

Tipping in the US made me feel uncomfortable and regretful

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I am just back from New York and I've brought home a new anxiety dream as a souvenir. I'm paying in a cafe and a giant touchscreen asks me to choose a gratuity. The options whirl, impossibly fast: 50%, 100%, nothing, \$100,000, as I try to hit the right one with sausage fingers. I fail, and face financial ruin, or have my meanness broadcast over a PA, while everyone stands around, judging: "Cheapskate on table four!" Brrrr.

Is there a more embarrassing social dance than tipping? It's got everything: money, guilt, notions of generosity, discomfort around service, a tussle between our idealised and authentic (broke) selves. I need therapy after a week of agonising over it daily in the US, struggling with screens and prompts. Should I tip for coffee, a bagel, a \$2 sachet of washing powder, rung up agonisingly slowly by an extremely stoned-looking Starbucks employee?

The only safe answer felt like yes after a first disastrous outing buying a takeaway coffee, when I forgot to tip in an intimidating Brooklyn Cafe and was forced to wait for my drink as the touchscreen showed the other stylish customers I was cheap and ignorant. As I waited, I remembered a New York waiter complaining last year on social media about stingy Europeans tipping her 10%, saying we should be banned from travelling until we learn how to behave. Not knowing how to tip isn't charmingly; it's shameful. To avoid such shame, I played it safe: 20% for everything (including a packet of tissues) and 25% in restaurants.

But perhaps that's wrong too? There's a growing backlash against tipping culture, decrying touchscreen tip requests everywhere from drive-throughs to self-checkouts (I think "appease the robots" is a sensible policy these days, but each to their own) and the upwards creep of suggested percentages. Comic skits suggest tipping to pet a dog, or for a baby to breastfeed. There's also well-founded unease around the lack of transparency about where digital tips go and how they're distributed and a more fundamental objection that tipping enables and excuses inadequate wages. It feels genuinely shocking that US employers can pay tipped employees a pathetic \$2.13 (£1.68) an hour, if tips make up the minimum wage difference.

It might prove a hard habit to shake. US research shows customers resent suggested tips less than an imposed service charge; I've heard Americans argue that tipping is exercising personal freedom. But how can that be a substitute for paying people properly?

There's no hint of a consensus about what's appropriate over here in the UK, service charges are inconsistently applied and poorly understood, and embarrassment is a national pastime. The

notion of “rewarding” good service feels rude – who do we think we are? Pizza Express notoriously tried to claw back a hefty chunk of digital tips from staff until the public outcry forced it into backing down. Cash tipping gets to the intended recipients, but it’s so awkward: tucking a tip under your plate is OK, but handing over notes provokes a full-blown argument.

Weirdly, mean Europeans may be on the right track. A 2023 YouGov survey highlighted the vast cultural difference in what’s considered appropriate. Sweden came bottom (or top depending on your perspective) in terms of how much and whether they tip: 37.8% didn’t, and the average restaurant tip was 4.5%, surely reflecting comparatively high wages. France scored low, too – 34% didn’t tip in restaurants, but service jobs are careers there and accorded real respect, and there’s a decent minimum wage. Italy has a similarly low proportion of people tipping, mostly because restaurants typically already include a 10% service fee in the bill.

One thing is certain: there’s no way I am deciding what’s appropriate for people to be paid is a fair or right way to do things. I struggled with GCSE maths percentages and my finances are as dubious as a Canal Street knock-off handbag. Indeed, all those craven attempts not to be the stingy Brit on holiday mean that 2024 is kicking off with a month of gruel. They have left me contemplating installing a tip screen near the dirty washing pile (darks 15%, delicates 20%?). Maybe not – if my husband retaliates with one on the coffee machine, I will be ruined.

Questions

1. Complete the following summary of paragraphs 1-2 using the best choice from the options given below.

The author has went on a trip to ____ (i) _____. While on her trip, she has developed a fear for ____ (ii) _____. It has gotten so bad the writer says she is undergoing therapy after living with it for _____ (iii) _____ while on her trip.

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|-------|---|
| (i) | A. Los Angeles
B. London
C. Chicago
D. New York |
| (ii) | A. Paying
B. Tipping
C. Facing financial ruin
D. Anxiety |
| (iii) | A. One day
B. Three days
C. One week
D. One month |

2. Find a word in paragraph 2 that can mean *fight*.

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3. What is the purpose for the writer to mention 'struggling with screens and prompts'? (Paragraph 2)

- A. She loves to give generous tips
- B. She does not know what to do when faced with a tipping screen
- C. She can choose how much she tips quickly
- D. She has no choice over how much she tips.

4. Name two groups of people in paragraph 3 who would have negative views on the writer when the she does not give enough gratuity at checkout.

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5. What does 'played it safe' suggest about how the writer gives out tips?

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6. Find a word in paragraph 3 which means 'ungenerous'
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7. Complete the following summary on paragraphs 4.

As ____ (i) ____ are becoming more common everywhere, people are starting to ____ (ii) ____ the culture of gratuity. Some people doubt the ____ (iii) ____ of digital tips and where the funds end up. While others reject gratuity since it allows employers to pay their employees a very ____ (iv) ____ wages.

8. How does the writer feel about the wage employers pay for tipped employees?

- A. She believes it is disgustingly little
- B. She believes it is appropriate
- C. She believes the employees receive too high of a wage
- D. She has no opinion

9. What does 'It' (1st line in paragraph 5) refer to?

10. Which of the following words has the most similar meaning to 'resent'?

- A. Agree with
- B. Welcome
- C. Be angry at
- D. Feel disappointed

11. Determine if the following statements are true, false or not given using the information in paragraph 5.

- i. An imposed service charge is more popular within Americans than tipping
- ii. The writer believes paying people properly is more important than exercising personal freedom
- iii. Most restaurants in the US impose a service charge on customers.

12. Below is a summary of paragraph 6, in lines there is a mistake. Find it and correct it.

There is one correct line, put a tick next to the line.

In the UK, service charges are well understood. As a result, people often get into awkward situations when handling service fees. The writer believes digital tipping can ensure tips go to the intended recipient – the owner. However, the situation can be sometimes awkward. The writer also thinks it is polite to hand over notes to people directly.

13. Do you think given tips via digital payments can improve the earnings of service workers?
Provide evidence from the text to support your answer.
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14. Find a phrase in paragraph 7 that means ‘doing something correctly’.
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15. Complete the following sentences which explain why Europeans tip less

- (i) Swedish people tip less because the wages are _____ in Sweden
- (ii) French people tip less because the minimum wage is decent and services jobs are well _____.
- (iii) Italian people does not frequently tip since a _____ service fee is already applied to their bill.

16. What is the simile that the writer used to describe the state of her finances?
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17. In the final paragraph, which of the following statements best summarise the writer’s view on tipping?

- A. Tipping is necessary in all occasions
- B. Tipping is evil and no one should ever tip
- C. Not tipping is a way of showing how selfish you are
- D. The customer should not be in the position to decide how much service workers are paid.