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Tipping Practices, Employee Motivation and Service Delivery Performance among 4 and 5-star Hotel Employees in Pulau Pinang

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Abstract: Tipping is a prevalent phenomenon that is best understood as a result of various cultural norms and payment practices. The anticipation of receiving the tips is considered work motivation; it acts as a catalyst for employees to elevate their service delivery. While it may a common for others, tipping is not customary among Malaysians. This paper examined the interconnection between tipping, employee motivation, and service delivery performance within the 4 and 5-star hotels in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia. Using a quantitative research approach, a total of 348 usable responses (collected among F&B employees) were retrieved for analysis. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between all tested variables and employee motivation fully mediates the relationship between tipping practices and service delivery performance. The outcome from this study is hoped to provide valuable insights for academicians into consumer behavior and cultural practices, while offering the hotel industry strategies to improve the service delivery performance.

Keywords: *Tipping, Motivation, Service Delivery Performance, Hotel Employees, Pulau Pinang.*

1. Introduction and Background

Customers frequently provide additional payments to service providers, commonly referred to as tips or gratuities, or similar terms (Lynn, 2021a). A tip is a voluntary payment made by guests or customers to reward service (Pala, 2020) and is defined as a gift given for services rendered. The amount of a tip varies based on the customer and the situation, which distinguishes it from regular transactions (Azar, 2020). Tipping is influenced by cultural norms and payment practices (Kakkar & Li, 2022). Some customers tip out of goodwill to support service workers, especially when they are underpaid, while others do so to display their social status (Lee et al., 2020). As a result, tips are not always given based on a consistent rationale.

In the hotel industry, employees often receive tips directly from customers (Lynn, 2021b). The expectation of receiving tips can act as a motivator for employees. Motivation, as defined by Pinder (1998), is the drive behind work-related actions, and Diefendorff and Seaton (2015) described it as an internal force that influences behavior. Motivation is critical to an organization's success (Mustafa & Domniku, 2018), and in the hotel sector, motivated employees are key to delivering high-quality service (Khoung & Linh, 2020). Research by Olusadum and Anulika (2018) found that without proper motivation, employees may develop negative attitudes toward their work, thus affecting performance.

This research identifies several key issues related to tipping within the hotel industry, particularly in Malaysia. First, there is little known research on how tipping practices affect employee motivation and service delivery in this country, especially from the employees' perspective. Previous studies mainly focused on customer motivations to tip in high-end hotels, creating a gap in understanding how tipping influences hotel employees (Md Rus et al., 2017; Zahari et al., 2011). Second, most tipping research has been conducted in regular restaurants, rather than in luxury hotel settings, where the dynamics of service and tipping may differ (Md Rus et al., 2017; Guéguen & Jacob, 2005). Third, tipping in Malaysia is uncommon, with service charges often automatically included in bills; hence it is imperative to study the effect of voluntary tipping on employee motivation. Therefore, this study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the relationship between tipping, employee motivation, and service delivery performance among Pulau Pinang's 4 and 5-star hotels F&B employees.

2. Literature Review

The Hotel Industry in Malaysia: The tourism industry, which includes hotel operations and tour services, is vital to Malaysia's economy, with the hotel sector making a significant contribution to the country's GDP (Romero & Tejada, 2019; Awan et al., 2020). The expansion of the hotel industry has likewise stimulated the growth of related sectors like food and beverage, entertainment, and retail (Poon & Low, 2005). Beyond its economic impact, the hotel industry is often associated with luxury and comfort, especially in luxury hotels, which are gaining attention in Asia as a growing market (Padma & Ahn, 2020). Guests at luxury hotels prioritize service quality and location over cost (Zhang et al., 2011), with four- and five-star hotels in Malaysia classified as luxurious according to the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture (2023). Pulau Pinang, a well-known tourist destination for its cultural heritage, beaches, and cuisine, is home to 31 such luxury hotels (Sing & Awang, 2022), making it the focus of this study.

Hotel Employees Hierarchy: In a hotel, employees are typically divided into two groups: rank-and-file as well as managerial employees (Bakhtiar et al., 2021; Simpao, 2018). Rank-and-file employees, such as waiters, housekeepers, bellmen, and front desk clerks, perform operational tasks, interact directly with customers, and do not hold leadership positions (Bakhtiar et al., 2021; Fu et al., 2020). These employees, known as Front-of-the-House (FOH) staff, are the most visible to guests and are likely to receive tips for good service. According to Theory M by Weaver (1988), employees are motivated when they feel they are compensated fairly, often through tips, which are typically given when guests are satisfied with their service. As such, rank-and-file employees are more likely to receive tips, as they directly serve the guests (Dyussembayeva et al., 2022).

Tipping Culture: Tipping, a practice that originated in England as a way for guests to reward exceptional service, is now widespread globally (Chandar et al., 2019). It is defined as a voluntary payment made by customers for services rendered (Karabas et al., 2020). Historically, tips were given in advance to ensure greater service delivery, while today, tips are typically given at the end of service performance, with the amount depending on service quality (Dyussembayeva et al., 2022). Tipping is particularly relevant in the hospitality industry, where employees' service quality directly influences the tips they receive (Lynn, 1997). Most existing studies have concentrated on customers' tipping behaviors (Azar, 2020; Lynn, 2015), with studies exploring factors such as employee-guest interaction (Guéguen & Jacob, 2012; Shih et al., 2016), tipping norms (Zahari et al., 2011; Gössling et al., 2020), and payment methods (Kakkar & Li, 2022). However, studies on employee perspectives, particularly motivation related to tipping, are limited (Whaley, 2019).

In Malaysia, tipping is relatively uncommon, as a 10 percent service charge is already being included in the total bill. Research on tipping is limited, focusing mainly on customer practices and norms (Zahari et al., 2011; Md Rus et al., 2017). Tipping decisions are influenced by the quality of service, with higher tips given for better service (Ford et al., 2012). For employees to receive higher tips, they must provide excellent service, which requires motivation (Whaley et al., 2019). Motivation, as a driver of performance, encourages employees to align their personal goals with organizational objectives (Jamal Ali & Anwar, 2021). However, cultural differences in tipping norms may affect employee motivation (Shkoler & Kimura, 2020), and in Malaysia, where tipping was not traditionally expected, this has implications for employee motivation (Zahari et al., 2011). This study will explore how receiving tips affects employee motivation in Malaysia's hospitality industry.

Motivation and Service Delivery: Motivation is a critical determinant of employee performance and service delivery, as it aligns with the fundamental aspects of human behaviour (Olusadum & Anulika, 2018). It is regarded as the desire to act or the underlying reason for expressing behaviour in certain ways. In organizational contexts, motivation is seen as the force that influences individuals to act in certain ways (Onah, 2008). Although research linking tipping practices to motivation is limited, Curtis et al. (2009) found that tipped employees often exhibit different motivational factors compared to non-tipped employees. Tips, as a form of recognition, can counterbalance the stress of low pay (Stamper, 2003). However, many scholars agree that motivation primarily stems from the individual employee's internal drive (Nicholson, 2003).

In the hotel industry, service delivery is crucial for customer satisfaction and, ultimately, financial success (Kim et al., 2013). High-quality service not only strengthens customer interactions but also fosters employee job satisfaction and supports the overall success of the organization. Employees are instrumental in shaping guests'

experiences, and enhancing their service delivery is crucial to the success of a hotel (Dorta-Afonso et al., 2021). Research by Kusluvan et al. (2010) suggests that improved employee–customer interactions lead to higher customer satisfaction, which subsequently enhances the organization's financial performance. To improve service delivery, employees must feel motivated, and this study aims to explore how tipping influences employee motivation. As such, when a waiter receives tips, it can boost their morale and motivate them to continue delivering excellent service to earn more tips.

3. Research Methodology

To assess respondents' perceptions of tipping practices, motivation, and service delivery performance among employees of four and five-star hotels in Pulau Pinang, a quantitative research design utilizing a self-administered survey was employed. A total of 348 valid responses were collected after excluding 16 cases identified as straight-lining or patterned responses.

A five-point Likert scale was used to measure respondents' level of agreement with statements representing the study's main variables—tipping practices, motivation, and service delivery performance. Data were gathered through an online survey distributed via Google Forms. To facilitate comprehension, the questionnaire was provided in dual languages, English and Bahasa Melayu.

Screening questions were included to ensure participation from qualified respondents. Descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, mean scores, correlation tests, and mediation analysis were subsequently conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 28.

4. Results

Profile of Respondents: Table 1 shows a summary of respondents' demographics in the study. Of 348 respondents, the majority are female (62.9%) compared to males (37.1%). Nearly half of them (48.3%) were between 18 and 29 years old, followed by 44.8% in the 30 to 39 age range, and a smaller group of 6.9% aged 40 to 49. Educationally, respondents were evenly split between those with a high school education and those holding a certificate, diploma, or degree, each comprising 49.1% of the sample. Only a small portion (1.7%) had a postgraduate qualification. Regarding work experience, most respondents had either 6 to 9 years of experience (45.7%) or less than 5 years (31.9%), with the remaining 22.4% having over 10 years of experience in their field.

Table 1: Demographic info of respondents

VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
GENDER		
Males	129	37.1%
Females	219	62.9%
Total	**348**	**100%**
Age		
18-29	168	48.3%
30-39	156	44.8%
40-49	24	6.9%
Total	**348**	**100%**
Education		
High School (SPM)	171	49.1%
Certificate/Diploma/Degree	171	49.1%
Post-Graduate Qualification	6	1.7%
Total	**348**	**100**
Years of Experience		
Less Than 5 Years	111	31.9%
Between 6 To 9 Years	159	45.7%
More Than 10 Years	78	22.4%
Total	**348**	**100%**

Descriptive Statistics: Table 2 displays the mean scores and standard deviations for the statements pertaining to tipping practices, motivation, and service delivery among the respondents. In the "Tipping Perception" category, mean scores reveal that respondents moderately agreed with statements about receiving tips (TP1, mean = 2.87) and the infrequent nature of tipping (TP4, mean = 3.44). However, they rated the statement regarding receiving large tips (TP2, mean = 2.43) and organizational practices of equal tip distribution (TP3, mean = 2.81) lower.

Regarding "Motivation," respondents expressed strong agreement that tips motivated them in several ways. High mean scores were observed for statements indicating that tips motivated them to do their work (MO5, mean = 4.32), be courteous (MO2, mean = 4.06), and work harder (MO1, mean = 3.83). The lowest mean score in this category was for "I'm motivated to earn tips" (MO3, mean = 2.41), suggesting variability in respondents' intrinsic motivation toward earning tips.

In the "Service Delivery" category, respondents generally agreed that tipping positively influenced their job satisfaction (SD1, mean = 3.98) and encouraged them to be kinder to tipping guests (SD2, mean = 4.39). The highest mean score was observed for the statement that they are kinder to guests who issue tips (SD2, mean = 4.39), and there was also strong agreement with delivering better quality service when receiving tips (SD3, mean = 4.23). Willingness to do extra work when given tips (SD4, mean = 3.29) received a more moderate level of agreement. These results indicate that tipping is perceived as a significant motivator and enhancer of service quality, although the extent to which it is expected or equally distributed may vary among respondents.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Description	Mean	Std. Dev.
TP1	I often received tips	2.87	1.043
TP2	I received a huge amount of tips	2.43	1.006
TP3	The organization divided the tips equally	2.81	0.790
TP4	Tipping is rare and not expected to be received	3.44	1.260
MO1	Tips motivate me to work harder	3.83	0.963
MO2	Tips motivate me to be courteous	4.06	1.066
MO3	I'm motivated to earn tips	2.41	1.047
MO4	Tips are financial stimulators at work	3.68	1.001
MO5	Tips motivate me to do my work	4.32	1.092
SD1	I am satisfied with my job when I receive a tip	3.98	0.978
SD2	I'm always kinder to guests who issue tips	4.39	1.106
SD3	I deliver better quality service when I receive tips	4.23	1.130
SD4	I'm willing to do extra work when given tips	3.29	0.969

Correlation Analysis: Correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationships among the study variables, and the results are presented in Table 3.

The correlation analysis indicated a significant positive relationship among all the examined variables. Tipping practices positively influenced both employee motivation and service delivery, and higher motivation levels in employees were linked to improved service quality. These findings highlight the interconnected and mutually reinforcing roles of tipping, employee motivation, and service delivery.

Table 3: Correlation Analysis

Correlations				
		Tipping Practices	Employee's Motivation	Employee's Service Delivery
Tipping Practices	Pearson Correlation	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)			
	N	348		
Employee's Motivation	Pearson Correlation	.649**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		
	N	348	348	
Employee's Service Delivery	Pearson Correlation	.597**	.872**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	348	348	348

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Mediation Analysis: According to Baron and Kenny (1986), a variable can be considered a mediator in a causal sequence when regression analyses demonstrate statistically significant relationships across three primary conditions. First, the independent variable must significantly predict the dependent variable (X → Y). Second, the independent variable must significantly predict the mediator (X → M), where the mediator functions as a dependent variable relative to the independent variable. Third, the mediator must significantly predict the dependent variable while controlling for the influence of the independent variable (M → Y). These three conditions collectively establish the presence of a direct effect. If any of these relationships are not statistically significant, mediation cannot be inferred and is considered improbable. Once statistical significance is confirmed, a fourth step is undertaken to determine the nature of the mediation—whether it is full or partial. Full mediation is indicated when the independent variable no longer exerts a significant effect on the dependent variable after accounting for the mediator, implying that the relationship between X and Y becomes insignificant. Conversely, partial mediation occurs when the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable remains significant but is attenuated. Generally, a smaller coefficient "c" reflects a stronger mediating effect.

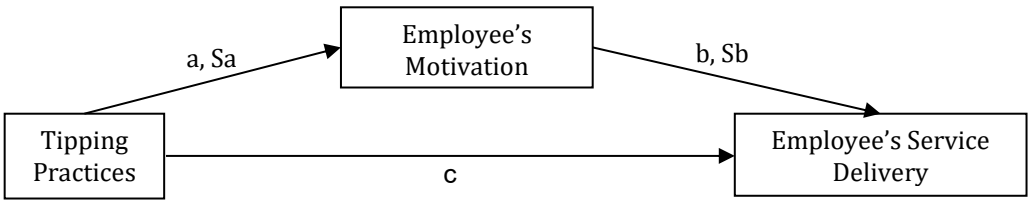

Table 4: Tipping Practices (X) → Service Delivery (Y)

Coefficients[a]						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.866	.212		-4.077	.000
	Tipping Practices	.903	.065	.597	13.852	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Service Delivery

Table 4 indicates that the independent variable, Tipping Practices, significantly predicts the dependent variable, Employee Service Delivery ($t = 13.852$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the unstandardized coefficient "c" ($\beta = 0.903$) is statistically significant.

Table 5: Tipping Practices (X) → Employee's Motivation (M)

Coefficients[a]						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.521	.184		-2.839	.005
	Tipping Practices	.893	.056	.649	15.851	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Motivation

Table 5 demonstrates that the independent variable, Tipping Practices, is also a significant predictor of the mediating variable, Employee Motivation ($t = 15.851$, $p < 0.05$). In other words, the unstandardized coefficient "a" ($\beta = 0.893$) is statistically significant.

Table 6: Tipping Practices (X) → Employee's Service Delivery (Y), Employee's Motivation (M) → Service Delivery (Y)

Coefficients[a]						
		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	-.388	.131		-2.958	.003
	Tipping Practices	.083	.052	.055	1.598	.111
	Employee Motivation	.918	.038	.836	24.185	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Employee Service Delivery

Table 6 indicates that, after controlling for the independent variable (Tipping Practices), the mediating variable (Employee Motivation) remains a significant predictor of the dependent variable (Employee Service Delivery) ($t = 24.185$, $p < 0.05$). Specifically, the unstandardized coefficient "b" ($\beta = 0.918$) is statistically significant. However, when Employee Motivation was included in the regression analysis, Tipping Practices no longer significantly predicted Employee Service Delivery ($b = 0.083$, $\beta = 0.052$, $t = -1.598$, $p > 0.05$). This finding suggests that employee motivation fully mediates the relationship between tipping practices and employee service delivery.

5. Discussion, Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

The study findings provide policymakers and hotel managers with insightful information and feasible solutions to improve staff motivation and service quality. Managers can adjust their strategies to maximize customer happiness and service delivery by knowing how tipping practices affect employee behavior. Fostering a positive work environment and promoting exceptional service experiences can be achieved through the implementation of incentive programs, training initiatives, and performance management systems that are in line with the motivational effects of tipping.

It is important to recognize the limitations of this study, despite its valuable insights into the relationships among employee motivation, tipping practices, and service delivery within the hospitality sector. First, the study was confined to a single geographic location, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of hospitality employees. Additionally, the cross-sectional research design provides only a snapshot of data at a specific point in time, thereby restricting the ability to infer causal relationships between the examined variables. Furthermore, the utilization of self-report measures allows for the possibility of response bias and social desirability effects, which could potentially impact the precision and dependability of the gathered data. Moreover, the validity of the study's conclusions may be influenced by the underlying assumptions of the mediation analysis, such as the absence of unmeasured confounding variables and the assumption of linear relationships, which may not consistently hold true in real-world contexts. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the work establishes the foundation for further investigations that seek to overcome these limitations and deepen our knowledge of tipping practices, employees' motivation, and service delivery in the spectrum of the hospitality sector.

Extensive studies could potentially explore the moderating factors that impact the relationship among tipping

practices, employee motivation, and service delivery. Examining contextual elements such as dynamics distinct to the industry, organizational rules, and cultural norms may aid in our understanding of the complexities underlying these relationships and offer direction for targeted interventions and management strategies. Comparative studies carried out in diverse hospitality environments and areas may also highlight cultural variations in tipping practices and how they impact employee behavior and customer service.

Conclusion

This study investigates the relationship between tipping, employee motivation, and service excellence in four- and five-star hotels in Pulau Pinang, Malaysia, where tipping is not a customary practice. Using a quantitative approach and data from 348 food and beverage employees, the findings reveal a strong positive correlation among tipping practices, employee motivation, and service performance. Notably, employee motivation was found to fully mediate the relationship between tipping practices and service delivery, highlighting its pivotal role in enhancing service quality within the hospitality sector.

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