

When tipping and smiling are expected at work, so is sexual harassment

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Workers in the service industry are often pressured by their employers to give friendly "service with a smile." New research suggests that when those employees also rely on tips to earn a living, it creates a power dynamic between the employee and customer that may increase the

likelihood of sexual harassment on the job.

Alicia Grandey, liberal arts professor of psychology at Penn State, said the findings could give insight into how companies can help reduce sexual harassment from customers, including raising employees' hourly wages.

"It may not be necessary to completely eliminate [customer](#) tips, but rather reduce the dependence on tips by offering a livable wage," Grandey said. "Based on our results, if employees were less dependent on customer tips, harassment would be less likely to occur because customers would hold less power over the employee."

According to the researchers, previous research has found that the majority of service employees have reported experiencing sexual harassment from customers, which typically involves inappropriate gestures, comments about appearance, and repeated unwanted requests for phone numbers. Additionally, other studies have found that sexual harassment from customers predicted poorer employee health and attitudes about their work, as well as a higher likelihood of employee turnover.

Timothy Kundro, an assistant professor of management and organization at the University of Notre Dame who earned his undergraduate degree at Penn State as a Schreyer Honors Scholar, said that while research has shown the consequences of sexual harassment, it was less clear why and how it occurs in the first place.

"Previous research has suggested that service employees are some of the most likely to face sexual harassment, and particularly from customers," Kundro said. "We were interested in understanding why sexual harassment is so pervasive in this context, and curious if any of these insights could provide actionable insights for organizations."

In their paper, recently published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*, the researchers first describe their initial evidence that showed that women employees working in service jobs where they receive tips also reported more sexual harassment. They then conducted two studies—one from the employees' perspective and one from the customers' perspective.

For the first study, the researchers recruited 92 participants who worked at least 35 hours a week at a job where they regularly received tips from customers. The participants answered questions about how much they were financially dependent on tips, how much they were required to project a positive attitude toward customers (i.e., "service with a smile"), how much they felt customers held power over them, and how often they had experienced sexual harassment from customers in the previous six months.

Then, for the second study, the researchers recruited 229 men to participate in an online experiment. The participants were randomly assigned to one of four study conditions in which a visit to a restaurant was simulated. Conditions included one in which the waitress appeared friendly and dependent on tips, friendly and not dependent on tips, neutral and dependent on tips, or neutral and not dependent on tips. The participants then answered questions about the service interaction.

After analyzing the data of the first study, the researchers found that when employees reported greater financial dependence on customers' tips they also reported more sexual harassment, but only when employees were also required to be friendly at all times. This was explained by perceptions that customers held power over employees.

The results from the second study—even though it took place from the customers' point of view—echoed these findings.

"Customers may not be thinking about how the [employee](#) depends on their tips for income, until they see that smile as an expression of deference, which suggests a low likelihood that they will resist or report unwanted advances," Grandey said.

Kundro said the research suggests that there are relatively straightforward ways for organizations to help mitigate customer sexual harassment—either by reducing dependence on customer tipping or relaxing emotional expectations for smiling at customers even when their behavior becomes inappropriate.

"We think this research fits with recent interest in moving to a fair wage model in service organizations," Kundro said. "We've started to see tip-free restaurants in recent years, but our findings highlight a really problematic—and previously unexplored—cost of tipping norms within [service](#) organizations."

Grandey said that in the future, their research will examine the intersection of customer sexual [harassment](#) and race.

"Recent Equal Employment Opportunity Commission reports show that [sexual harassment](#) levels are decreasing, but only for white women," Grandey said. "In our future work, we will be examining when and why minority women are targeted for this power abuse by customers and how the work can be designed to address this issue."

More information: Timothy G. Kundro et al, A perfect storm: Customer sexual harassment as a joint function of financial dependence and emotional labor, *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000895](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000895)

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