's benefit it is a way for them to increase the bill amount to get a bigger tip. Andy said, "knowing the menu and what pairs well will help you be able to upsell, which will definitely get you a bigger tip". In addition to the server's expertise and training, several personal factors were mentioned as playing an important role.

Personal factors

Personal factors include the server's inherent traits, such as attitude, confidence and personality, as well as their appearance and ability to read customers, and were mentioned as important determinants of a tip amount (15 of 20 interviewees). On attitude and confidence, Jacqueline said, "I think my attitude towards my job, my determination to work and then also seeming confident in your job". Regarding attitude, Peter further explains that "you can choose to go up to a table and deliver the absolute best service or someday you just aren't feeling it and you are just going through the motions, and you can see the difference in your tip amounts."

On the opposite side, it was noted that the attitude of the customer also dictates how the service is delivered. Michaela said, "if the customer is rude to me, I move to silent service, rather than asking if they want a refill, I just do it, that way there is minimal interaction with them." It was mentioned frequently that customers with a bad attitude influence the service style and that while the basic expectations would be met, the server would not go above and beyond for those people.

The ability to read customers was mentioned by almost all participants and is critically important in providing customers with the experience they are looking for. Jordan, a long-tenured server, said, "you have to know how to read customers, especially in this industry. If you can't read your customers, you don't belong in this industry." Most respondents noted that they could read the customers as they walked in or sat down. William said, "somebody

that doesn't really want to talk, you pick up on that without them telling you, another person wants to talk to you the entire time and you handle it differently. You get the same tip, but they are completely different interactions, but you have to know how to read the situation, so you play it right." Relatedly, Michaela said, "if you read your guests right, it's going to positively influence your tip, if you read them wrong it could cost you."

Throughout the interviews, the server's personality was one factor mentioned ubiquitously as influencing the tip amount. The server's personality has only been the subject of inquiry in one previous study (Zeigler-Hill, Besser, Vrabel, & Noser, 2015) and is therefore relatively unexplored in the tipping literature. Regarding the server's personality, Anthony said, "it has to do with a decent personality, like who you are, and just being able to communicate or joke with a lot of different types of people." Jordan said, "I think customers think more about the server's personality rather than the bill amount when it comes to leaving a tip. I can make double what some servers make because it's just personality." As a result of this line of inquiry, it was determined that personality is an influential determinant of the tip amount from the server's perspective. A server's personality also influences the next category, connection.

Connection

Closely related to the personal factor category is the connection category, which has to do with establishing a relationship and building rapport with customers and was mentioned by almost all servers (17 of 20 interviewees). Brittany said, "you try to converse and get to know them, find something out about them to make them so it's more than just someone I'm giving food to." Jordan echoed this sentiment saying, "I try to make them feel special and that it's not just about me giving them food and keeping their drink full". Anthony said, "it is not just about slinging drinks. It is also talking to people and making regulars, building a relationship with them, so they come back." All servers said they actively engage and try to build relationships with customers to turn them into regulars. The belief amongst the respondents was even if the food was just ok, it was the connection that brought people back.

For many servers, offering a compliment is a way to build a connection or find a common interest. Peter said, "being able to connect is really important, which means finding something that is common ground to talk about". Beth said, "I always try to compliment them on something, it just starts to break the ice, and you get to know them, little details like that will go a long way."

On creating an experience, Kristen said, "just engaging and talking with the customers, making them feel like they're having more of an experience than just eating food out. People love experiences and that's what they will remember". Michaela said, "It is all about the little personal touches, like finding out if it is a special occasion they are celebrating and making sure people feel valued."

Research questions three, four, and five focused on how servers classify a large party, a regular customer, a desirable tip amount, the nuances of the relationship with regular customers and the effort required to serve large parties. Several questions related to the research aims were asked for each variable to understand the server's perspective.

Group size

To identify the number of people dining together that a server classifies as a large party and theoretically the point where effort is reduced, the participants were asked, "how many people do you consider to be a large party/group?" The answers ranged from 6 to 10, with an average response of 8.1. The frequency of mentions is shown below in Table 4.

Additionally of interest was whether servers reduce the amount of effort when serving large tables, as suggested in the literature regarding equity theory. Participants were asked,

"do you think you put forth more effort, less effort, or the same amount of effort when serving a large group versus a smaller table?" Overwhelmingly participants said they put forth more effort when serving large groups. Table 5 below shows the frequency of responses.

Those who responded that it requires less effort all mentioned that it has to do with the level of conversation. Andy said, "In a big group, you're just not going to get the same level of conversation you would with smaller tables. You just don't have the time, and they are more interested in each other than they are in you. You're just the person bringing them what they need." Similarly, Anthony said, "serving large groups is almost easier because they're all friends, so there is less pressure to have those conversations; you just get their drinks and take their orders." Overwhelmingly, the respondents said that a large party requires more effort than a smaller table of two or four people. Respondents noted that large parties move a lot faster, need more attention and require more trips to the table. Elizabeth said, "you have got three times more people, so it's three times more drinks, more food, and you've got that many more people to explain things to and answer questions."

Based on the analysis of the interviews, it was established that a large party as classified by respondents is eight or more people dining together. Furthermore, 70% of respondents said that serving a large party requires more effort than serving a smaller table, primarily due to the volume of orders and maintaining the table. However, less personal connection through conversation is required.

Regular customers

The frequency a customer must visit a restaurant to be considered a regular by the server was a key factor to establish as the server must be the one who recognizes the customer as a regular and provide a different level or type of service. Questions were aimed at understanding how frequently a regular customer dines at the restaurant and how the interaction differs between a regular customer versus one-time customers. Except for one respondent who had the least amount of tenure (2 months), all others reported having customers they considered to be regulars. When asked, "on average, how often does a customer have to come in to be considered a regular," most respondents said once a week minimum, some said two to three times a week, and others said every day.

Although most respondents said that a regular is a person who dines in the restaurant at least once a week, some classified regulars as both once a week and multiple times per month. Jacqueline said, "I have regulars who live down the street, and I see them once a week, and

Dining party size	n	%
6	4	20%
7	2	10%
8	8	40%
10	6	30%

Table 4.
Frequency of responses – large party **Source(s):** Table by authors

Amount of effort	n	%
Less	3	15%
Same	3	15%
More	14	70%

Table 5.
Amount of effort serving a large party versus a small table **Source(s):** Table by authors

then I have regulars who live further away, and I'll see them once a month. I still consider them a regular, because I know when they come in, they're going to ask for me." Michaela said, "at least once a week, but I also consider people regulars who were there once or twice a month. But I didn't know them as well. It was the people who were there at least once a week who were almost like family to us."

Some responses were sorted into multiple categories to capture the full range of frequencies mentioned by participants which resulted in 27 responses being categorized from the 20 respondents. Overall, 85.2% of the respondents believed that to be considered a regular customer they must dine in the restaurant at least once per week, if not more. Table 6 shows the frequency distribution of server responses.

To understand more about a server's relationship with a regular customer and how it differs from one-time/infrequent customers, they were asked, "do you interact with regular customers differently than infrequent customers?" All but three respondents said they do interact with or provide preferential service to customers they consider regulars. Those who said they interact with regular customers differently cited reasons such as familiarity, involvement and being more natural. Logan said, "with regulars, that personal aspect is already there, so you skip all of the awkward introductions and stuff, nothing is scripted, it is more natural." Several mentioned that the ice is already broken with regular customers making it a more relaxed interaction.

Many interviewees indicated that serving customers was akin to acting in a performance; when you have regulars, you can drop the act. William said, "you are not putting on a show for them. You let that go and interact with them as you would a friend, a normal conversation with somebody you know." Likewise, Patrick said, "you can be yourself with regulars rather than putting on the show as you do for everyone else." Elizabeth noted, "it is more personal, we talk about life rather than just playing our parts as server and customer."

When asked if regulars tip more than one-time customers, most respondents said that, on average, regulars tend to tip more. Michaela said, "absolutely, they [regulars] would on average tip at least 30% or better, sometimes even up to 50%." Andy said, "I think they [regulars] tip more consistently which is nice when you usually don't know what you might make or if your efforts will be rewarded." Additionally, almost all respondents said regulars would bring them gifts from time to time, especially during the holidays as a "Christmas bonus" as some referred to it. Patrick said, "I've had regulars give me tickets to events or games, they have brought me craft beers from places they traveled, and usually you get a little extra cash around the holidays." With regulars, the respondents felt there is more familiarity, can be more natural and establish relationships beyond a casual interaction, which leads to better tips and, in some cases, other benefits such as gifts.

Desirable tip amount
The extant tipping literature relies on the normative tip amount of 15-20% of the total bill. However, the tip amount is the primary source of income for most tipped employees, so it is

Frequency of regulars	n	%
1–2 times a month	4	14.8%
Once a week	10	37%
1–2 times a week	3	11.1%
2–3 times a week	7	25.9%
Everyday	3	11.1%
Source(s): Table by authors		

Table 6.
Regular customers dining frequency

critical to understand what servers believe constitutes a desirable tip amount. Participants were asked, "it is widely believed that a 15-20% tip is the standard tip amount. In that range, would you draw a line somewhere and say that this percent and above is considered desirable and below is undesirable?" Table 7 below shows the frequency of responses.

Most respondents firmly believed that 20% is the minimum tip for receiving good service. The respondents who said 20% was the desirable tip amount also made a point to mention that they also understood when they did not get 20% due to their error. Brendan said, "honestly I have to say 20% is the minimum for good service, but I can understand if I didn't give good service and they leave 15%, like ok, I get it. But if I bend over backward for somebody, they never have to wait, and everything went smoothly, and they give you 15%, it is like really, come on!"

Other respondents noted certain things factor into their decision on a desirable tip amount that customers may not be aware of. Several made a point to mention that they must tip out other service staff (runners, bartenders, etc.) that is integral to the customer experience, and that factors into their decision. Similarly, Alex mentioned the pay rate as a factor in his decision, he said, "20% no matter what unless the server is really bad…I wish the guests knew how much money we make; it's $2.13. We don't do all this extra stuff for them just because it's to make more money and have a better income."

Interestingly when asked if they would prefer a different type of compensation that was not based on tipped income, all respondents said no. Many said that earning tips puts them in a position to be mistreated by guests or sexually harassed (all female respondents and two male respondents said they had been sexually harassed while working) and still did not want to replace the current compensation system. When asked what the most frustrating thing as a tipped employee was, eighteen mentioned inconsistent income. When presented with alternative compensation methods that would provide more consistent incomes, the respondents still wanted to maintain voluntary tipping. The unifying message from this line of inquiry was that despite its many drawbacks they have control over their income and their performance dictated how much money they could make, which they felt would not be the case with another form of compensation.

Discussion

The results from research questions one and two provide an in-depth look at what factors tipped employees feel influence the amount left as a tip and therefore where they spend their time and effort in the labor process of serving. The respondents felt that in order of frequency of mentions, service quality and connection are the most important factors, followed by personal factors, expertise and food quality. Additionally, some variables discussed during the interviews are relatively unexplored in the tipping literature, specifically personality. The server's personality was frequently mentioned across all interviews as an essential aspect of creating a good experience for the customer and forming a connection and has only been explored in one other study (Zeigler-Hill *et al.*, 2015). Personality as a predictor of tip amount should be explored in more depth based on how fervently it was mentioned during the interviews as a factor that influences servers' ability to earn tips.

Desirable tip amount	n	%
15-20%	1	5%
18% and above	4	20%
20% and above	15	75%

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 7.
Desirable tip amount

Answers to research questions three, four and five provide an understanding of variables from the tipping literature from the often-overlooked perspective of the server. Previous literature has shown that as table size increases, tip size decreases using equity theory to explain that larger tables require less effort (Bodvarsson & Gibson, 1997; Ineson & Martin, 1999; Parrett, 2006). Based on the findings of this study, a server does not classify a table as a large party until it reaches eight people. Additionally, the respondents indicated that large parties require increased effort and attention, not less as the literature has previously suggested. However, there is a greater focus on the execution of tasks rather than on building rapport, suggesting that it is not about less effort as previously suggested but a shift in style that occurs. This finding supports the inclusion of equity theory to explain why as group size increases, tips decrease, but from a different perspective which identifies the shift in style servers employ for large groups.

Regarding regular customers, previous studies have generally used once a month as a cut-off to establish who is and who is not a regular (Azar, 2007; Conlin *et al.*, 2003). However, from the server's perspective, they must recognize the customer as a regular and alter service accordingly. Respondents believed that a regular customer is someone they see at least once a week, if not more and the relationship is characterized by a more laid-back and friendly interaction, where they can drop the "act".

Lastly, previous studies rely on a normative tip range of 15-20% of the bill size, but this does not take into consideration the person whose livelihood depends on earning tips. Respondents indicated that 20% and above was considered a desirable tip amount, and anything below that amount while appreciated was considered undesirable for their efforts. Additionally, despite the numerous drawbacks, of which the respondents were intimately aware, they did not want the tipping system replaced with other forms of compensation as many industry activists and writers are calling for (ROC United, n.d.; Zetlin, 2019).

Conclusion
Theoretical implications
This study was the first since McCarty *et al.* (1990) to truly engage the server's perspective to understand their interactions with customers and how they concentrate their time and effort to earn tips. Involving tipped employees in the study of tipping behaviors presents a more inclusive representation of the service exchange relationship between the server and customer. Furthermore, a relatively unexplored variable, the server's personality, was highlighted throughout as an influence on a tip amount. Future research should consider including this variable when examining the determinants of a tip amount.

By engaging the server's perspective this study also provides a new lens through which the variables in the tipping literature can be analyzed. Specifically, future research on tipping behaviors should utilize the identified values for regular patrons and large parties, which incorporate the server's perspective and accounts for the shift in service that occurs with those customers or groups. Several insights are provided as to why effort is increased when serving large groups and how the interaction/relationship with regulars differs. Together this information fills a gap in the extant literature and provides new knowledge of the mechanisms at play on the server's side of the service exchange relationship.

Practical implications
In the current climate, where tips and the practice of tipping are under scrutiny, it is essential to capture the contemporary voice of the tipped employee. Doing so provides a more well-rounded understanding of the situation and the outcomes for the person affected by the amount of money left as a tip. This study offers immense insight into the efforts put forth by

restaurant servers above and beyond simply taking an order and delivering drinks and food to a table. Servers view their job as more of an art form likened to acting in a performance than a robotic performance of tasks.

The insights garnered here will aid restaurant operators in understanding the nuances of a server's relationship with regular customers. In many cases, restaurants provide a strict script that servers must follow when greeting tables or how/when to check back on the table. Based on the results, restaurant operators should allow servers to craft their approaches and service style to better cater to different guests. Additionally, many restaurants have implemented automatic gratuities for large groups. However, the numbers of guests and the gratuity percentage vary greatly between restaurants. This research supports that automatic gratuity should start at eight customers and should be no less than 20% gratuity. Lastly, a server's job and ability to earn tips include much more than the basic tasks described in job postings. Restaurant operators can use this information to craft more well-rounded job descriptions to identify quality candidates and retain staff.

Limitations and future research

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, a small sample size was selected, and all respondents worked in casual dining restaurants. Future research should seek to validate these results with groups of servers from other restaurant classifications, such as fine and luxury restaurants. Additionally, only servers working in restaurants that use voluntary tipping as a compensation method were explored. Future research should seek to understand the server's perspective on service-inclusive pricing or service charge-based compensation plans. These compensation plans may influence the server's perspective and relationships with customers. A comparison of the perspectives of servers from different compensation systems may provide helpful insight for developing a more inclusive and equitable compensation structure. Although the customer's perspective is well represented in quantitative analyses, a qualitative study with restaurant customers may reveal other insights about their motivations for tipping and determining a tip amount. Even more interesting would be focus groups with those considered regular customers to illustrate further the bond established with a particular server and how this influences behavioral outcomes, specifically spreading positive word of mouth.

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