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Digital Tipping Intimidation at the Counter

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Although tipping for counter service at fast casual restaurants/cafes is not expected etiquette, it seems to be headed in the direction of becoming a social norm as tip jars next to registers are now a common sighting. However, as cash becomes less prevalent of a payment method, businesses are turning to mobile digital point of sale (POS) technologies with preset tipping options for customers. Oftentimes, businesses using digital POS systems will utilize touch-based tablets for sales that the counter staff can swing around for customers to add tips and sign with their fingers. If there are other customers standing behind them, does this influence how much (or whether) they choose to tip? And if it does, how so and what are the motivational factors behind it?

A total of 112 students (66 women, 46 men) were asked to complete a questionnaire about how they felt regarding a specific hypothetical occurrence. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions ($20 paper receipt or $20 screen receipt), and all participants completed the Liebowitz Social Anxiety Scale (Liebowitz, 1987). Hence, a 2(Receipt: paper vs. digital) x 2(Social Anxiety: Present vs. Absent) between-subjects factorial design was used.

Results do not support an argument that digital tipping intimidation at the counter causes consumers to tip more when presented with a digital receipt on a tablet screen where others can witness their tipping behavior. In fact, the opposite occurs! Of the 71.4% of participants who chose to tip at the counter, those who experienced digital tipping intimidation rebelled and tipped less than they would have had they been given a paper receipt. Interestingly, although social anxiety was not a moderator, it did show a main effect: Consumers with social anxiety tipped counter service employees less than those without social anxiety. Age, income, gender, whether or not the participants do work or have worked a job where they receive(d) tips, and those who tipped vs. didn’t tip were factors also investigated; results show no differences.

Fourteen motivational factors for tipping were examined; only two of those factors affected dollar amounts tipped at the counter. Results revealed that when customers are motivated (vs. not motivated) to comply with social norms, the dollar amount they tip for counter service decreases, but when they are motivated (vs. not motivated) to avoid making the server angry or upset, the dollar amount increases.

Analysis of an open-ended question asking whether participants feel there is a difference in their tipping behavior when asked to sign a paper receipt (that nobody can see) vs. a tablet screen receipt (that anyone behind/next to them can see) is presented and offers insight into possible explanations for this tipping behavior.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Dr. Jennifer R. Bechkoff received her PhD in Marketing from the University of Cincinnati. She is currently an associate professor in the Department of Marketing & Business Analytics at the Lucas College and Graduate School of Business at San Jose State University in San Jose, California. Dr. Bechkoff is also certified as a business etiquette consultant from the Etiquette Institute; her current research interests are in the areas of soft skills in marketing pedagogy and dining etiquette in relationship marketing.