Exploring the Culinary Landscape: A Study of Restaurants and Tipping Culture

By Madeline Tudor

When going out to eat at a sit-down restaurant, the expectations are quite high. People pay top dollar for professional service, a delicious meal brought to them in a timely manner that they did not have to prepare themselves, and overall, quite an enjoyable and memorable experience. After all the pleasantries have ended, you could say that the guests think very little of what's going on backstage. After the check has been returned to them, and they decide how much to tip their server who's making a measly $2.13/hour (if they choose to at all), they leave and their night is over. However, a lot of people do not realize that the front of house restaurant workers and the back of house cooks all make up a specific activity system that *must* run smoothly every night to ensure quality experiences every time. This activity system is referred to as a discourse community, which are groups that have goals and purposes, and use communication to achieve their goals (Swales).

I believe that the common public goals among restaurant workers in this discourse community include ensuring a positive experience for guests and having the most profitable shift possible. These two things go hand in hand, as people who have a poor dining experience are not likely to be generous tippers when the bill comes to the table. In this discourse community *especially*, communication is of the essence. There are so many moving parts and pieces when working a shift at any restaurant. Just to provide a few examples from my time as a host (the first human being you speak to after entering the restaurant), you must communicate with the kitchen when a rush of people begin to enter, you must communicate with a specific server if you seat them a large party, a party in need of special accommodations, or a party with guests showing up

later (so many instances!), and you must communicate with the guests about wait times. These restaurant workers are able to work together smoothly because they make up this discourse community.

This also means that there is a system of hierarchy here as well. In my conversations with and through observation of a server at my local restaurant, I could clearly see how much power the general manager/owner of the restaurant had over the atmosphere. They were the one who got to call the shots (at least from what I saw), make the executive decisions when issues arose, and at the end of the day, fire people if they decide it is needed. Their authority is not only shown on display through their physical actions, but through the subtle tension and shift that is felt in the atmosphere. At smaller, local restaurants, the manager(s) are also usually the owners, really making it known that they're the ones with authority in this discourse community. All the centralized and essential information that one must know during their time working there will come directly from the manager/team of higher-ups. The most common forms of communication in this discourse community include simply verbal, face-to-face communication and written communication. I brought up early how essential communication with all members of the staff and guests was in order for a restaurant to properly function on any given day, but written communication plays a large role as well. I've noticed this in various restaurants, not just the one my friend works at, but *signage* displayed around the back is extremely common. Updates from management about new rules, reminders of rules, a large visible sign of worker's rights, etc. I used to wonder why my old restaurant where I worked as a host used to keep so many up, but I realized it's much easier to keep rules or new changes fresh in people's minds when they're forced to see it every shift. Without consistent, effective, and accurate communication, this

discourse community would not function, and much, much more people would be ordering takeout. One of the most notable things about this discourse community is their special language practices, their "lingo," or specific terms and phrases unique to workers at restaurants with a waitstaff. A big one that is prevalent in restaurants is "86-ed." When a dish or drink has run out at a restaurant, it has been 86-ed. This term is only used amongst restaurant staff, and not to guests. The origins of the term are still debated, but nevertheless, it is a widely used phrase. Another common phrase is "top." When guests are walking into the restaurant, party sizes are referred to by the number of guests plus the word "top." For example, a 2-top, 4-top, 6-top, etc. If a 10-top walks into the restaurant during lunch peak, the host might have trouble seating them promptly. During the interview with my friend, she talked about how neither she, nor her co-workers wanted to take any 1-tops (single guests) who would walk in, due to their bill being small, meaning the tip would be small as well. Tips are how servers make their money, with a few exceptions at certain restaurants. While the U.S. minimum wage is $7.25, servers make just $2.13 an hour. Through secondary source research of this discourse community, I came to find that while tipping is nearly ubiquitous throughout U.S. restaurants, it has come under attack by many journalists, social commenters, and restaurateurs in recent years. Among other things, they argue that tipping results in unreliable and low incomes for tipped workers and creates income inequality between waiters and kitchen staff, as kitchen staff is paid a standard hourly wage (Field). Throughout our interview, I realized that money seemed to be the big priority. I mean, this isn't a revelation, as this *is* a job, but I became more and more curious about how tip culture truly affected this discourse community, and if conflicts arose due to it. As I said earlier, members of this group all have very similar goals, and not everyone can be successful in them

every single day, which is where the conflict could arise. I began to wonder how guests feel about having to tip every time and how the standard tip percentage has changed in recent times. However, I just mostly began to ponder how this tipping culture plays a role in this particular discourse community and how it affects communication between members, relationships with other co-workers and guests being served, and if money made is truly the number #1 common goal among members of the discourse community.

To truly be able to answer the question of if tipping culture affects communication and relationships negatively, there are many elements I must look at and compare. I will use my interview with my friend who is a server at a local restaurant, my 1-hour time spent observing her work and interacting with guests and co-workers, and studies on tipping culture and its potential various negative effects to deduce if tipping culture actually does create a tense atmosphere in the workplace. While interviewing my friend, I asked her the basics of how long she has been a server and what her typical responsibilities include, but I also asked her for her most exciting and most frustrating stories with customers while at work, things I wasn't necessarily able to see in person when I went to observe. The day I *did* go to observe, I took notes on her behavior and superficial (this isn't a bad thing!) attitude with guests, and hers and others' demeanor towards guests.

To start off, I want to take a look at how tipping culture affects communication amongst workers and to guests in the restaurant. As I brought up earlier, typical restaurant communication includes discussion between all roles of workers (the kitchen, host, servers, bartenders, etc.), and written communication through signage around the restaurant. From my observations during my time spent inside the restaurant, I actually noticed interactions to be

quite negative and irritated. What I mean by this, is complaining. The servers all seemed to have a bonding moment that day about how slow it was on this particular Tuesday evening, ranting to one another about how they'll have to pick up another shift, how they actually wished they worked Saturday night in hopes of making more money, and how irritating it was to have to do so much side work while making their $2.13/hr. My interview with my friend gave me more information, though. When I asked, "What different ways do you communicate at work?," she gave me a detailed list showing how essential communication with team members was. She replied with:

> The restaurant would not run without constant communication! We don't have a host at Shenanigan's, so me and my co-workers have to talk to each other about who wants the table when they walk in. To the customers, it is usually constant communication (taking their order, promoting specials, making them laugh to provide a good experience, you know). Also, alcohol is frequently ordered, so I have to communicate with the bartender when I go to pick up my drinks.

What really stood out to me about her answer was how she hinted that communication with guests was simply always positive. Always a great attitude with the goal of getting a good tip. I struggled myself deciding if fake positivity or attitudes for the goal of a better tip equated to an overall negative effect on communication in this discourse community. However, I eventually determined that it was wise to keep interactions with guests versus interactions with team members (which is more on the topic of affecting work relationships) somewhat separate, at least for now in my investigative process. Through studying secondary sources, I discovered that studies examining server-diner interactions have found that increased tipping can result

from servers briefly touching their customers, personalizing their interaction by giving customers their first name during the initial contact, displaying a maximal smile upon the initial interaction with customers, and writing "thank you" on the backs of checks before delivering them to customers at the end of their interaction (Rind et al.). Seeing this common trend from the studies done, it is no surprise that servers will act and communicate a certain way in order to maximize their profits. A lot of the behavior I observed and read about in these sources reminded me of John Swales' description of "local discourse communities." He talks about how members of these local discourse communities specifically have acquired expectations and conventions of behavior that orchestrate their working days, and further, members of these discourse communities may get together socially outside of work, which reinforces the community (Swales). Overall, I have personally concluded that tipping culture plays an indifferent role in communication when it comes to interacting with guests, because while these interactions are superficially positive, the guest gets a positive experience, typically leading to a large tip for the server. I would consider this a win-win situation in this discourse community, and I would not say that tipping culture negatively affects communication in this discourse community.

The last aspect of this discourse community I really want to take a look at is how tipping culture affects relationships amongst servers at work. I mentioned previously that this local discourse community may get together socially outside of work according to Swales' listed criteria, but it is also worth asking if attitudes towards one another are different while *at* work versus outside of work. During my interview with my friend, I asked her if she had ever spent time with her co-workers outside of work hours. While she said she had not, she said that their

typical discourse at work was pretty laid back, and that the work group chat communication was always silly and fun, full of memes and jokes when not texting and asking people to pick up their shift at the last minute. This very much surprised me. Based on my personal last job in a restaurant and my own assumptions, I had thought it was kind of a cutthroat environment, as servers typically wanted bigger or more tables to make the most amount of money possible (or so I thought). A secondary source study involving the role of team member exchange and how it coincided with tip size also disproved my previous beliefs. This study examined how team member exchange mediated the relationship between positive emotional intelligence and job performance. And as we now know, good job performance correlates with tip size (Oh et al.). Rather than thinking about it as tipping affects behavior which (negatively) affects relationships among co-workers, it is actually team member exchange affecting behavior which decides the tip. This brings me to another large conclusion, that relationships are not negatively impacted by tipping culture in this discourse community, but rather benefitted.

To really bring things to a close, I genuinely believed that the impact and stress that came along with tipping culture, for both the guests and servers, would bring negativity to the discourse community itself. However, the various studies I found, supported by my friend's first-hand account, all went to prove that tipping culture does not cause as much harm as I once thought.

Works Cited

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Appendix A: Transcribed Interview with a Server

Madeline Tudor: How long have you worked as a server?

Server: I've worked at my current job, "Shenanigans", since around the start of the school year, so early September? My last job back in Lexington, at "Ramsey's", I had been at since May 2021, so a little over 2 years.

MT: What do you consider to be your main responsibilities at work?

Server: My main responsibilities include taking orders at the table, getting drinks, running my table's food and others as well, cashing people out, cleaning out/bussing tables, and then side work. Side work are things we HAVE to do, that we don't get paid for (besides the $2.13 an hour). These include rolling silverware, restocking ice, pumping sauces, and more.

MT: What kinds of writing do you have to do at work?

Server: The only actual writing I have to do whilst at work is taking orders on a notepad so I can put it in the system to send to the kitchen.

MT: What different ways do you communicate with your co-workers?

Server: The restaurant would not RUN without constant communication! We don't have a host at Shenanigan's, so me and my co-workers have to talk to each other about who wants the table when they walk in. To the customers, it is usually constant communication (taking their order, promoting specials, making them laugh to provide a good experience, you know). Also, alcohol is frequently ordered, so I have to communicate with the bartender when I go to pick up my drinks.

MT: What are your key terms specific to your community that you use throughout your shift?

Server: There's a lot of server specific lingo I use, like referring to table-size. "2-top,

6-top, 8-top, etc. all refer to the amount of people in a party. Also, when something is "86-ed" by the kitchen, it means we are out of it.

MT: Are there specific things (body languages/facial expressions) that you look for to see if a customer is upset? Or is it more through intuition?

Server: I look at body language AND facial expressions a lot to see if a customer is upset. Typically, when a customer wants a refill for example, they'll put their drink at the edge of the table. It's quite easy for me to read faces and see when a customer is upset or displeased with a dish. However, it's server basics to frequently check on your table every 10-15 minutes to see if they need anything.

MT: What are specific tactics you use to have the most profitable and successful shift possible?

Server: Some of the tactics I use are quite embarrassing, actually. I've noticed my tips, especially from all men's tables, are higher when my hair is in braids or a ponytail, so I usually wear that hairstyle to work. As always though, I am polite and attentive to every table. There really isn't any competition for certain tables or anything between me and my co-workers, so there is no tension there.

MT: Do you have a story about a really unhappy table/group?

Server: There was one time I forgot to put in a table's order, so they sat for an extra 30 minutes once I realized. My manager had to go over to speak to them, and she comped their entire meal. Not only were they upset with me (and stiffed me!), my manager was disappointed as well.

MT: What are your main priorities at work in relation to guests, relationships with your team, and money made?

Server: These are all intertwined. Treating guests well and providing a great experience will

lead to higher tips. Relationships with my team are important as well, cause when I help them out, they help me as well.

MT: How does your digital intercommunication with your team (group chat, messages from management) compare to face-to-face interactions?

Server: We are much more laid back and relaxed in our interactions in the chat, as it's online. Still, its primary purpose is shift coverage and discussing important updates at work, like new specials to promote.