Rude customers may be lucrative for restaurant servers

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Have you ever been out at a restaurant and witnessed a fellow customer being rude to their server? How did it make you feel? Did you react?

According to newly published research from the Haskayne School of Business at the University of Calgary, when customers witness fellow
customers mistreat servers—including behaviours such as sarcasm and looking at smart phones during transactions—it elicits empathy for servers and anger towards the rude customers. These emotional reactions cause witnesses to leave higher tips, leave more positive customer service evaluations and behave friendlier towards victimized than non-victimized servers. The study also shows that the more aggressive the mistreatment, the higher the tips and the more positive the evaluations.

"The most significant finding is that people are willing to financially compensate for the poor behaviour of fellow customers—people who are virtual strangers," says lead researcher Sandy Hershcovis, PhD, from the Haskayne School of Business. "Moreover, customers were friendlier, saying please and thank you more often during the transaction to try to offset the bad behaviour of the previous customer.

"Servers have to live by the mantra 'the customer is always right,' which is really hard when they are faced with rude and demanding customers. The knowledge that maybe there is a hidden benefit—that other customers see this rude behaviour and financially compensate—may be a silver lining."

The results of the study, "When Fellow Customers Behave Badly: Witness Reactions to Employee Mistreatment by Customers," have been published in the Journal of Applied Psychology. The researchers conducted three studies of full-time employees in North America, one of which was a field experiment that looked at real customer reactions to fellow customer mistreatment.

Hershcovis is an associate professor in organizational behaviour and human resources. Her research focuses on understanding the social context of workplace mistreatment such as workplace bullying, incivility, and abusive supervision.
"We hired an actor to pretend to be a rude customer, a server to pretend to be the victim and then we observed how real customers behaved," she says. "While only 11 per cent tried to intervene, 73 per cent of customers said something supportive to the server after the rude customer left the restaurant."

This research is the first to examine how customers react when other customers are rude to servers. It also suggests that servers unfortunately have to put up with the mistreatment in order to gain the benefits.

"One of the findings of our study is that when servers were rude back to the rude customer, the witnessing customers no longer left higher tips or evaluated the server more positively. When servers take matters into their own hands, customers no longer feel empathetic towards servers and no longer feel the need to compensate for the rude behaviour of fellow customers," adds Hershcovis.


Provided by University of Calgary

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