

## UNDERSTANDING TIPPING ATTITUDES IN TURKEY: A USER-GENERATED CONTENT ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

Tipping is a practice influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors, and it is perceived and practiced differently across countries. This study aims to explore how tipping is perceived in Turkey by analyzing user-generated content on Ekşi Sözlük. The findings show that tipping in Turkey does not function as a strong social norm. Instead, tipping is understood in two opposite ways: (1) A positive attitude, where tipping is seen as an expression of gratitude, a social expectation, or a way to support low-paid workers; and (2) A negative attitude, where tipping is seen as an unnecessary burden, an exploitative tool that benefits employers, or a practice imposed by capitalism. Additionally, contributors mention different motivations for tipping, such as the desire to get better service in future visits, feeling social pressure. Furthermore, the results indicate that tipping in Turkey is still a developing practice and has not yet become a fully accepted social norm. As the first study to examine how tipping is understood from the consumer's perspective in Turkey, this research is important and provides guidance for shaping tipping policies and practices in the country.

**Keywords:** Tipping, Consumer attitudes, User-generated content, Ekşi Sözlük

**JEL Classification:** A14, L83, E24

## TÜRKİYE'DE BAHŞİŞ TUTUMLARINI ANLAMAK: KULLANICI KAYNAKLI İÇERİKLERİN ANALİZİ

### Öz

Bahşiş, sosyal, kültürel ve ekonomik faktörlerden etkilenen bir uygulamadır ve ülkeler arasında farklı şekillerde algılanmakta ve uygulanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Ekşi Sözlük'te yer alan kullanıcı tarafından oluşturulan içerikleri analiz ederek, Türkiye'de bahşişin nasıl algılandığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bulgular, Türkiye'de bahşişin güçlü bir sosyal norm olarak işlemediğini göstermektedir. Bunun yerine, bahşiş iki zıt bakış açısıyla değerlendirilmektedir: (1) Olumlu tutum, bahşişin bir minnettarlık ifadesi, sosyal bir beklenti veya düşük ücretli çalışanlara destek olma yolu olarak görülmesi; (2) Olumsuz tutum, bahşişin gereksiz bir yük, işverenlerin yararına işleyen sömürü aracı ya da kapitalizmin dayattığı bir uygulama olarak görülmesi. Buna ek olarak, katılımcılar bahşiş vermeye dair gelecekte daha iyi hizmet almak istemek ve sosyal baskı hissetmek gibi farklı motivasyonlardan da söz etmektedir. Ayrıca, bulgular Türkiye'de bahşişin hâlâ gelişmekte olan bir uygulama olduğunu ve henüz tam anlamıyla kabul edilmiş bir toplumsal norm haline gelmediğini göstermektedir. Türkiye'de bahşişin tüketici bakış açısından nasıl anlaşıldığını inceleyen ilk çalışma olması bakımından önemli olan bu araştırma, ülkede bahşiş politikalarının ve uygulamalarının şekillendirilmesine yönelik yol gösterici bilgiler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Bahşiş, Tüketici tutumları, Kullanıcı kaynaklı içerik, Ekşi Sözlük.

**JEL Sınıflaması:** A14, L83, E24

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## 1. Introduction

Tipping is generally defined as extra money voluntarily given by customers to service workers, in addition to the cost of the service. Tipping behavior is a topic that has attracted the attention of both economics (Azar, 2003; Ferguson, Megehee & Woodside, 2007) and sociology (Lynn, 1997). The tipping literature mostly focuses on customers' motivations for tipping (Azar, 2010a; Azar, 2010b; Lynn, 2015; Lynn & McCall, 2016), occupations that typically receive tips and their characteristics (Lynn, 2016a), and the factors that influence the amount of the tip (Parett, 2015; Seiter, 2007; Bujisic, Wu, Matilla & Bilgihan, 2013; Jacob, Gueguen, Boulbry & Ardiccioni, 2010; Seiter & Weger, 2018).

Tipping is a widespread practice in many countries and is applied in different ways depending on the type of service. However, there is no universal rule for tipping, and its practice varies from country to country. Tipping behavior takes shape according to each country's unique traditions and social background (Shamir, 1984). For example, in the United States, tipping has become a strong social norm, while in Japan, it is often seen as a shameful act, since people are expected to do their jobs properly without expecting additional payment (Ferguson, Megehee & Woodside, 2017).

Therefore, when discussing the concept of tipping, it is useful to evaluate each country within its own tipping culture. Understanding what tipping means in a particular culture is important for shaping tipping policies in the service sector. Additionally, knowing how tipping is perceived in a specific country can help travelers adjust their attitudes in accordance with local tipping norms when they visit that country.

As far as it is known, the limited number of studies on tipping in the literature have examined employees' attitudes toward tipping in Turkey, while no studies have focused on how tipping is perceived from the customers' perspective. Pala (2020) conducted a study to determine how hotel employees perceive tipping; however, it did not address how customers view tipping. Therefore, the present study aims to understand the perspectives of customers who give tips or choose not to, regarding tipping.

This study aims to understand how the concept of tipping is perceived and defined in Turkey. To achieve this objective, user-generated content on social media—specifically the opinions of contributors on Ekşi Sözlük—was analyzed. This study is exploratory research aiming to understand how participants define tipping and the factors that influence their attitudes toward tipping. The results of the study may help understand how tipping is perceived in Turkey.

## 2. Literature Review

Tipping emerged as a cost-reduction strategy by transferring the responsibility of monitoring service quality and rewarding performance from employers to customers (Ogbonna and Harris, 2002; Azar, 2005). In this system, employers avoid providing fair wages or performance-based rewards, relying instead on customers to offer additional payments to employees depending on their satisfaction with the service. Researchers suggest that the motivations behind tipping extend beyond economic factors, encompassing social and psychological dimensions as well.

Azar (2004) observed that in the United States, tipping has evolved into a social norm, rather than remaining a mere expression of gratitude offered after receiving service. Similarly, Conlin et al. (2003) argue that people tip not as a reward for the service received but because they perceive tipping as a social norm. Lynn and McCall (2000) claim that although tipping is generally considered a reward for good service, the relationship between service quality and tipping is weak. From a broader perspective on how tipping is perceived, it can be viewed as a social norm, a status symbol, an expression of gratitude to the employee, or a guarantee of good service in the future (Azar, 2004).

Fernandez et al. (2024) stated that in European restaurants where the service charge is included in the account, tipping cannot be explained only by service quality. They found that social norms, payment methods, and income levels are also factors that influence tipping behavior. Azar (2010b), in his research on why customers leave tips, found that tipping serves as a way for customers to express gratitude, adhere to social norms, and contribute to employees' earnings. In a separate study, Azar (2010a) argued that tipping is given primarily for social and psychological reasons rather than as an incentive for future good service. Additionally, other reasons for tipping include contributing to the wages of low-paid workers (Crespi, 1947), serving as a status symbol for the tipper, and functioning as a gift for the employee (Shamir, 1984).

Lynn (2016a), in his study on which services receive higher tips, found that customers tend to tip more in services where they can quickly evaluate employees' performance based on intangible service quality. Shamir (1984) also noted that tipping is significantly observed in tourism-related services. Although tipping practices vary considerably across professions, it is most commonly given in restaurants and bars (Azar, 2020). The reason tipping motivations differ across occupational groups is that tipping is either perceived as a social norm or given based on service quality (Lynn, 2016b).

Tipping practices may vary significantly across cultures and are often shaped by broader societal values related to social hierarchy, interpersonal relations, and reward mechanisms. As suggested by Lynn et al. (1993), drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, societies differ in their levels of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism, all of which can influence economic and social behaviors—including tipping. In this context, tipping may function not only as a reward for service but also as a means of reinforcing hierarchical social structures in high power distance societies, whereas in low power distance contexts, it may be perceived as conflicting with egalitarian values (Lynn et al., 1993). Furthermore, tipping can operate as a performative act that signals social status and reproduces power relations (Lynn, 2000). However, empirical findings regarding these cultural influences have been somewhat inconsistent. For instance, Lee (2004), in a comparative study of Japanese and American restaurant patrons, found only limited support for traditional cultural patterns in tipping perceptions related to service quality. Similarly, Ferguson et al. (2017) argue that tourists often interpret tipping norms through the lens of their own cultural frameworks rather than those of the host country, thereby introducing uncertainty and inconsistency into intercultural interactions.

Given the significant role of cultural differences in shaping tipping behavior, several studies have either focused on specific national contexts or conducted cross-country comparisons to identify key patterns. Kowalczyk and Gębski (2021) found that restaurant customers in Poland leave tips either to feel good, as a result of their satisfaction with service quality, or because they perceive tipping as a social norm. Similarly, Saayman and Saayman (2015) conducted a study with restaurant customers in South Africa and argued that tipping is not solely a reward for service quality but is also influenced by social and economic factors. They suggested that higher income levels and the perception of social pressure increase the likelihood of tipping.

Among researchers conducting cross-country comparisons, Azar (2010), in a comparative analysis of the United States and Israel, identified that the most common reasons for tipping in both countries are adhering to social norms, expressing gratitude, and providing additional income to low-paid servers. However, while tipping in the U.S. is primarily driven by social norms, in Israel, it is more commonly given as a gesture of appreciation. Expanding the scope of analysis, Gössling et al. (2021) examined tipping practices across various European countries and found that each country has a distinct tipping system. They argued that tipping norms vary according to the level of economic development and socio-economic policies of each country.

Pala (2020) investigated how tipping is perceived by hotel employees in Turkey and argued that tipping culture has not yet been fully established and is still not widely accepted as a social norm. The study found that employees do not perceive tips solely as part of their wages or as a reward but also as a means of control and exploitation. Furthermore, hotel employees reported experiencing harassment or instances where customers saw themselves as superior to employees due to tipping (Pala, 2020).

Pala (2020) examined tipping from the employees' perspective to explore its meaning. However, there is a need for comprehensive research to better understand tipping perceptions in Turkey. The present study aims to contribute to this gap by analyzing how tipping is perceived using data from *Ekşi Sözlük*, a platform where individuals can anonymously express their opinions openly. By analyzing the entries written by individuals who wish to share their views on tipping, this study aims to explore how tipping is perceived in Turkey, identify the occupational groups that typically receive tips, and determine the factors influencing tipping behavior.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to examine perceptions of tipping practices in Turkey. This method was chosen primarily because it enables an in-depth exploration of subjective attitudes, meanings, and interpretations embedded in user-generated content on *Ekşi Sözlük*. As Creswell (2013) notes, qualitative content analysis is particularly well-suited to studies that aim to explore the richness of contextual meaning and individual perception, rather than to produce statistical generalizations. In line with this view, this study does not seek to quantify the frequency of codes but rather to uncover the complexity of how tipping is socially and culturally understood. Moreover, content analysis allows for exploratory insights to emerge without being confined to predefined categories. Given the study's objective of gaining foundational insights into tipping perceptions in the Turkish context, this method was deemed most appropriate.

As the Internet becomes increasingly embedded in our daily lives, it has become common for people to share their opinions, feelings and knowledge in various digital media. Especially, by the virtue of Internet, the one-sided information transfer of mainstream media channels loses power and is gradually replaced by an environment where the the recipient of information transforms into an information producer (Curran, 2012). Collaborative hypertext dictionaries are one of the digital platforms where the acquirer turns into an information producer. Some

examples in Turkey can be Ekşi Sözlük, İTÜ Sözlük, Uludağ Sözlük and İnci Sözlük. However, the oldest and most popular of these dictionaries is the Ekşi Sözlük. The reason why Ekşi Sözlük is so popular is their effort to present the information more enjoyable and entertaining rather than formal and dull, with the slogan of “sacred source of information” (Gurel and Yakın, 2007). According to 2020 statistics announced by Ekşi Sözlük on its own site, more than 321 million different people in total have viewed 6.1 billion pages. In addition, the first three countries where the majority of the dictionary's visitors reside in Turkey (91.50%), Germany (1.82%) and USA (1.02%) (Ekşi Sözlük, 2020). Ekşi Sözlük is an important digital platform that provides clues about Turkey’s people, culture and structure by providing alternative definitions to concepts, following the politic agenda (Gurel and Yakın, 2007).

Ekşi Sözlük is a hierarchical and closed dictionary that accepts dictionary writers after going through certain stages. Writers anonymously share their opinions about a concept, event, movie, person etc. by creating a new title or typing new entries under a title. In this study, entries posted under the title 'Bahşiş' (Tipping) by Ekşi Sözlük contributors between January 14, 2000, and January 10, 2025, were examined. Among the 173 entries found under the title, 150 were analyzed. The other 23 entries were not included because they were too short, not relevant to the topic, or did not give enough information about tipping.

The decision to use Ekşi Sözlük as the primary data source was not based solely on its popularity, but on its capacity to provide organically generated textual data that reflect the contours of public discourse in Turkey. As one of the oldest and most active collaborative hypertext platforms in the country, Ekşi Sözlük hosts contributions from a wide range of anonymous users who share personal experiences, cultural interpretations, and everyday social observations. These characteristics make it especially valuable for exploring social norms and public attitudes toward everyday practices such as tipping.

What makes the perspectives of Ekşi Sözlük contributors particularly relevant is their ability to articulate widely held—but often unspoken—beliefs and tensions surrounding the practice of tipping. The anonymity of the platform reduces the pressure to conform to social expectations, allowing for the expression of honest, diverse, and sometimes contradictory viewpoints. In this way, the entries do not simply reflect individual opinions but serve as a form of grassroots discourse that can reveal how tipping is socially and culturally negotiated. Analyzing these texts therefore offers meaningful insight into the public understanding of tipping in Turkey, which would be difficult to access through more structured or formal data sources.

In line with the principles of qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018), the analytical process began with open coding. Each entry was read multiple times, and recurring expressions were identified around thematic questions such as “What is tipping?” and “Why do people tip?” These expressions were then transformed into codes and organized into categories based on their conceptual similarities (e.g., positive attitudes, negative attitudes, types of service providers, tipping amounts). This study prioritized the exploration of the meaning of tipping and how it is perceived within the Turkish cultural and social context. The resulting themes offer insights into how tipping is socially constructed and culturally negotiated in Turkish society.

#### 4. Findings

The entries written by Ekşi Sözlük contributors regarding tipping focus on how tipping is defined and the reasons behind tipping behavior. Definitions addressing the question “What is a tip?” are categorized based on whether they reflect a positive or negative attitude toward tipping. Additionally, all reasons mentioned by contributors in response to the question “Why do people tip?” have been compiled. It is also noteworthy that the majority of the entries discussing tipping primarily mention waiters. Other mentioned professions include couriers, hotel employees, barber apprentices, car washers, taxi drivers, valet service providers, porters, and musicians at weddings and entertainment events.

Beyond discussions about what tipping is and why people tip, some entries suggest that people dining alone, those who consume alcohol, and men tend to tip more frequently. Although there is no consensus on a standard percentage or amount for tipping, a few entries mention that an average of 10% is commonly given. Furthermore, a limited number of entries suggest that providing a tip at the beginning of the service might ensure better service quality.

What is tip?

When examining how Ekşi Sözlük contributors perceive tipping, two dominant perspectives emerge. The first group argues that tipping should be given, considering it a necessary practice.

The second group questions the rationale behind tipping and believes that tipping should not be obligatory. As a result, entries discussing the nature of tipping have been categorized into themes reflecting either a positive or negative attitude toward tipping.

Definitions provided by contributors with a positive attitude towards tipping include the following: The additional payment separate from the service fee, reward for the extra service,

gift, expression of gratitude, worker's livelihood, the service fee, rightful compensation for good service, social norm, expression of satisfaction, financial assistance for low-wage worker, gesture, way to make an employee happy. Some contributors expressed their views as follows:

"Tipping is the materialized form of gratitude. It means, 'You provided excellent service, the food was great, thank you.' Giving a tip is better than not giving one. Good service should not go unrewarded."

"If you receive excellent service at a restaurant and are pleased with the attention given to you, leaving a tip—even if the amount is entirely at your discretion—is a kind gesture."

"I believe tipping should be given to those who do their job with dedication."

Definitions provided by contributors with a negative attitude towards tipping include the following: Bribery, forced donation, practice that should not be encouraged, source of anxiety over how much to give, way to buy favor at the time of payment, exploited concept in Turkey, product of capitalism, a favor to the employer, unfair burden on customers to compensate for the employer's responsibility, form of psychological pressure, mechanism that enforces economic inequality, disguised extortion, unnecessary imitation of American practices.

Notably, negative opinions on tipping outnumber positive ones. Most contributors question the rationale behind tipping, arguing that even though customers directly give tips to employees, tipping ultimately benefits the employer by shifting the burden of fair wages onto customers. One contributor states:

"...If anyone benefits from tipping, it's always the employer. The employer shifts their responsibility for fair wages onto customers through tipping. While tipping is not yet a deeply examined economic mechanism in Turkey, in the U.S., it serves as a tool for labor exploitation in the service sector. In fact, tipping is the service industry's distorted extension of neoliberal policies designed to promote competition under the guise of 'performance' and 'total quality management.'"

One entry mentioned that tipping is not yet established as a social norm in Turkey, unlike in the U.S. The contributor expresses discomfort with tipping and states:

"I feel very awkward while tipping. I order food for delivery, and the person who brings it is much older and bigger than me... How do I say, 'This is for you'? At restaurants, I leave the tip inside the bill folder and rush away... It feels like tipping asserts some kind of superiority over the other person, and I can't handle that stress. So, I always make someone else give the tip."



Additionally, some contributors who define tipping negatively still acknowledge the necessity of tipping in certain situations. These individuals seem to experience an internal dilemma about tipping, as demonstrated in the following entry:

“...Tipping is basically hush money to prevent staff from cursing at you behind your back. Of course, not always, but I’m talking about situations where tipping should not even be necessary.”

Why people tip?

According to the entries analyzed, the reasons for tipping include: Receiving special attention at a venue, displaying generosity as a form of social prestige, encouraging service providers, a mechanism imposed by capitalism (where customers supplement employees’ wages instead of employers paying fair salaries), perceiving tipping as a tradition, rewarding an employee’s good intentions rather than the service itself, avoiding negative consequences (such as rude behavior, poor service, insults, or complaints), providing financial support to low-income workers, using tipping as a penalty-reward system. Some contributors express that tipping motivates employees to perform better. For example:

“I reject the idea that ‘they already receive a salary.’ I, too, receive a salary at my job, but being appreciated, perhaps in the form of a bonus, always motivates people.”

Other contributors emphasize that they tip to receive special attention at a venue in the future. One entry states:

“A few liras (or 20 liras, depending on the place) can buy you things that otherwise wouldn’t be possible. Humans love money. If you frequently visit a place and tip, you become their top priority. If you tip the waiter, you get personalized service at the café next time. If you tip the delivery courier, your food arrives faster. If you tip the valet, they don’t just park your car anywhere. If you tip the taxi driver, they prioritize your calls.”

Others mention tipping to avoid poor service or mistreatment, as reflected in the following entry:

“...If you don’t tip, they might treat you poorly, ignore you, or even tamper with your food if they’re really upset.”

Finally, some contributors believe people tip as a way to display generosity to others, as reflected in the following statements:

“Tipping builds your reputation in this country...”

“I tip to show that I am a generous, decent, and respectable person... and to avoid the fear of ‘What will people say?’”

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

Among the entries analyzed, waiters are the most frequently mentioned occupational group when discussing tipping. While defining tipping, it is observed that most contributors express negative opinions about it. Striking negative definitions include terms such as bribe, forced donation, favor to the employer, and psychological pressure. In general, contributors question the practice of tipping, even though a few describe it as a reward for good service, a motivational gesture, or a means of expressing appreciation. However, many argue that good service should be delivered without the expectation of extra rewards, and that ensuring fair wages is the responsibility of the employer rather than relying on customers to supplement low salaries. Tipping is often perceived as a system that allows employers to maximize their profits by shifting the burden of fair pay to customers. This widespread view is consistent with Ogbonna and Harris (2002) and Azar (2005), who suggest that the main reason for tipping is to reduce employer costs.

Although some contributors state that they tip because they see it as a social norm, their comments also reveal uncertainty regarding the appropriate amount and manner of tipping, as well as feelings of embarrassment while tipping. These findings support Pala’s (2020) argument that tipping is not yet established as a social norm in Turkey. Moreover, contributors’ explanations for why they tip are consistent with the literature, which sees tipping as a status symbol (Shamir, 1984) and as a way to support low-paid employees (Crespi, 1947; Azar, 2010a).

Interestingly, while some contributors believed that tipping would lead to enhanced service or preferential treatment in the future—a finding inconsistent with Azar’s (2010) assertion that tipping is rarely driven by expectations of future service—this view aligns more closely with the findings of Saunders and Lynn (2010), who argue that tipping is sometimes strategically used to secure improved service outcomes. Indeed, several participants explicitly stated that they tip before service delivery in order to ensure quality. In this context, tipping also emerges as a performative act that signals social status and reproduces existing power asymmetries between customers and service workers (Lynn, 2010).

This research is an exploratory study that aims to understand tipping culture in Turkey, focusing specifically on customer perspectives, especially those who have opinions or experiences related to tipping. Since there is very limited research on tipping culture in Turkey, this study fills an important gap and provides insights into customers' perceptions, offering a foundation for future research.

Nevertheless, this study has some limitations. First, it reflects only the views of individuals who are willing to share their opinions about tipping, focusing on the customer's perspective. Therefore, it provides a one-sided understanding of the issue. Because tipping is a complex phenomenon involving multiple actors (customers, employees, and employers), future research should examine tipping from all these perspectives together. Second, since the data comes from anonymous users on a single online platform, variables like demographic characteristics (which can influence tipping behavior) could not be analyzed. Additionally, since the data is based on anonymous user-generated content from a single online platform, the findings cannot be generalized to the wider population but rather reflect the attitudes of a specific user group. Future research using surveys or interviews should include such variables to offer a deeper understanding of factors affecting tipping behavior. Despite these limitations, this study can serve as a guideline for future research on tipping in Turkey and offers valuable insights into how tipping practices are understood and negotiated from the perspective of customers in Turkey. Overall, the analysis of user-generated content reveals that tipping in Turkey is often perceived with ambivalence or skepticism. While some contributors express support for tipping as a form of appreciation or incentive, a larger portion of the sample questions its fairness and rejects it as an exploitative practice.

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