

# Being Uniquely Nice: Feelings of Liking and Belonging can Increase Tips

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Tips constitute a large portion of servers' total income, and as such, understanding which behaviors increase tips is of great concern to service providers. Past research indicates that server-diner interactions effectively increase tips, but here we explore whether different types of interactions matter. We investigate whether preferential treatment leads to larger tips, and if feelings of liking and belonging mediate the relationship. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four scenarios: the participant's table was either told a joke, heard the same joke told to another table, both tables heard the same joke, or neither table heard the joke. Participants treated with preferential treatment (*unique niceness*) – where only their table was told a joke and others were not – reported intentions to leave larger tips. Results support our hypothesis that unique niceness increases tips, but did not support our prediction that feelings of liking and belonging mediated the relationship.

*Keywords: unique niceness, server, tipping, liking, belonging*

Individuals who have had dining experiences might recognize moments where they made a connection with their server, and as a result tipped more than usual. We questioned whether specific factors might impact a diner to leave a larger tip. We predicted that creating a unique connection with the server might play a role. In North America, tips account for a large percentage of servers' total income – almost 100% in several U.S. states where hourly wages pay only enough for income taxes (Lynn, 2003a). As such, it is important for service providers to understand the determinants of tipping behaviour. In our study, we explored whether preferential treatment (*unique niceness*) increases tip sizes, and if greater feelings of liking and belonging generated by a unique connection might mediate the relationship.

Several studies suggest that a multitude of factors influence tipping behaviour. According to Lynn (2003b), service qual-

ity only accounts for 2% of the variability, implying that there are other reasons besides service quality that might impact tipping behaviour. For instance, evidence suggests that levels of sunshine outside were significantly related to patrons' gratuity (Cunningham, 1979). Similarly, servers that merely forecasted sunny weather the next day by writing, "[t]he weather is supposed to be really good tomorrow. I hope you enjoy the day!" on the back of diners' cheques experienced an 18% increase in their tips (Lynn, 2003a). Other findings indicated that when female servers would touch customers on the face of the palm or shoulder (Crusto & Wetzel, 1984), or write "thank you" on the bill before handing it to customers (Rind & Bordia, 1995), customers would leave larger tip percentages than without these actions.

Although the above areas appear to lead to moderate increases in server's tips, the highest increase in tip percentages ap-

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pear to be related to server-diner interactions that foster a sense of interpersonal connection, such as servers' smiling at their customers. Researchers have found that strengthening interpersonal connection can increase tips by 140% (Lynn, 2003a). Smiling creates an opportunity for friendly interactions between the server and diner (Bujisic, Wu, Mattil & Bilgihan, 2014); however, diners must interpret servers' smiles as authentic for this behaviour to show an increase in tips (Kraut & Johnson, 1979). Studies examining servers' authentic positive display of Duchenne smiles — smiles that engage muscles around the mouths and eyes — revealed that customers had greater positive impressions of the service provider and higher overall satisfaction with the encounter (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Lynn, 2003a). These studies emphasize the important role that interpersonal connections can play within server-diner interactions as a means to increase tips.

We speculate that servers' ability to elicit a sense of connection in server-diner interactions may hinge upon customers' feelings of belonging and liking. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posit that the need to belong is an innate drive that motivates humans to form enduring positive relationships with others. Humans seek frequent, enduring, stable, and caring relationships with others. This need to form social bonds with others is pervasive and affects both emotion and cognition. For instance, researchers found that participants who have been manipulated to feel socially rejected (i.e., told they would be alone in the future) were less likely to engage in prosocial behaviour such as donating money, volunteering time, cleaning up after an accident, or cooperating in a game (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007). Moreover, anxiety ensues when people experience or imagine social rejection, which further demonstrates how the need to belong is intrinsic to the human condition (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Even at

a minimal level during transient service encounters (e.g., buying coffee), social interactions have been shown to increase people's sense of belonging (Sandstorm & Dunn, 2013). Considering these previous studies, the innate need to belong may also drive the relationship between server-diner interactions and tipping behaviour.

Given Baumeister and Leary's (1995) notion of the innate human need for belonging, we speculate that unique niceness (i.e., preferential treatment) will make diners feel that they are uniquely connected with the server. In turn, this unique connection will increase customers' liking for their server and temporarily meet their need for belonging, and that feeling of connection will lead to larger tips. To test this idea, we had participants read one of four hypothetical dining situations to see how they would differ on ratings of liking for their server, feelings of belonging, and tip size. In our study, unique niceness was operationalized as the hypothetical server telling a joke at the participant's table, while surrounded by other customers at different tables who were not told the joke. This unique niceness condition was compared to three other conditions where participants were not treated with unique niceness. Participants were then examined to see whether reading about a scenario where they are treated with unique niceness would influence their reported tip sizes.

## Methods

### Participants

A total of 200 individuals ( $M_{age} = 21.74$ ,  $SD = 5.27$ , 48% female) on the Simon Fraser University campus participated in this study in exchange for either one or two snack-sized chocolate bars or twenty-five cents. One participant was considered a significant outlier, responding five standard deviations above the mean on our key dependent variable. His information was excluded from the data, leaving a final sample of 199 individuals ( $M_{age} = 21.74$ ,

$SD = 5.27$ , 48% female).

## Procedure

Participants were approached in public areas and invited to participate in a psychological study investigating interpersonal interactions. If participants agreed, they were given a consent form and then instructed to read a short vignette and complete a one-page questionnaire. Vignettes depicted one of four randomly assigned scenarios describing an interaction between a server and two customers at a fictitious restaurant. The vignettes included the presence or absence of a joke being told by the server at the participant's table, and the presence or absence of the participant overhearing a joke being told by the server at another customer's table. This resulted in four conditions whereby either (a) no jokes were told to either tables (*both no joke*) (b) no joke was told to the participant's table, but told to another table (*unique exclusion*) (c) a joke was told to the participant's table, but not the other table (*unique niceness*) or (d) the same joke was told to both tables (*both joke*) (see Appendix for vignette example).

We were interested in the difference between unique niceness and the three other scenarios – whether unique niceness treatment leads to larger tips as a result of greater feelings of liking and belonging. To ensure participants understood the scenario they read, participants were first asked two questions about the scenario they read: (a) whether the server told their table a joke, and (b) whether the server told another table a joke.

Participants then completed a questionnaire where they rated their level of happiness, satisfaction with the meal, feelings of liking for the server, feeling of closeness to the server, and feeling of being cared for and belonging to the establishment. All questions were rated on 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 = “*Not at all*” to 7 = “*Extremely*”. Participants were asked to report how much of their total bill (in percentage form) they would leave as a

tip for the server. Finally, participants answered demographic questions about their gender, age, ethnicity, household income, and whether they frequently ate at restaurants (possible answers were “*yes*”, “*sometimes*”, or “*no*”).

## Results

### Manipulation Check

To measure whether participants recognized whether a joke was told to their table and/or another table, we used a one-way ANOVA to examine responses to our manipulation check items. Results indicated that participants were aware of our manipulation; of the 100 participants who read they were told a joke to their table, 79% of participants confirmed they read they were told a joke, while 7% erroneously reported reading they were told a joke when they were not told one,  $F(1, 197) = 219.55, p < .05$ . Of the 99 participants who were told they heard a joke at another table, 78% of participants correctly reported they read they heard a joke, and 13% of participants erroneously reported reading they heard a joke told to another table when the other table was not told one,  $F(1, 199) = 144.94, p < .05$ . This suggests that most participants accurately recognized when their table or another table was told a joke. Participants who erroneously reported did not pass the manipulation check, and their data was excluded from the analysis.

### Hypothesis 1: Unique Niceness Treatment Leads to Larger Tips

To investigate whether participants in the unique niceness condition said they would leave larger tips than participants in the other conditions, we conducted a planned contrast with co-efficient weights as follows: both no joke (-1), unique niceness (3), unique exclusion (-1), and both joke (-1), allowing us to determine whether the unique niceness was different than the three other conditions (see Figure 1). As predicted, our analyses revealed a significant difference between unique niceness ( $M = 14.46, SD = 7.14$ ) and the three

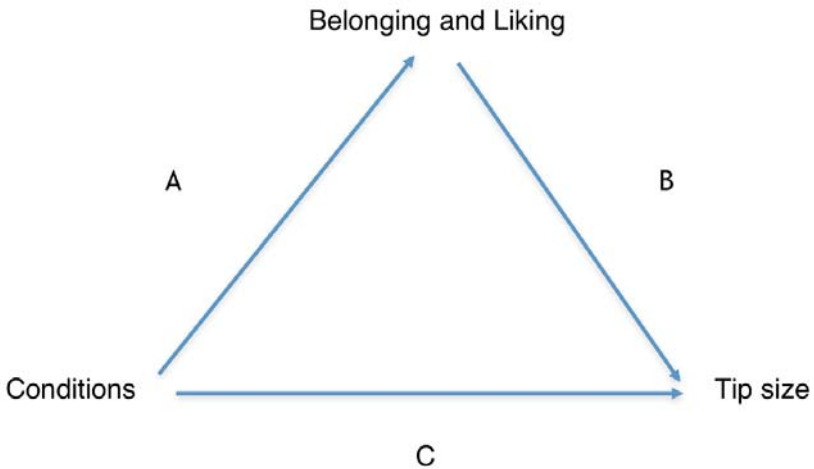


Figure 1. Proposed model between condition, liking/belonging, and tip size. This figure illustrates the different pathways under study: pathway C examines if unique niceness differ from others conditions in tips; pathway A examines whether conditions differ on levels of liking and belonging; pathway B examines whether liking and belonging correlates to tip sizes; and pathway B + C (indirect mediation) examines whether unique niceness is greater than other conditions in its relations to larger tip sizes due to greater feelings of liking and belonging.

other conditions (both no joke, unique exclusion, and both joke;  $M = 12.79$ ,  $SD = 5.59$ ,  $F(1, 192) = 2.07$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Participants who read a scenario where they were told a joke and did not overhear the same joke told to another table said they would leave larger tips than participants who did not hear a joke, heard a joke at both tables, or heard a joke told to another table but not their own. This suggests that servers' unique niceness treatment may lead to customers tipping greater amounts. Interestingly, results also indicate that participants who read they heard the same joke told to both tables (both joke) said they would tip less ( $M = 12.84$ ,  $SD = 5.04$ ) than those who did not read about hearing a joke at all (both no joke) ( $M = 13.6$ ,  $SD = 4.77$ ). Because witnessing the same joke being told to multiple customers likely comes across as disingenuous, this finding suggests that the perceived authenticity of servers' intentions to be friendly may influence reported tip sizes.

**Hypothesis 2: Unique Niceness Treat-**

**ment Leads to a Greater Sense of Liking and Belonging**

Given the high degree of conceptual overlap between our dependent variables (feelings of liking, belonging, and closeness to the server and the establishment), we created a composite variable of liking and belonging; reliability analysis reveals Cronbach's alpha to signify variables are statistically similar ( $\alpha = .87$ ). To examine whether unique niceness led to a greater sense of liking and belonging than the other three conditions, we conducted a planned contrast test with the same coefficient weights as hypothesis one and compared unique niceness against the other three conditions (Figure 1, pathway A). Results indicated that the unique niceness condition, where participants read their tables were told a joke and did not overhear it told to another table, was significantly higher on the liking and belonging composite ( $M = 4.70$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) than both no joke, unique exclusion, and both joke conditions together ( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ,

$F(1, 195) = 2.84, p < .05$ ). Our predictions were confirmed; this result suggests that our unique niceness condition is related to a greater sense of liking and belonging than the other three conditions.

### **Hypothesis 3: Feelings of Liking and Belonging Are Related to Tip Size**

We examined whether our liking and belonging composite variable was correlated with tip sizes (Figure 1, pathway B). A bivariate correlational test revealed that tip sizes were significantly correlated with liking and belonging,  $r(197) = .194, p < .05$ . Participants who rated greater feelings of liking and belonging had a tendency to report leaving larger tips. This confirms our hypothesis, showing that greater feelings of liking and belonging are associated with larger tip sizes.

### **Hypothesis 4: Unique Niceness Leads to Larger Tips through Feelings of Liking and Belonging**

Thus far, our analyses have shown the following: unique niceness leads to greater feelings of liking and belonging (Figure 1, pathway A) and larger tips than all other conditions (Figure 1, pathway C), and feelings of liking and belonging are significantly related to tip sizes (Figure 1, pathway B). Given these relationships, we were interested in testing whether there was an indirect mediating effect between pathway A and B. Does unique niceness result in larger tips than the three other conditions due to greater feelings of liking and belonging? We used the distributions of the product coefficients method to evaluate our mediation (Tofghi & MacKinnon, 2011), which revealed our predictions as unsupported. The indirect effect through liking and belonging was not significant, 95% CI [-0.651, 0.774], indicating that there is no indirect effect of liking/belonging on the association between unique niceness and tip size.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study provide a preliminary understanding of how liking

and belonging may influence customer-tipping behaviour. Participants who read about experiencing preferential treatment (unique niceness) did indeed have greater feelings of liking and belonging and said they would leave larger tips than those who read about witnessing servers' treat others with unique niceness, or receiving comparable treatment with others. In addition, we found that participants who read about hearing their server tell the same joke to both tables reported tipping less than those who heard no jokes at all. Inconsistent with our predictions, analyses revealed no mediating association between the conditions and tip sizes via belonging and liking (Figure 1, pathway C). Overall, these results support the idea that preferential treatment is a beneficial strategy for maximizing tips, but only when it is truly unique.

We explored whether treating customers uniquely in comparison to other customers would influence feelings of liking, belonging, and tip sizes. Our findings are consistent with previous research on how interactions between servers and diners can increase tips, and further supports the notion that creating a unique connection is an effective strategy to generate larger tips. This research has valuable practical implications for servers, because tips constitute a large percentage of servers' total income; therefore, strategies to boost a server's income can have significant impact on an individual's livelihood. As demonstrated in our unique niceness condition, participants who read they were uniquely told a joke not only felt greater feelings of belonging and liking, but also said they would tip more than those who read about overhearing a joke told to another table (unique exclusion). Not surprisingly, our results indicate that reading about overhearing the same joke told to both tables (both joke) was related to fewer tips than not reading about joke at all (both no joke). We speculate that this is because participants who read they heard the same joke told to both

tables felt the server had insincere ulterior motives for telling a joke. Thus, perceived inauthenticity of servers might undermine the effects of other server-diner interactions on tip amount. This finding is supported by previous studies about the effect of perceived authenticity of service professionals (e.g., authentic smiles) on tip sizes in server-diner interactions (Bujisic et al., 2014; Grandey et al., 2005).

However, our study is not without limitations. Data collection was confined to a university campus and is not a representative sample of the general population. Additionally, our study used hypothetical vignettes, instead of data from actual diners and servers or experiential settings, thus it lacks generalizability to real-life settings. In an attempt to counteract the limitation of our population sample, we asked participants to report if they frequently dine out and found that the majority of participants reported having experienced restaurant dining. This suggests that most participants' were likely to be informed by their relevant dining experience and might have an understanding of tipping practices. In this respect, the majority of our sample is likely similar to the general population in that we can assume they were familiar with dining norms. However, a caveat to this attempt is our lack of operationally defining "frequently" on our questionnaire, which limits how much we can gauge participants' familiarity with restaurant norms. Follow-up studies must take measure of this error.

In spite of the low external validity, using a vignette structure allowed for reliable internal validity. The use of hypothetical vignettes was important to control for extraneous variables that may have interfered with the variables under study. Future research may design studies with stronger external validity based off our preliminary evidence by extending research practices to observe actual dining experiences. It is important to recognize that our study serves as an initial investi-

gation, and further study is needed in the area. For instance, our findings infer that perceived authenticity of servers' intentions to make a connection may be related to tip sizes. In turn, forthcoming research could build upon on our findings by investigating how feelings of belonging and liking are related to tips in respect to perceived servers' authenticity of intentions to be uniquely nice.

Though previous research indicates that various positive server-diner interactions can increase tips (Lynn, 2003a), our findings extend this notion, suggesting that servers should go beyond mere server-diner interactions and aim to build uniquely nice connections. Our results suggest that not all gestures of niceness are the same, and we speculate that perceived inauthenticity (in the form of similar, repeated interactions with multiple customers) may backlash against servers' intentions to increase the size of their tips. Thus, our study reveals that not all server-diner interactions are equal; it is better for servers to create a unique connection if they wish to maximally increase their tips.

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## Appendix

Example of Vignette (Both Joke scenario) and Questionnaire

### Restaurant Scenario

*You have decided to have dinner with a friend at a new restaurant named “Ben’s”. As you enter the restaurant, the hostess smiles, greets your party and shows you to your table. Shortly after, your server comes over.*

*Server: “Hi, welcome to Ben’s! My name is Sam and I’ll be your server today.”*

*You: “Thanks.”*

*Server: “Here are some menus. I’ll be back in a few minutes to take your order.”*

*Server leaves and returns a few minutes later.*

*Server: “Hi there. Have you decided on beverages?”*

*Both you and your friend reply: “Just water please.”*

*Server: “Sure, I’ll be back with water in just a minute”*

*One minute later.*

*Server: “Here’s your water. Have you decided what you’d like to eat this evening?”*

*You: “Yes, I’ll have the chicken souvlaki.”*

*Your friend: “And I’ll have the salmon burger with fries please.”*

*Server: “Great, thanks! I’ll punch in your order right away. By the way, have you heard about the new restaurant that opened on the moon—good food but no atmosphere.”*

*Your server leaves and attends to other tables nearby. Fifteen minutes later, your server returns with your food orders. You both start eating. You overhear the server talking with the table beside you.*

*Server: “And how was your meal? Here’s the bill.”*

*Customer: “Great, thanks! Yeah, I’ll put it on credit please.”*

*Server: “For sure! [hands pin pad over] So, have you heard about the new restaurant that opened on the moon—good food but no atmosphere.”*

*Customer pays.*

*Server: “Thanks! Have a great night.”*

*The server comes back after a while to take away your finished plates, and leaves to get the bill.*

*Server: “Here’s your bill. Whenever you’re ready...”*

*You pull out your wallet*

*You: “I’ll put it on debit please.”*

*Server: “Okay.” [hands pin pad over]*

*You finish the payment.*

*Server: “Would you like your receipt?”*

*You: “No, I’m fine, thanks.”*

*Server: “Okay. Thanks for coming.”*



Did the server tell a joke to you and your table? (please circle)    Yes        or        No

Did the server tell a joke to another table? (please circle)        Yes        or        No

How happy are you feeling right now?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

How satisfied are you with the customer service you received?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

How satisfied are you with your meal?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

To what extent do you like the server that served you?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

To what extent do you feel close to your server?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

To what extent do you feel a sense of belonging at this establishment?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

To what extent do you feel cared for at this restaurant?

Not at all    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    Extremely

What size tip (i.e. percent of your bill) would you give your server? This can range from 0% (no money) to 100% (an amount equal to your total bill) \_\_\_\_\_%

Gender \_\_\_\_\_                      Age \_\_\_\_\_                      Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Income (household income before taxes) \_\_\_\_\_

Do you eat in restaurants often? (circle one)        Yes        Sometimes        No