

Analysis of American Restaurant Interior Design with Respect to Tipping Propensity

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ABSTRACT

Waitstaff incomes in the United States depend on tipping due to lower minimum and starting wages. Although tipping is a valuable component of service because it acts as a positive reinforcement mechanism, consumers evaluate their dining experience holistically based on the service and non-service elements of their experience. It is important to understand the details of consumer valuation of dining experiences because waitstaff rely on them for their economic livelihoods. Existing research on the role of visual and sensory input in determining tipping propensity shows meaningful relationships between tipping and the design of a restaurant, offering a possible method to improve waitstaff incomes. However, there are limited studies about the effects of specific and atmospheric interior design elements on tipping behavior. This study examines the effects of emotional and visual determinants of tipping on 20 young adults in Houston and seeks to determine how these sensations affect perceived value. Participants were presented with a survey asking how much they would tip in various restaurants with distinct interior designs. Then, participants were interviewed and asked how they chose how much to tip and whether design played a role in that decision. Design coherence and tableware showed the strongest correlations with tipping, while interviews frequently mentioned feelings of luxury as proponents of tipping. The findings have relevant implications for promoting the economic success of waitstaff and of restaurant owners by helping them identify restaurant design elements that can be altered to benefit waitstaff by encouraging greater tipping.

INTRODUCTION

Tipping culture in the United States has received heavy criticism from both domestic and international audiences, being seen as a corporate strategy to intentionally underpay service workers. However, many proponents argue that tipping serves to promote greater customer experiences in service industries. Nevertheless, because waitstaff rely on tipping to make up for a lower minimum wage, the role of tipping in cushioning the wages of waitstaff has prompted extensive research into the non-service determinants of tipping. Restaurant owners, or restaurateurs, are also interested in using sensory cues to create greater perceived value among customers to increase satisfaction and tipping. Not only would this improve customer retention, but the higher resulting incomes would also reduce waitstaff turnover rates and the

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 5.

associated training costs. Existing research shows that variations in sensory inputs like color and music can affect customers' willingness, or propensity, to tip, but little literature exists comparing the quantitative and qualitative aspects of visual tipping.

The possible applications of examining visual influences on tipping extend beyond the service industry; perceived value and willingness-to-pay are important considerations for any entrepreneur. Given the important role of design on customer satisfaction, it is especially valuable to understand the specific elements of restaurant design that create value. Additionally, evidence exists that consumers also use emotions to judge satisfaction and value (Mehraliyev et al., 2020). Initially, it is hypothesized that dark lighting, design coherence, and distanced seating arrangements will have the strongest positive effect on tipping because they create feelings of luxury, and these assumptions will be verified or contradicted with data gathered from restaurant customers and waitstaff.

Existing literature fails to consider emotional evaluations of design due to the use of solely quantitative methods. This research focuses on how various measurable design elements and general design patterns influence the sentiment of customers and affect tipping propensity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review seeks to examine the current determinants and causes of tipping behavior, the significance of sensory cues and design in value creation, the role of consumer preference in determining experience satisfaction, and current debates surrounding tipping in relation to waitstaff compensation. By examining these various fields, this review identifies how existing literature fails to account for the effects of interior design on individuals' propensity to tip.

Current research suggests that "employees [who] understand that superior customer service is expected, desired, and rewarded ... are more likely to provide good service" (Liao & Chuang, 2004, p. 45). Thus, tipping has emerged as a monitoring mechanism that empowers consumers to positively reinforce exceptional service while increasing the baseline service experience for all diners (Azar & Tobol, 2008). However, it is entirely possible that extrinsic factors such as food and pricing "are not less important than service quality for many people" (Azar, 2007, p. 525) in their valuation of a dining experience. Kwun and Oh (2004) corroborate that "consumers tend to judge quality based on extrinsic cues" (p. 33), such as brand name and marketing design, suggesting that tipping may be affected by factors beyond waitstaff performance. Thus, it becomes essential to evaluate the extent to which tipping arises from features that are outside of waitstaffs' control, particularly the physical and sensory elements of a restaurant.

When choosing how much to tip, consumers retroactively determine the pleasure they derived from their dining experience. Although there is limited research connecting specific visual stimuli to tipping, customers also engage in reflective valuation when writing reviews. Mehraliyev et al. (2020) find that "the explanatory power of sensory experiences on rating behavior [is] 24.6%" (p. 3), a clear indication

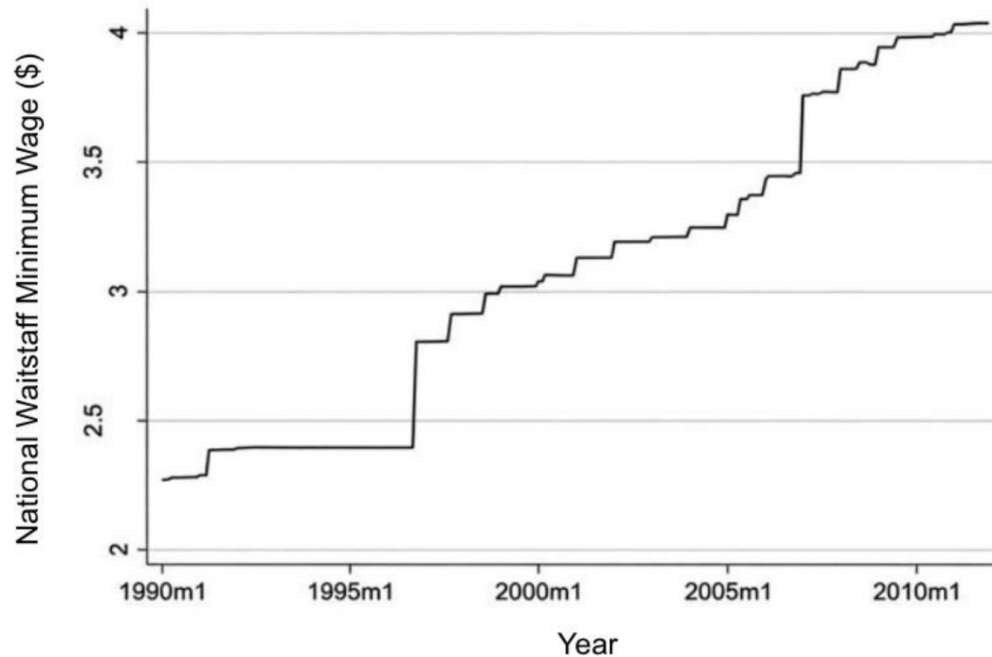
that sensory cues have the ability to influence consumer behavior. In support of this finding, Anandtajaya et al. (2017) find that restaurant design positively influences consumers' perceived value by 84%, with physical design having a high explanatory power of 96% (p. 335). Considering the influence of design on customer satisfaction, "analyzing sensory experiences [with respect to] sentiment analysis becomes crucial" (Mehraliyev et al., 2020, p. 3), as sentiment can be derived from both visual sensory cues and nominal service quality. However, these studies only prove that design has an effect on perceived value rather than identifying which specific elements of design affect tipping the most.

The role of consumer preference in restaurant design can be attributed to consumers' expectation that the value of a dining experience reflects their own social or economic merit (Barrigan, 1956), suggesting that consumers place value in a product when they feel that ideals of luxury and respect are being reciprocated. A study conducted by Lee et al. (2016) revealed that changing the tablecloth color from white to gold increased tipping among patrons by 2.1 percentage points, emphasizing the value of a luxurious sentiment. Alonso and O'Neill (2010) concur that "consumers relate to ... design in terms of [emotional] benefits," (p. 257) which can be achieved through positive feelings like cleanliness and fun. Consumers also value privacy when dining, as found by their preference for booth tables which offer a sense of separation from other patrons (Samsudin, 2022). Barrigan (1956) explains that this preference for booths can be attributed to the desire for privacy among customers. Therefore, consumers' willingness to tip may be shaped by the emotions evoked by restaurant design, which has the power to create feelings of respect, value, and comfort.

The subjectiveness of tipping has fostered arguments against the practice, as it encourages inconsistent wages among waitstaff. In a study conducted on 15,601 McDonald's restaurants, Ashenfelter and Jurajda (2021) found that most restaurants only increase worker wages to comply with the law, suggesting that restaurant owners are not concerned about maintaining employees as much as they are about compliance. Evaluating employment stability among these waitstaff is also important. "On a realistic level, restaurant jobs suffer from a bad reputation of long hours, low pay, lack of benefits and hard work" (Wildes, 2005, p. 214), explaining the high employee turnover in the restaurant industry.

Figure 1

Average Tipped Minimum Wage Between 1991 and 2011



Note. From “The effect of the tipped minimum wage on employees in the U.S. restaurant industry” by Even, E., & Macpherson, A., 2014, *Southern Economic Journal*, 80(3), 633–655.

Waitstaff are typically paid 42% below the average minimum wage (Even & Macpherson, 2014). Additionally, the inelastic nature of minimum wages means that total compensation varies with tipping, not income regulations; “a 10% increase in the tipped minimum wage would increase average weekly wages by less than 1% in the full-service restaurant industry” (Even & Macpherson, 2014, p. 648). However, somewhat counterintuitively, the argument against tipping exists in the restaurant industry, with few restaurateurs saying that they are pro-tipping (Azar, 2020), indicative of a clear dissatisfaction with the current price floor established by minimum wage laws that forces consumers to shoulder the cost of service.

In an analysis of the literature surrounding the determinants and arguments surrounding tipping, it becomes clear that not only does tipping rely on factors external to the normative service level of waitstaff, but also that inflating consumer experience with interior design can reduce anti-tipping pressures as consumers are willing to pay more for the same service. However, scholars typically prioritize solely quantitative methodologies in their research, rather than taking a holistic approach to a singular-exchange consumer phenomenon like tipping. Additionally, previous research has only established that there is a relationship between design, emotions, and tipping rather than identifying which interior design elements affect tipping to the greatest extent. By focusing on how a variety of sensory variables affect tipping transactions, this paper will aim to close an existing gap in the current literature surrounding consumer behavior in the face of sensory interference. Although conclusions have already been drawn regarding the personal influences of tipping, it is also important to examine a sensory-focused

perspective on why consumers tip the way they do. Therefore, the following research question should be addressed: Which elements of restaurant interior design have the greatest effect on patrons' propensity to tip?

METHODS

The main purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of which restaurant interior design elements (lighting, seating arrangements, and color) affect tipping propensity the greatest among young diners in Houston. Through quantitative and qualitative research designs, the association between visual input and consumers' tipping behavior is explored to better equip restaurateurs with a framework to build value into their restaurants.

In order to address limited existing qualitative research surrounding tipping, this study employs a mixed-methods approach composed of both quantitative surveys with young American restaurant diners followed by qualitative post-survey interviews with diners and waitstaff. The mixed-methods approach will allow the research to not only identify which elements of design affect tipping the most, but also the emotions that consumers feel in each visual setting. In the surveys, information was collected about the elements of restaurant design that most greatly influence tipping. Similarly, in the interviews, respondents were asked about how they assigned value to each presented restaurant design and how that value affected their willingness to tip. This data was analyzed from an economic and aesthetic perspective to gain an understanding of the extent to which tipping is informed by external conditions.

Subjects

The research primarily studied 20 young adults in Houston, Texas, who regularly dine out at sit-down restaurants and five waitstaff who work in customer-facing positions. The Texan context of the research is important because dining trends vary by region, and examining a population that was local to the researcher would ensure that these trends could be defined within a specific geographical and cultural context. Customers must be between the ages of 18 and 20, dine out at least three times a week, and live in or near Houston, Texas. This specific population was chosen because it is most important to understand the consumption behavior of young adults to help restaurateurs and entrepreneurs prepare to cater to this group; according to the National Restaurant Association, younger consumers play a major role in restaurant demand, with 67% of Gen Z adults and 64% of millennials reporting that ordering takeout from restaurants is an essential part of their lifestyle (National Restaurant Association, 2025). Additionally, those who dine out regularly are better able to judge a restaurant's value relative to their past dining experiences. The waitstaff group was included to provide insight into observed trends in consumer tipping. Waitstaff must be above the age of 18 and have worked in a restaurant setting for more than three months in order to ensure that they had significant experience in interacting with a diverse variety of customers.

Data Collection

The first part of the data collection procedure involves recruiting participants to participate in my survey and interview. This was done by randomly selecting students 18 years old or older in a high school

Aug 2026

Vol 10, No 5.

cafeteria and reaching out to them to fill out the survey and participate in the interview. Upon obtaining consent to use their survey and interview responses, participants were sent the survey form through email and asked to answer 10 questions about the percentage of the bill they would tip upon being presented with 15 different images of restaurant interiors (see images at Appendix B). The images were selected from a public domain site, with a panel of three high school students reviewing the photos to ensure that no design style was overrepresented or underrepresented in the image collection. The students in the panel did not partake in the survey or interview. After the survey was completed, an interview was conducted (see question samples at Appendix C), where students were presented with five additional questions about how they determined how much to tip in each restaurant condition. The interview questions were designed to address the gaps in existing literature, specifically how different elements of design affected feelings of value and how those feelings affected tipping. After the survey and interview were completed, participants were told that their data would be used in an investigative study of the effects of interior design on tipping. The procedure was largely the same for the waitstaff group, but instead of being presented with a survey and an interview, they were only asked to complete a modified version of the same interview presented to customers.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure that ethical considerations were observed, each participant in the survey and the following interview completed a consent form (see sample at Appendix A). Participants were informed of their choice to opt out of the research at any time. The research has also received approval from the campus Institutional Review Board (IRB). Because the questions focused on topics of personal finance and spending habits, the survey and interview questions were worded in an impersonal manner to avoid causing feelings of discomfort or stress. At the end of the data collection, participants were debriefed about the purpose of my research and the use of their data. Following ethical research guidelines, the identities of all participants will remain confidential throughout the paper.

Data Analysis

Upon obtaining all data, an Excel Spreadsheet was used to organize and graph the responses to the survey. Each graph was created with the interior design element rating on the x-axis and the deviation from average tip on the y-axis, with each data point representing the average effect of one restaurant on all participants. The same Excel Spreadsheet software was then used to determine the slope of each graph and identify the coefficient of determination (R^2). The interviews were thematically analyzed, with responses being categorized into different interior design themes such as “spacial constraints” or “decorations.” In order to interpret the data, the slope and coefficient of determination data were combined with the thematic analysis to find which specific elements of interior design had the greatest influence on tipping behavior. The expectation was that elements which were more important to consumers would have a higher coefficient of determination and be mentioned more frequently than other elements of design.

FINDINGS

This research study included 25 participants: 20 student-diners and five waitstaff. It was conducted over the course of three weeks in January. Customer participants were asked to provide the percentage of their bill they would tip upon being presented with various images of restaurant interiors, and were then interviewed about why they assigned specific tipping values to each restaurant. 15 images of different restaurants were presented and were ranked on a scale from 1-5 in eight measures of restaurant design: lighting, seating, exterior view, color tone, privacy, material quality, coherence, and tableware. Coherence, material quality, privacy, and color tone were characterized as general design feelings while lighting, seating, exterior view, and tableware were labeled as specific design elements.

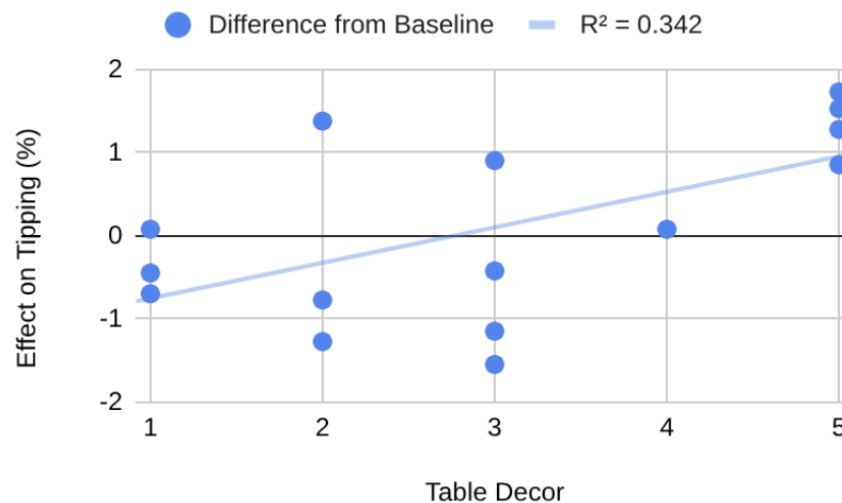
Experimental Averages

After combining the data from the survey, a correlation between specific design elements and tipping was observed. Among all participants, self-reported baseline tipping percentages averaged 17.5%. Tipping percentages for the images presented averaged to 17.59%, suggesting that the images were representative of a diverse range of restaurant conditions that are familiar to consumers.

After subtracting the baseline tip from each participant's response, restaurant interiors with better table arrangements and cutlery showed a moderate positive relationship with tipping, with a correlation coefficient of 0.58 (r) and a determination coefficient (R^2) of 0.342. Out of all measured specific design elements, tableware had the strongest relationship with tipping.

Figure 2

Quality of Table Decor and Effect on Tipping Percentage

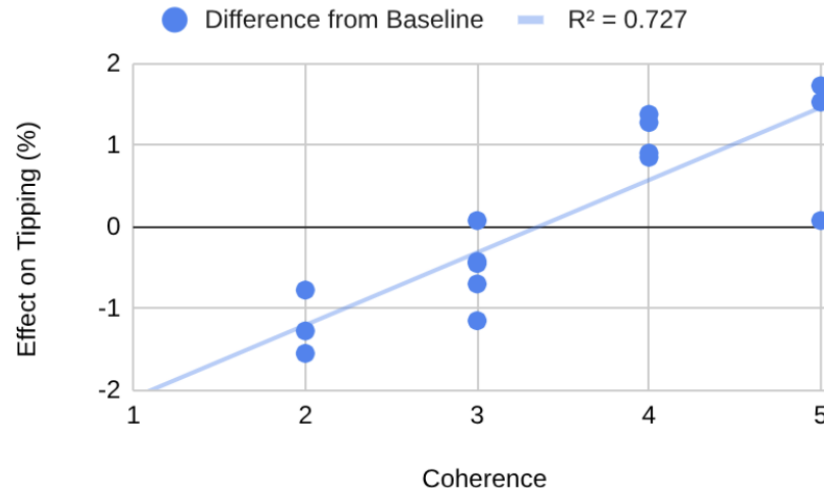


Note. Quality ranked 1-5 on a Likert scale with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest.

Although not a specific element of design, coherence of design displayed a very strong positive correlation ($R^2 = 0.727$, $r = 0.85$) with tipping variation. This means that out of all design elements studied, coherence was the general design element which had the strongest positive effect on tipping propensity among customers.

Figure 3

Design Coherence and Effect on Tipping Percentage



Note. Coherence ranked 1-5 on a Likert scale with 1 being lowest and 5 being highest.

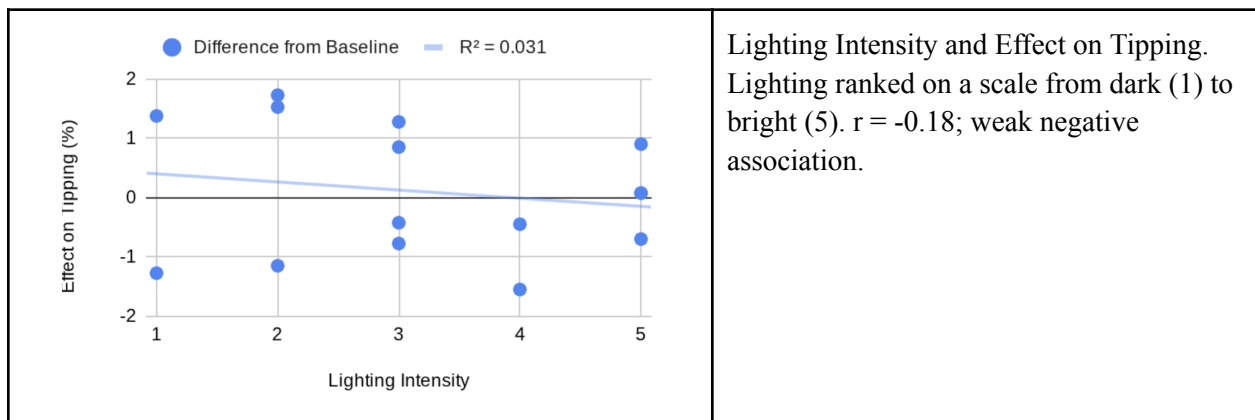
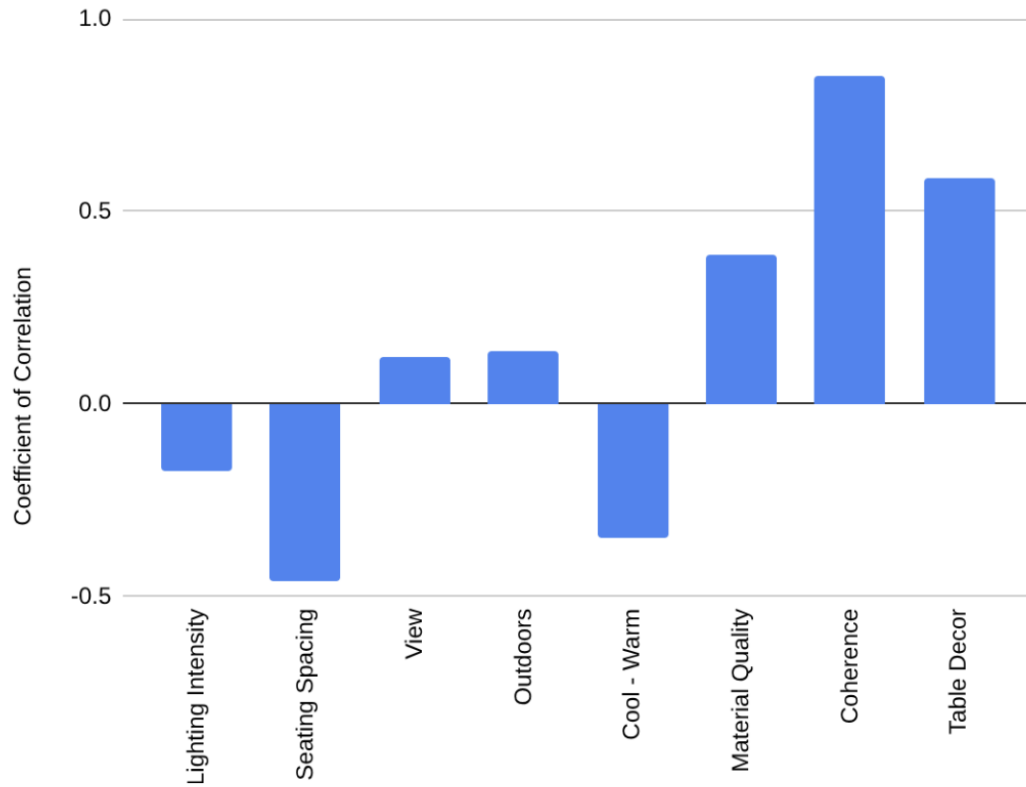
This is supported by interviews with customers, who frequently reported theming as a signal of value. On January 20th, Participant J reported:

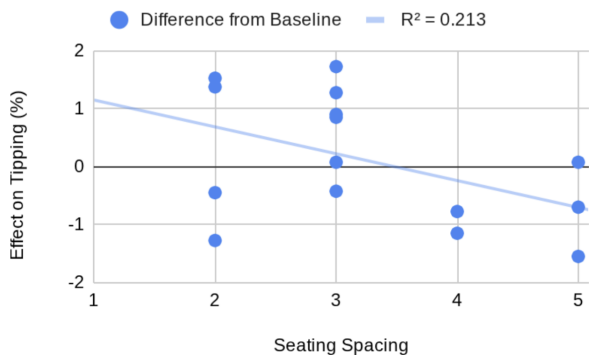
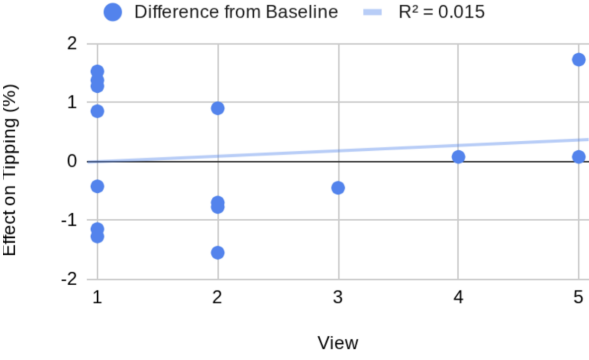
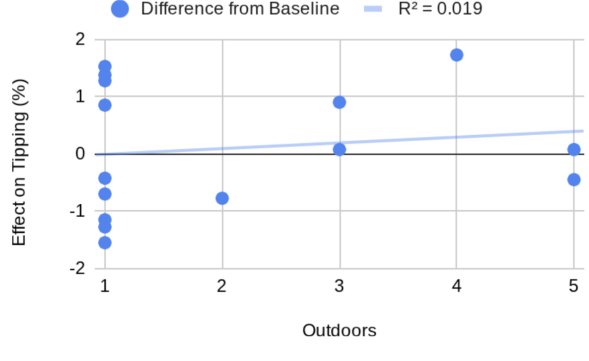
I really like a theme. Every picture, to me, there was never a restaurant where I felt that it was not high quality. ... I mean, as long as there's a set theme, ... or a decorator is definitely kept in consideration when making the restaurant, I think that's a higher value.

The interview suggests that value was considered in evaluating each restaurant interior, supporting the hypothesis that visual design was translated to tipping through feelings of luxury. Viewing the correlation between tipping and other elements of design supports these findings as well. Using the r value of their correlation, coherence and table decor had the strongest associations with tipping (see all r values and graphs at Figure 4).

Figure 4

Coefficient of Correlation (r) between Design Elements and Tipping



 ● Difference from Baseline $R^2 = 0.213$ Effect on Tipping (%) Seating Spacing	Seating Spacing and Effect on Tipping. Seating spacing ranked on a scale from close (1) to distanced (5). $r = -0.46$; moderate negative association.
 ● Difference from Baseline $R^2 = 0.015$ Effect on Tipping (%) View	View and Effect on Tipping. View ranked on a scale from none (1) to scenic (5). $r = 0.12$; weak positive association.
 ● Difference from Baseline $R^2 = 0.019$ Effect on Tipping (%) Outdoors	Natural Integration and Effect on Tipping. Nature ranked on a scale from no exposure (1) to high exposure (5). $r = 0.14$; weak positive association.

Note. Absolute values of r closer to one signify stronger associations.

Individual Examinations

In examining the restaurant images that induced the greatest increase and decrease in tipping percentages, further conclusions can be drawn.

Figure 5

Restaurant Image 1



Note. This was the first image presented to participants.

Restaurant Image 1 received an average tip of 19.225% among customers, a 1.725% increase from the baseline tip. Interviewees supported the exceptionally high rating of this restaurant. Participant H, on January 13th, answered what visual cues stood out to them the most:

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 5.

Definitely the ones that were outdoors, again, with good lighting. Kind of the moody restaurant images. The ones where the glassware was presented neatly and all of your silverware was in the positions that they were supposed to be in.

Again, tableware and coherence were mentioned as signals of value.

Figure 6

Restaurant Image 10



Note. This was the tenth image presented to participants.

Restaurant Image 10 received an average tip of 15.95%, a 1.55% decrease from the baseline. Interviewees cited that lighting, a greater number of seats, and limited privacy contributed to their lower ranking of this restaurant, as evidenced by Participant N on January 20th, who described that “darker settings and darker colors gave off more expensive vibes and the lighter ones have the opposite [effect].” The interview also furthers the importance of luxury in restaurant design: ensuring that design increases the perceived value of a restaurant will elicit an increase in tipping propensity.

Given the negative correlation between lighting intensity and tipping ($r = -0.18$) examined in the quantitative analysis supported by the selected interview, dark lighting was also a contributor to the perceived value of a restaurant image.

Waitstaff Investigation

Interviews with waitstaff provide similar support for previous findings. In interviews, various subthemes of design were mentioned consistently as having either positive or negative effects on tipping.

Table 1

Aug 2026
Vol 10, No 5.

Environmental Sub-Themes and Waitstaff-Reported Effect on Tipping

Environmental Sub-Theme	Positive (+)	Negative (-)
Seating Arrangement	2	1
Spatial Constraints	-	3
Cleanliness	2	-
Decorations	1	-

Note. Positive means higher tipping; negative means lower tipping.

In contrast with the results from customers, waitstaff seem to weigh decorations and theming less. Although spatial constraints are mentioned in customer interviews, they are not mentioned as frequently as expected based on the waitstaff interviews.

DISCUSSION

Current literature surrounding tipping and interior design has already extensively studied quantitatively how minor variations in specific design elements can affect willingness to tip. Studies also identify the effects of the general atmosphere of a restaurant, with Barrigan (1956) describing that restaurants should aim to evoke feelings of cleanliness and privacy among patrons to increase satisfaction. There already exists substantial evidence that interior design can be used to harness increased satisfaction and tipping, and it is important to examine how specific, easily altered interior design elements of restaurants affect consumer behavior.

Elemental Investigation

The findings of this study reveal that the coherence of design and theming have a strong positive correlation with tipping. Overall, in interviews, participants mentioned that designs that catered toward the specific location of the restaurant were perceived as more luxurious than others. This is evidenced by existing research about thematic design elements. Samsudin (2022) explains that thematic dining establishments offer consumers a form of cultural consumption through sensory stimulation and coherence with the surrounding environment. Restaurants that build on their cultural and thematic attachment to their surrounding environment offer diners greater satisfaction with their experience.

Similarly, tableware had a strong positive correlation with tipping. Azar & Tobol (2008) describe that tipping arises from our desire to compensate waitstaff for effort that goes beyond what is expected, rather than for the baseline level of service. Decorative tableware arrangements were frequently reported as luxurious by interviewees, suggesting that they were perceived as surpassing the expectations of study

participants. Specifically, for Participants C and H (see full transcripts at Appendix D), who reported table design as a major visual cue, this evidence could suggest that they were examining decorative tableware as an unexpected part of the design.

However, there exist discrepancies between the findings of my research and current literature as well. The analysis of correlation coefficients between different elements of design and tipping suggests that greater seating proximity has a negative effect on tipping, which is not supported by literature that describes that consumers desire a sense of privacy when dining (Barrigan, 1956). The literature would suggest that seating proximity and tipping would have a positive correlation, but the actual negative correlation contrasts my hypothesis. This discrepancy can potentially be explained by the difficulty of isolating each variable of design's effect on tipping.

In a discussion of the level of privacy offered in a restaurant, dark lighting may serve to replace seating spacing as a signal of isolation from other customers. Alonso & O'Neill (2010) find that lighting can serve to accentuate the design elements of a restaurant, and moody lighting can appropriately do so without straining the eyes of customers. This suggests that darker lighting not only evokes feelings of luxury, but also accentuates the other design elements of a restaurant. Waitstaff interviews also support this finding, such as Participant X mentioning that the bright lighting in her place of employment causes eye strain and may affect tipping negatively (see full transcript at Appendix E). Additionally, examining the correlation coefficient of lighting and tipping shows a negative relationship, which supports the hypothesis that dark, moody lighting can improve tipping.

Specific Design Elements and General Sentiment

Patterns can be observed in the effect of specific design elements, such as lighting and tableware, on tipping compared to the effects of the overall atmosphere or environment of a restaurant. In customer interviews, general elements of design (spaciousness, cleanliness, luxuriousness, minimalism, and quality) were mentioned more frequently than specific elements of design (lighting, color, outdoor/indoor, natural elements, and view). This may suggest that when considering how much to tip, consumers are more likely to refer to perceived design rather than emotion when explaining that decision. However, emotions may still play a role in tipping. Lee et al. (2016) describe that design elements like color can alter our emotional state. Furthermore, Samsudin (2022) describes that a feeling of privacy can be created through design. Although it is not immediately evident in the interviews, the literature suggests that there exists a cognitive framework in which sensory experiences are transformed into the sentiment felt by customers. References to emotions of luxury and comfort as determinants of tipping are explained by the translation of the specific elements of restaurant design into a general feeling evoked by a restaurant interior. (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010).

Non-Design Determinants of Tipping

Even though the focus of the data collection was about interior design, participants frequently mentioned that the anticipated level of service in each presented restaurant would factor into their decision about how much to tip. Six participants (B, D, I, K, O, S) mentioned that their regular tipping amount depends

on the service level of the restaurant. Liao and Chuang (2004) explain that restaurant employees understand that high service is rewarded by higher tips. The variance of tipping in relation to customer satisfaction and service is supported by waitstaff interviews, who unanimously discussed that they believed the tips they received were reflective of the work they put in.

Additionally, bill amount was considerably mentioned as another determinant of tipping percentage. Participants C and H mentioned that the bill amount would influence their tipping behavior. As bill size is a sign of the luxury status of a restaurant, it makes sense that there exists a correlation between feelings of service and the price of the meal (Samsudin, 2022). Because bill size contributes to a general sentiment of luxury, the frequency of bill size as a reported non-design determinant of tipping is expected.

Waitstaff Considerations

In waitstaff interviews, the influence of decorations as a positive factor influencing tipping was mentioned only once, while spatial constraints were consistently mentioned as a detractor from tipping. This contrasts with the customer interviews, as coherence and theming were mentioned far more frequently than spatial constraints. Mehraliyev et al. (2020) suggest that this may be due to limited memory of positive sensory experiences compared to negative ones, which is furthered by waitstaffs' understanding of limited space as a detractor from service, and therefore tipping.

LIMITATIONS

From analyzing the participant results, outliers can be found. Namely, Participant D reported a 15% tipping percentage in each restaurant interior, regardless of design variations. The lack of an experimental procedure may also have affected accuracy of the results, as there was no effective way to isolate the effect of each specific element of design on tipping. It is important to consider that some participants in the study could have preset tipping amounts that do not change based on design or service considerations, which may have affected results. Additionally, the emotional state of the participants may have affected how much they were willing to tip. Factors such as the time of day, weather conditions, and hunger in the real world may have affected how participants assigned value to each restaurant photo. These non-design factors may explain some of the variance in the data between participants. The monetary nature of the questions asked to waitstaff may have also been a source of response bias, as participants may not have been willing to disclose how much they earned from tipping. These factors could have slightly altered self-reported tipping amounts among participants. Social desirability bias may also have affected customers' responses, as they may have reported higher tipping percentages in order to seem more generous. Future researchers should attempt to limit the confounding effects of as many external variables as possible.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research can be built upon by using an experimental method to collect quantitative data about the effects of different interior design on tipping. Because the survey data collection method may be subject

to response bias due to the monetary nature of the questions, an experimental design method may more accurately study the effects of changing specific elements of interior design, such as lighting, on tipping averages. Additionally, the cognitive pathway by which sensory input can affect emotions, which in turn affects tipping, could be further studied by combining the study with an electroencephalogram test to evaluate how different elements of interior design affect consumers' brain activity and emotions. This would be helpful in constructing a meaningful correlation between different emotional states and tipping propensity. Furthermore, a larger, more representative sample could be implemented to generalize the findings to the American restaurant industry as a whole.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has discovered strong correlations between specific design elements, general atmospheric effects, and tipping. In the academic context, this research has contributed a basic framework for a mixed-method design that can be used to determine the relationship between tipping and factors of a restaurant experience. By including both surveys and interviews, this research has gained a deeper understanding of the emotional decision that consumers make when choosing how much to tip. Design can be used to stimulate different emotional responses in restaurant customers, affecting how consumers evaluate the service quality and choose to tip. Because of limited legal protections for the base wage of waitstaff and the major role of tipping in their incomes, it becomes increasingly essential to create design guides for restaurant owners to improve customer satisfaction and tipping without significantly raising operational costs.

The practical applications of this work also affect restaurant customers, particularly in dine-in establishments, and their satisfaction with their experience. Because consumers create perceived value based on their sensory experience, visual design is an important factor to consider in increasing satisfaction. The findings of this research suggest a manner of ways by which restaurateurs can take advantage of these non-service value judgements to increase consumer enjoyment, and in turn, spending. By supporting designs that consumers prefer, which are described by the results of this research, the enjoyment that they derive from dining out can be enhanced.

Although restaurateurs may face obstacles in overcoming the initial investment required for developing effective restaurant design, the value of meeting consumers' expectations of design cannot be overlooked. This research provides a basic framework for developing accessible, cost effective interior design templates for restaurateurs. These templates should contain detailed instructions for restaurant owners that highlight how lighting, seating, and other design elements can be used to boost tipping behavior without compromising aesthetic appeal. A standardized visual guide could significantly reduce the costs of completely overhauling the existing design of the restaurant by suggesting small, yet effective, actions that can be taken. By using design as a method to increase wages without major policy changes that raise the minimum wage, a large step can be taken to improve the economic livelihoods of waitstaff.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Forms

Customer Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study titled:

“Interior Design Elements of a Dining Establishment and Patrons’ Propensity to Tip”

- This study is being done by [] from [] as a requirement of the College Board Capstone – AP Research class.
- You were selected to participate in this study because you are an 18-year-old high-school student who dines at a restaurant at least 3 times a week.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

- You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.
- The purpose of this study is to identify how different elements of restaurant interior design affect the percentage that diners are willing to tip.

STUDY PROCEDURES:

The purpose of this research study is to analyze any correlations between the specific elements of interior design in a restaurant and how they influence consumers’ willingness to tip.

- If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a survey followed by an interview and explain your tipping behavior.
- This survey and post-survey interview will ask about how much you would be willing to tip upon being presented with photos of various restaurant interiors and how you made those decisions.
- The process will take you approximately 20 minutes to complete.
- With your permission, the post-survey interview will be audio/video-taped in order to ensure that all quotes and comments are not misrepresented in any way.

RISKS:

- There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

BENEFITS:

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study may inform you of how restaurant design can inform your consumption behavior and affect your tipping.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

- Your responses to this survey and post-survey interview will be anonymous.
- Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

COMPENSATION:

- No compensation will be given for participation in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

- If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact my AP Research teacher, [].
- If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, you may contact the [].

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the

researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT:

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Waitstaff Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a research study titled:

“Interior Design Elements of a Dining Establishment and Patrons’ Propensity to Tip”

- This study is being done by [] from [] as a requirement of the College Board Capstone – AP Research class.
- You were selected to participate in this study because you are a restaurant employee in a front-of-house position.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

- You are invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.
- The purpose of this study is to identify how different elements of restaurant interior design affect the percentage that diners are willing to tip.

STUDY PROCEDURES:

The purpose of this research study is to analyze any correlations between the specific elements of interior design in a restaurant and how they influence consumers’ willingness to tip.

- If you agree to take part in this study, you will participate in an interview and explain demographic trends you have noticed in consumer tipping and how you feel about how these trends can be supported.
- The process will take you approximately 5 minutes to complete.
- With your permission, the post-survey interview will be audio/video-taped in order to ensure that all quotes and comments are not misrepresented in any way.

RISKS:

- There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

BENEFITS:

There will be no direct benefit to you for your participation in this study. However, we hope that the information obtained from this study may inform you of how restaurant design can inform your consumption behavior and affect your tipping.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

- Your responses to this interview will be anonymous.

- Participant data will be kept confidential except in cases where the researcher is legally obligated to report specific incidents. These incidents include, but may not be limited to, incidents of abuse and suicide risk.

COMPENSATION:

- No compensation will be given for participation in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION:

- If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact my AP Research teacher, [].
- If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or that your rights as a participant in research have not been honored during the course of this project, or you have any questions, concerns, or complaints that you wish to address to someone other than the investigator, you may contact [].

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign a consent form. After you sign the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not affect the relationship you have, if any, with the researcher. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT:

I have read and I understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

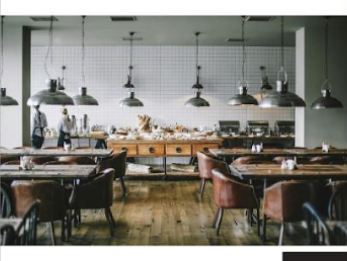
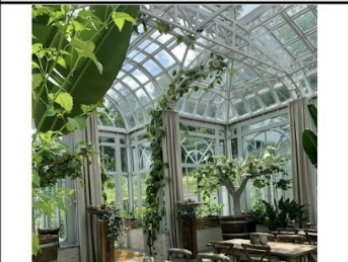
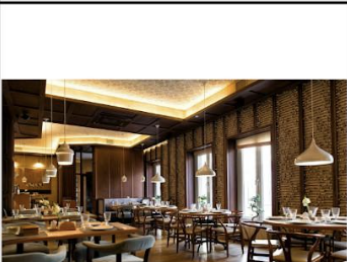
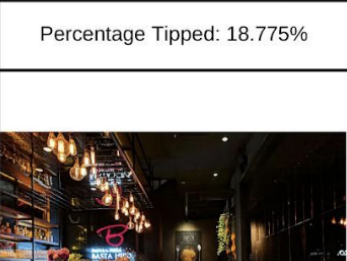
Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

Restaurant Stimulus Images

Customer participants were presented each photo and asked what percentage of their bill they would tip in each restaurant.

		
1	2	3
Percentage Tipped: 19.225%	Percentage Tipped: 16.35%	Percentage Tipped: 18.875%
		
4	5	6
Percentage Tipped: 18.4%	Percentage Tipped: 17.575%	Percentage Tipped: 18.775%
		
7	8	9
Percentage Tipped: 17.05%	Percentage Tipped: 18.35%	Percentage Tipped: 16.225%

Aug 202
Vol 10, N

 10	 11	 12
Percentage Tipped: 15.95%	Percentage Tipped: 16.8%	Percentage Tipped: 17.075%
 13	 14	 15
Percentage Tipped: 16.725%	Percentage Tipped: 17.575%	Percentage Tipped: 19.025%

From Unsplash, 2025. In the public domain.

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

Customer participants and waitstaff participants were asked different sets of interview questions. Customers were asked about how they evaluated each image in the survey, while waitstaff were asked about general patterns in tipping.

Questionnaire Presented to Customers

1. Considering you dine out at least 3 times a week, what design elements do you prefer in a restaurant?
2. Percentagewise, how much do you usually tip when dining out in a sit-down restaurant?
3. How did you assign value to each of these restaurants?
4. Did that value inform your willingness to tip?
5. Speaking generally, which visual cues stood out to you the most?
6. Did you feel that any of these designs felt more luxurious than the others? If so, which ones?

Questionnaire Presented to Waitstaff

1. Speaking generally, what is the dollar amount of tips you receive per week? Do you feel that this amount matches the level of work you put in?
2. Are there any significant demographic patterns you have noticed in tipping percentages?
3. Speaking personally, how do you visually perceive your place of employment? Is there anything you would change about the design?

4. What have been your personal experiences with the preferences of consumers and their impact on tipping behavior?

APPENDIX D

Selected Customer Interview Responses

Participant B

1. I prefer a restaurant ambiance that is firstly dim lit. I think that it kind of elevates the atmosphere more when it's a little bit more formal. I prefer, I think that I technically associate like darker hues, like darker wood and lower light as something like with elegance or something that's like more established than something with light tones or something that's a little bit more open in atmosphere so my personal preferences would probably be like somewhere that is like more elegant although something that's more elegant would probably be more expensive so i don't know how much I would actually like dine out there but if I had to like choose I would probably choose a restaurant with like a darker more elegant atmosphere.
2. Typically, my family and I do 20%. If the service is good. Now, if the service is poor, then probably 15%. And if the service is above average, probably closer to 23%.
3. Because the restaurants were really only different in their ambiance and their interior design I would kind of kind of going back to what I said which was if I thought that the restaurant was more established and it kind of aligned with like a nicer restaurant feel like had lower lighting or like the architecture was like classier I felt like I would assign I would tip more in those areas because I would assume that it would be more expensive versus someone that was more open or someone that looked like a little bit more casual or less formal. In those instances, I would be more likely to tip less.
4. (...) yes it did because if the restaurant I thought was nicer and the ambience was better I would assume the service would match so I would probably rate that a higher tip.
5. Like I said, the darker wood, if it was lower lit, if the seating seemed of nicer quality, if there were more natural elements. If the environment was more uplifted or more elegant, I would probably choose that in general.
6. Yeah. There was (...) there was one that was really pretty the third one was nice the fourth one was really pretty but I wouldn't associate that with like fine dining the I think this is the sixth one with the dark elements with the wood on the bottom I would associate that with a really nice dining so my favorite restaurants like that and then I think this is the

seventh with the stucco walls and the beige and like the clay seating I thought that was the nicest and I would assume that a restaurant with that kind of environment would probably be much nicer and i'd probably tip a lot if the food was good.

Participant C

1. I really like it if it's minimalistic and like very smooth and modern. Basically, I don't want it to look very vintage, so that's personally not my style. I like it when it's modern because it looks more classic and a little more formal.
2. I usually tip around, I'd say, 15% to 18% of whatever my bill is.
3. (...) if it looked more modern, I guess, and more like more minimalistic, then I would tip more. But if it looked kind of old or like vintage, I would tip less.
4. (...) oh yes like i said um it's a lot about the design if it's more like minimalistic more modern then yes i would probably tip more speaking generally
5. (...) the visual cues that stood out to me the most were probably the table and chair designs like for one of them i think like I don't know what number, but if you look inside, it looks like it's made out of brass and straws, and that looks kind of ugly compared to these other ones where it's more sleek and fancy and modern.
6. Yes, I thought the ones that look like they're on a vacation next to the beach. So the first image and then the second to last image looked very luxurious. That might also be because of the background environment that's like outside of the restaurant.

Participant D

1. I prefer a restaurant that is somewhat formal and it's, like, a safe environment for me and, like, my party.
2. In a sit-down restaurant, I tend to tip at least 15%, but if my service was better than anticipated, then I would tip more.
3. I assigned the value as just, like, the base as expected. Like, I...am dining so many times a week, I always like to have a minimum tip. So all restaurants are equal to me in that

aspect. And if they exceed my expectations, then they will get a greater tip. But I tend to tip 15% at every restaurant.

4. That value, like, has me tipping them ... my expected tipping percentage. And that does ... affect how I react to greater than expected services.
5. Visual cues that stood out the most to me in images were ones that provided ... more scenery than other ones because I feel like that is a different aspect and that could also be like what you're paying for in a sense.
6. I definitely feel like they were all different in various ways. But like for my preference, I feel some of them were luxurious, more ... luxurious than others. And I would have to be like the ones at the beachside. I think those were very different from the others.

Participant H

1. Definitely a good chair. If I'm sitting down for a long time and I'm going to be stuffed by the time I'm done eating my dinner, I want to be in a comfy chair. As well as tables. Sometimes restaurants have sticky tables because of whatever cleaning products they use. And then something that's visually appealing. So if I'm in a restaurant and all the decorations kind of look cheap, then it kind of makes me wonder about what ingredients they use for their food. Whereas if I'm in a fancy restaurant with a good mood, good lighting, of course I'm going to want to order more. I'm going to want to stay there longer because I like the vibe.
2. Definitely the average. I don't stray away from it. So 15 to 18% depending on how much the overall bill was.
3. There was a variety of percentages that I put for different images based on my personal preference. So the beach one, I really, really liked the ambiance of that restaurant. So I put in a little bit more.
4. Yes, it did.
5. Like I said, whatever kind of connected with my personal preferences. So good lighting and I really like the outdoor restaurants.

6. Yes, I did. Let me go look back. Definitely the ones that were outdoors, again, with good lighting. Kind of the moody ones. The ones where the glassware was presented neatly and all of your silverware was in the positions that they were supposed to be.

Participant I

1. Well, I prefer the place to be clean. I prefer it to be spaced out so that way people aren't touching each other. I prefer the environment to be nice. I prefer there to be music as well, and I prefer it to be calm overall.
2. Most of the time, I would tip 10% if the place is slightly nicer or if the service is really good. Pushing 15% if it's excellent, but it's around 7% to 10% most of the time.
3. For all the restaurants, I put 10% except for the ones that seem to be a bit smaller, so the workers would have to be working so I assigned them 5% because I do appreciate the value that workers have at higher end restaurants, and they deserve to be tipped more.
4. Yes, it did. Quite heavily, in fact.
5. Um, generally the, like I said earlier, the spacing of the place, as well as the colors, the colors as well. I prefer a lighter environment, not darker, such as the bar, for example.
6. Let's see. I really liked the design on the water. That one was great. I also like the design with the plants, the greenery design, simply because it has a more nature-esque feel. It's calming to the soul.

Participant J

1. I really love self serve. I love servicing myself. Obviously I get if the servers have to do it. I like images very not, I don't know how to put it, like very not AI, like very, like where we're at right now, there's just so many cute like paintings and, and like flowers and plants and like nice themed colors. Like you can definitely tell there's a theme and like, it's just very nicely put together, like giving very local and very like a farmer's market.
2. I usually tip 20%.
3. Well, I think, like, sort of how I said before, I really like a theme. Every picture, to me, there was never, like, there was never a restaurant where I felt that it was not, like, high

quality. Like, they each had nice decorations. Even ones where it low-key looked like a Cane's inside, you could tell it was very supposed to be, like, sort of more industrial feeling, like, farmhouse. And I still feel like, in that sense, it was, like, a higher, like, nicer restaurant than, like, just fast food. I mean, as long as there's a set theme, I guess, or a decorator is definitely kept in consideration when making the restaurant, I think that's a higher value.

4. Yeah. Um, I guess because of my background as a server, it really didn't. I basically put the same amount for every single one. But I feel like I guess if there was any of the pictures that looked like it was lower quality or like dirty or not put together, I could factor that in. But really, except for me is the server's money. So it's really just dependent on how the server serves.
5. I think I'm gonna look back at it right now, but I think the biggest ones were the lighting. Um, there were some that just had very dark moody lighting and, um, ones that were obviously either outside or just had really nice lighting. I think those don't really have a difference in value, but you can tell in general, whenever one focuses on one of the other, it's very nice. Like one that's very moody tends to have more neon lights or like, you know, cute stuff like that. So I feel like, really, like what I said before, if there's like a clear decorator, then like you could tell it looks nice and it's put together, you know.
6. I really feel like each one was nice, but looking through it, there are some that stand out to me. And a pattern I guess you can sort of see between them is they tend to incorporate more, like, plants and flowers to me. That's just probably a personal preference, but I also feel like the presence of white as well. Like, white to me is very, like, clean and, like I don't know. Sometimes it can be too much. Like, there is one picture where it looks very, like, like a sanitization zone or some shit, where it's just, like, crazy focused on, like, white. But, like, some of these places just have a very nice, flowery, like, one of them literally looks like a greenhouse. I really, really like that one. It's probably my favorite.

Participant K

1. I prefer official restaurant restaurants and not just fast food. I do prefer to have either open lighting and like open spaces to be just very welcoming, or if it's like a dinner type restaurant, then I do like it where it's more moody, I guess, in a way, yeah, like the lighting makes it more moody. And I like it when, like, it's private for dinner, so it's like they have booths, or just a sense of privacy.

2. Um, for me, it depends on how much I'm served. If it's kind of like a self serve restaurant, then I don't really tip very much, just because I feel like tipping is for the service. If I'm not getting a service, then I won't tip, but if I am, then 15 to 20%.
3. I'm really big on lighting, so and like, just like the mood that, like you set with the lighting, I feel like it needs to be like lit enough to not trip around once you stand up to go somewhere. But it's also like moody, in a sense that it's like comforting, and I think also, I'm pretty big on furnish, or furniture. So it like the types of tables, the quality of tables. I prefer wooden tables, as opposed to like, and like wooden tables and nice chairs, as opposed to like plastic tables, or like really white things. I prefer when my or I think a restaurant's more high value, I guess when it has darker furnishing,
4. A bit? Yes, like, I feel like that's for me, the difference between a 15 and a 20% tip. But realistically, if, like, my willingness to tip is completely dependent on how much I'm served again.
5. I'd say once again, like the lighting and also the quality of the photo, some of these pictures do look like they were taken in 2016 with a visco filter. So I think I prefer, like, more moody ones, but also like the ones that look pretty spacious, the photo that kind of looks like a bar, I feel like that's like dark and moody, but it's not the type of mood I'd go for normally. I think instead, like, if I wanted a dark and moody restaurant, I'd go for like either the third photo or the first photo. But yeah, I really just look for like, lighting furnishing and like the spacing between the furniture.
6. Yes, I think instead of saying which ones feel more luxurious, I feel like the ones that feel least luxurious are the one third from the bottom. Kind of looks like a coffee shop study the the bar esque one, I think that's 7, from the bottom that looks like a bar. I don't know if it is actually one, but it seems like a bar. So that's just not as luxurious the one, wait, 7, from the top looks nice. It's nice, but it's not, like, luxurious. I like it in a, like, comfy, cozy sense, and not a luxury type, like restaurant sense, just because it's outdoors and like, it has, like, the chairs that you'd see on, like someone's porch, balcony or like porch, not really in a restaurant, but yeah, those ones did not feel super luxurious to me.

Participant N

1. If I'm going with the count of wanting it to be formal, I look for maybe darker colors and a more ambient setting. But if I'm dining out with friends at a Saturday evening hangout, I would look for something that's more bright and lively.

2. Because I'm a student, I usually dine between 15% to 20%.
3. Based on how expensive they looked. (...) Like darker settings and darker colors gave off more expensive vibes than the lighter ones have the opposite, so...
4. It did, a little bit, but I feel like it would also just be mainly based on how the waiter is too.
5. Definitely the lighting. Some restaurants had spot lighting and you would think because it's harder to see when you eat, it'd be like counterproductive, but I feel like it gave a really nice vibe.
6. Definitely the ones that were indoors, had darker furniture and like darker settings with more focused lighting.

Participant O

1. I prefer a more casual space with friendly workers and a more laid-back environment rather than a fancy restaurant.
2. In a sit-down restaurant, I tip at least 15%. Based on the worker and the service, I tip higher than that.
3. Based on how much I believed each worker gets paid, I normally tip based off of age. So high schoolers, I normally tip a lot more than I would a full-blown adult. That's just a personal preference, but I went based off of the vibe of the restaurant and how much I believed each worker most likely got paid.
4. Yes.
5. Lighting and dining areas. Elaborate. Um... I would say like the setting of which the restaurant was located, the dimming of the lights, or the type of tables placed in the restaurant, whether the tables were outside, the tables were inside in a closer space, or if there was a lot more lights, candles, chandeliers, fancier type. Those are visual elements I'm normally based off of.
6. Yes. Yes, I did believe that. I said that I believe that ones that were more outside and had a lot more glassware or had a lot more expensive furniture outside on a patio would have a more luxurious experience as you would dine in this restaurant.

Participant S

1. I like a more mellow vibe. I don't like too many bright colors or anything that's too distracting just while I eat. Soft music gets you nodding your head well, so just some calm elements visually.
2. It all depends on the service, but given, let's say, 7 out of 10 service, I'll tip 16, 18% is usually my medium.
3. It was just mostly all personal preference, what I consider value. I guess you could say classy or fancy. And at the same time, how much I would feel, I guess, comfortable and at peace sitting at one of those tables.
4. Probably, yeah. I'd say it did.
5. I'd say lighting and color, right? So, like just the color of walls, of the tables, floor, whatever it may be. And then definitely the lighting. I prefer some dimmer lighting.
6. Off the top of my head, just the ones that incorporated more warm lighting, so less white light and less natural light as well.

Note. All transcripts include any grammatical errors that were spoken to preserve the integrity of the data.

APPENDIX E

Selected Waitstaff Interview Responses

Participant X

1. In total total well a big portion of my paycheck is from tips so I make minimum wage and then after tips I make about 10 to 12 dollars an hour depending on what days I work but So, I mean, I think I would probably make 30 bucks communal tips. Sometimes I'll get like a five or \$10 bill, but we're not really like a tipping restaurant because we're like a lunch cafeteria style. But I would say that the tips that I do receive match my work because we don't necessarily serve our customers. We just assist them, get their food for them. I would say that my tips do reflect my work.
2. So if I'm being honest, I feel like old people either tip the most or they tip the least. no matter what race or gender they are, it just comes out to whether they're old or not. Because some of them, I mean, they walk in with like Louis Vuitton bags and then they don't tip anything. You know, sometimes they're very snobbish, but then other times they're very kind and considerate and tip a lot. So that's definitely one of the biggest patterns that I notice. Young people, like teenagers around our age, maybe up to like 25, they tend to tip less because they're I think that they don't have as much money because the place I do work at is pretty expensive. We average about like \$23 for one meal. So a lot of people usually come in there to eat, not to tip.
3. Yes, I would. So in the place that I work, I feel like there's a lot of favoritism because the (...) Yes, I mean, I really like how it's set up the way it is. I mean, we have tables, booths, we have a back room for people to rent out. If I could change one thing about the physical design, I think it would be maybe to have the tables in, like Maybe like a darker scenery. I feel like it's really bright in there. And sometimes like looking up or even looking like at any customers, my eyes get hurt because it's so bright. So that would probably be something I change is making it a little bit darker.
4. So my personal experience is that I think that the more work and the nicer you are to the customers, the more likely they are to tip. And honestly, I feel like that's how I am at restaurants as well. So I think that that's definitely because a lot of people think that they're just entitled to tipping. But I do agree with that. Sometimes you should earn your tip. I mean, I'm a type of person who personally tips 20% almost everywhere I go, unless there's like a crazy reason. So seeing customers come in and then tipping, you know,

great tips. Whenever I feel like I'm not doing as much work as other restaurants, you know, that feels really good. But I also feel like that sometimes people who don't tip at all, maybe don't understand everything that goes into our job because, you know, we're not just taking your order. We're also cleaning up. We're also making everything. Then, you know, it takes us like 45 minutes to an hour to close, you know? So I think that there's a lot that goes into it. And I wish that, I think everybody should at least one time in their life have experience of working in a restaurant so they can really understand everything that goes into it.

Note. The transcript includes any grammatical errors that were spoken to preserve the integrity of the data.