

EXAMINING E-COMPLAINTS ABOUT TOUR GUIDES: SERVICE FAILURES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract: Tourist guides play a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and destination loyalty. However, service failures in guide-tourist interactions often lead to dissatisfaction and negative word-of-mouth. Despite growing digital complaint platforms, the academic literature lacks comprehensive analyses of e-complaints about tourist guides through a theoretical lens. This study aims to examine online complaints lodged against professional tourist guides, identify major service failures, and interpret their implications for tourism service quality and management practices, within the framework of Service Failure and Recovery Theory. The study employs a qualitative netnographic approach to analyze e-complaints collected from the Turkish platform www.sikayetvar.com. A total of 893 relevant complaints were retrieved and subjected to content analysis using MAXQDA 2022 software. The data were coded and categorized into three main themes: personal attitudes and behaviors, professional incompetence, and fee-related issues. Inter-coder reliability was ensured through Cohen's Kappa coefficient, which indicated high agreement (>0.80). Findings reveal that the most frequent complaints stem from inappropriate and rude behavior (27.9%), indifference (22.6%), program disruptions (17.1%), and lack of knowledge (15.8%). Complaints related to pricing issues such as overcharging and pressuring tourists into extra tours were also prominent. These results demonstrate that tourists' dissatisfaction is not limited to technical knowledge gaps but extends to interpersonal, ethical, and organizational shortcomings. Moreover, failures in communication and transparency appear to significantly harm customer trust and destination image. The results highlight the critical role of guide behavior in post-service evaluations and eWOM dynamics. This study contributes to the theoretical literature by applying Service Failure and Recovery Theory to the domain of tour guiding and offering a timely update on complaint trends. It also provides practical recommendations for tour operators, guide associations, and policymakers, suggesting the need for stricter professional oversight, ethical training, and competency-based performance evaluations to improve service quality in tourism.

Keywords: tourist guide, e-complaint, service failure, service recovery, customer satisfaction, destination loyalty

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a highly competitive sector where service quality and customer satisfaction are directly related to destination loyalty (Cordente-Rodriguez et al., 2012). While tourists' travel experiences are shaped by the quality of the service provided, one of the most important elements for this experience to be perceived positively is tourist guides (Huang et al., 2010). Professional tourist guides serve as a critical bridge and representation in tourists' interaction with the destination. From this perspective, tourist guides are considered as one of the most visible faces of service quality (Zhang & Chow, 2004). However, customer dissatisfaction and complaints become inevitable in case of service delivery failures and tourists' expectations are not met (Davidow & Leigh, 1998). In this context, Service Failure and Recovery Theory, which deals with service failure and service recovery processes, provides a suitable theoretical framework for analyzing e-complaints against tourist guides. Service failure is defined as the mismatch between the service that consumers expect and the service they experience (Park & Park, 2016). Managing these failures effectively and compensating for tourists' negative experiences plays a critical role in restoring customer satisfaction (Patwary & Omar, 2020). It has been suggested that customers usually react in five different ways in case of service failure: doing nothing, not buying the same service again in the future, complaining to their immediate circle, complaining directly to the company or service provider, and complaining to third-party platforms (e.g. complaint sites, social media) (Rogers et al., 1992).

Complaints against tourist guides are especially concentrated on digital platforms (Nazlı, 2020). Today, expressing complaints online has a significant impact on the process of potential tourists obtaining information about service providers (Avcı & Doğan, 2018). Therefore, analyzing e-complaints about guides constitutes an important research area in terms of improving the service quality in the sector and better meeting the expectations of tourists. This study aims to identify the most common types of service failure and develop recommendations for service recovery strategies by analyzing e-complaints

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about tourist guides on the www.sikayetvar.com¹ platform. Within the scope of the research, complaints were categorized under three main headings: personal attitude and behavior, professional incompetence and wage policies. It is observed that complaints about the personal attitude and behavior of the guides are higher than the other categories. This shows that the concept of service failure is not only limited to technical competence, but also includes interaction and communication with the customer. At the same time, the lack of effective implementation of service recovery processes increases the negative eWOM (electronic Word of Mouth) effect and negatively affects destination loyalty (Rahman et al., 2023).

This study aims to examine e-complaints against tourist guides within the framework of Service failure and service recovery theory and to provide suggestions to the stakeholders of the sector to improve the service quality of guides. Although various studies have examined tourist guide performance and customer dissatisfaction using surveys and interviews, few have systematically explored large-scale e-complaints using qualitative netnographic methods.

Existing research, such as those by Temizkan & Ar (2017) and Kanlı (2019), analyzed earlier datasets, and there has been a lack of updated empirical insights reflecting the evolving nature of tour guide-related service failures in the digital age. Furthermore, the integration of Service Failure and Recovery Theory into the context of tour guiding remains underexplored. Therefore, this study addresses this research gap by applying a netnographic approach to recent e-complaints, offering an up-to-date and theory-driven analysis of the main service failures attributed to professional tour guides.

This not only enhances theoretical understanding but also provides actionable insights for tourism stakeholders aiming to improve service quality and tourist satisfaction. It is expected that the findings of the research will be an important guide for travel agencies, guide associations and educational institutions in training guides and improving service quality.

Conceptual Framework

The tourism industry is one of the most dynamic and competitive areas of the service sector. Success in this industry depends to a large extent on ensuring tourist satisfaction. Tourist satisfaction refers to the level at which the services provided by tourist guides and tourism businesses meet or exceed expectations. The difference between achieving satisfaction and not achieving satisfaction plays a decisive role in the long-term success of operations, brand image and competitive advantage (Kagai, 2014; Panda et al., 2019). Achieving guest satisfaction brings about a number of positive outcomes for tourism businesses. First of all, satisfied tourists tend to visit again by increasing their loyalty to the business (Mohammad, 2014). This is referred to as customer loyalty and ensures the sustainability of businesses' revenues (Karim & Rabiul, 2024). Moreover, satisfied tourists strengthen the reputation of the business through word-of-mouth and make it easier to reach potential customers (Foroudi et al., 2025). In other words, satisfied customers contribute to the promotion of the business by telling people around them about their satisfaction. Since tourism activities have a unique structure, consumer behavior differs. The product is intensely intangible. One of the situations caused by this situation is the high uncertainty in consumer perception before the use of the product (Wang et al., 2019).

This uncertainty increases risk perceptions and affects the consumer purchase decision process (Laroche et al., 2003). In such cases, the experiences of satisfied guests can be considered as a very important marketing tool, as consumers rely more on information obtained from their own reference groups. The impact of customer satisfaction on customer behavior is often emphasized. For example, Su & Ha (2025) states that satisfaction increases customers' repurchase intentions and strengthens their tendency to give positive recommendations. In the tourism industry, this manifests itself in the form of guests choosing the same hotel or destination again and recommending it to others. From another perspective, failure to achieve guest satisfaction can have serious negative consequences for tourism activities. Dissatisfied tourists tend not to prefer the business again due to the negative experiences they have had, and this situation causes businesses to lose customers.

More importantly, dissatisfied guests can damage the reputation of the business through negative verbal communication or negative comments on online platforms (Sparks & Browning, 2011). Considering the prevalence of social media and online review platforms today, even a few negative experiences can seriously affect the brand image of businesses. Heskett et al. (1994), in his "Service-Profit Chain" model, emphasizes the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction and states that dissatisfaction leads to customer loss and thus to a decrease in financial performance. In the tourism industry, this situation may cause actors providing tourism supply to lose market share, especially in a highly competitive environment. Service Failure and Recovery Theory is a critical conceptual background in the field of service management that focuses on the nature of service failures and service providers' efforts to recover from them. This theory suggests that service failure is inevitable due to the inherent variability of service delivery and the inseparability of service production and consumption (Morrisson & Huppertz, 2010). Responses to service failure are referred to service recovery and have a significant impact on customer satisfaction, loyalty and overall perceptions of the service provider (Ah-Keng & Loh, 2006; Silber et al., 2009).

Service failures can be categorized according to their level. This categorization plays a decisive role on customer emotions and the effectiveness of recovery strategies (Tang et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2011). For example, even minor service failures can cause customer dissatisfaction and affect repeat purchase intentions. At the same time, serious failures trigger stronger negative emotions, increasing the need for effective recovery strategies (Jones & Farquhar, 2007). The theory emphasizes that the type of service failure directly affects the recovery strategy to be chosen. These strategies can range from financial compensation to service interaction-oriented approaches (Silber et al., 2009). Effective service

¹ sikayetvar.com is Turkey's leading online complaint platform where consumers share their service-related complaints about various sectors. The platform allows users to submit complaints about their experiences with businesses, products and services, while companies have the opportunity to respond to and address customer concerns. Thanks to its extensive database and real-time consumer feedback, Sikayetvar.com serves as a valuable resource for understanding service quality issues, customer dissatisfaction trends and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) dynamics in the Turkish market.

recovery strategies can mitigate the negative consequences of service failures by transforming a dissatisfied customer into a loyal customer (Dabin et al., 2007; Morrisson & Huppertz, 2010). Moreover, perceptions of justice play a critical role in the service recovery process. The perceived fairness of the process, called recovery justice, can be decisive on customer satisfaction and loyalty (Liao et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2011). Research shows that high levels of interactional justice can weaken the negative impact of service failure on customer loyalty (Wang et al., 2011). This suggests that how service providers communicate and interact with their customers during the recovery process is as important as the actions taken during the recovery process (Chen et al., 2022). The theory also considers the role of customer emotions in the service recovery process. Emotional reactions to service failures shape how customers evaluate recovery efforts and their overall satisfaction judgments (Smith & Bolton, 2002). For example, customers who feel that their complaints have been addressed and resolved may experience positive emotional outcomes and increase their overall satisfaction (Smith & Bolton, 2002). In fact, the result of compensated mistakes may even lead to a greater sense of satisfaction than a perfect service (McCullough et al., 2000). However, the timing of recovery efforts is also a critical factor; quick responses can alleviate negative emotions and reinforce customer trust (Suarka & Sulistyawati, 2023; Tang et al., 2018).

The tourism industry is a sector where customer experience is directly related to service. Tourists experience many services such as accommodation, transportation, food and beverage and entertainment together and the quality of these experiences determines the level of satisfaction. Satisfaction is not only limited to customer loyalty and positive recommendations, but also contributes to the competitive advantage of businesses or destinations (Kotler et al., 2014). Moreover, in the tourism industry satisfaction is a critical element for building a sustainable business model. Satisfied guests enable businesses to grow and increase revenues in the long term, while dissatisfied guests can cause reputational damage and financial difficulties for businesses or destinations. Therefore, tourism actors should focus on ensuring guest satisfaction by continuously improving service quality and develop strategies to quickly and effectively compensate for potential failures.

Within the scope of this study, consumers' complaints are considered as an indicator of service failure and also as an important feedback. By examining online complaints against tourist guides, theoretically understanding the failure of their services is considered as the most important premise for service recovery activities to be carried out in an effective way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourist loyalty is largely associated with satisfaction (Assaker et al., 2011). In other words, tourists' satisfaction has the greatest impact on repeat visits (Campo-Martínez et al., 2010). Tourist satisfaction is shaped by the comparison of tourists' expectations and their perceived experiences in a destination (Kim & Brown, 2012; Su & Ha, 2025). Tourist guides are largely responsible for the overall impression and satisfaction with all tour services offered by a destination (Ap & Wong, 2001). In this context, tourist guides should not only have competence but also competence.

While competence is defined as a person's general knowledge, motives, image, social role and skills that are necessary for a person to perform a job but are not related to superior job performance (Joneidi et al., 2025), competence is defined as a set of knowledge, abilities, skills and behaviors that are necessary for a person to perform a job as it should be (Ng & Liu, 2025). In other words, competence is the set of behavioral patterns that the person working in that position should have in order to fulfill the duties and functions of a position as it should be (Woodruffe, 1993). Hoffmann (1999) categorized the definitions of competence in the literature under three headings. These titles are; observable performance, the standard or quality of a person's performance result and the basic qualities of the person. Woodruffe (1993) emphasizes that competence requires both ability and willingness to act in accordance with competence.

The competence required by a profession includes both conceptual (cognitive, knowledge and understanding) and operational (functional, psycho-motor and practical skills) competencies (Le Deist & Winterton, 2005). One of the most important issues for the success of the services provided by tourist guides is the concept of effectiveness. The level of competence possessed by tourist guides is a critical factor that directly determines the quality of the provided service and, consequently, overall consumer satisfaction. As one of the oldest professions within the tourism sector (Carvalho, 2022), tour guiding necessitates a multifaceted set of competencies to be performed successfully. The literature has framed these abilities in various ways; for instance, Kapa et al. (2022) explained the core competencies of tourist guiding under four main headings: knowledge, skills, qualifications, and physical appearance. The knowledge dimension includes not only fluency in foreign languages, general cultural literacy, and an awareness of other cultures, but also in-depth knowledge of the guided region—its history, geography, politics, art, and economy—as well as basic first-aid training. The dimension of skills encompasses the ability to communicate effectively, the power of interpretation, organizational and coordination capabilities, and the capacity to cope with problems and engage in professional self-renewal. Supporting this, Sulaiman Al Jahwari et al. (2016) stated that guides should have developed sophisticated verbal skills, including grammar and word choice, alongside nuanced non-verbal skills such as friendliness while maintaining a professional distance. Finally, qualities and physical appearance relate to the guide's leadership role, extroversion, hospitality, and professional dress. Furthermore, Sharma (2018) points out that an essential part of guiding involves emotional regulation, which is the ability to hide negative emotions like anger and consciously exhibit positive behaviors such as smiling and making eye contact.

Jonasson & Scherle (2012) state that the competencies required in a tourist guide include the ability to translate, narrate and interpret, verbal as well as non-verbal communication, a general willingness and openness to interact with cultural diversity, no barriers to travel, group involvement and creativity. Kapa et al. (2022) stated that the most important competencies that tourist guides should have are time management skills, ethical skills, enthusiasm, guest service skills, health and safety skills and communication skills. For leadership, which is one of the competencies that a tourist guide should have, Zhang et al. (2025) stated that a good leader should be good at managing four issues. These four issues are

attention, meaning, trust and self-knowledge. Managing attention means attracting the attention of the group he/she is addressing and gathering them around him/her. Managing meaning means aligning individuals with themselves and establishing good communication, while managing confidence emphasizes the importance of stability and focus. Managing oneself means knowing what one is good at and what one lacks. In a group with a good leader, everyone feels valued and belongs to the group, so they leave the tour satisfied. Unsatisfied guests express their dissatisfaction by complaining to various platforms (Sahin et al., 2017). Rogers et al. (1992) define consumer complaint behavior as the action or actions that occur after customer dissatisfaction and state that guests follow 5 different paths in this case;

- Doing nothing
- Changing future behavior (not buying the product or service complained about again),
- Complaint to close circle,
- Direct complaint (complaint to the company or its representatives)
- Complaints to third parties

All of these paths followed after a complaint are paths that can harm the agency and the destination. Even if the guests with a complaint follow the path of doing nothing, this is damaging. Because complaints are actually road maps to find out where it is wrong and make amends. Indeed, Patwary & Omar (2020) emphasized that it is important to take complaints seriously in providing good and quality service, which is the most basic feature of the service sector. He stated that complaints made by tourists provide the destination or business with the opportunity to compensate for service failures and allow the destination or business to win back tourists.

Based on the importance of tourist guides and the concept of complaint for the tourism sector, the study reveals the common causes of complaints against professional tourist guides and offers a roadmap for ensuring destination loyalty by offering solutions. The following table has been created by reviewing the literature on complaints against tourist guides and the leading studies conducted to date. The tags and results of these studies are given in the Table 1.

Table 1. articles dealing with complaints against tourist guides (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Article Title	Conclusion
Chang (2006). Customer satisfaction with tour leaders' performance: A study of Taiwan's package tours.	In this study, data were collected by 3 methods. First, a semi-structured face-to-face interview with a random sample of Taiwanese travel agency owners; Second: Participant observation on a guided package tour; Third, international telephone calls with tour group participants. It was concluded that the service attitude of the tour leader was sufficient to satisfy the tour participants, but interpretation skills would increase the satisfaction level of the customers. It was also observed that tipping improves the performance of guides.
Akköz (2015). Evaluation of the Expected qualifications of professional tourist guides and their performance by domestic tourists. (Unpublished master's thesis).	According to the performance of professional tourist guides in terms of knowledge and equipment, communication has the highest average, while general culture has the lowest average. In terms of skills, the antecedents with the highest average are speaking ability, leadership ability, interpretation ability and body language ability. Taking responsibility, empathizing and coping with problems are the antecedents with the lowest performance in this area. Regarding character traits, the antecedents with the highest average are being respectful and polite and being hospitable. Being a listener and being disciplined are the antecedents with the lowest performance in this area. In conclusion, it can be said that increasing the performance of guides in terms of knowledge-equipment, skills and character traits will increase the satisfaction level of domestic tourists.
Avcı & Doğan (2017). What Do E-Complaints Say About Tourist Guides?	Of the 225 complaints received against tourist guides; Leadership and social skills, For professional competence, Failure to fulfill their responsibilities to the group, Complaints about unethical behavior and It was found that complaints about legal obligations were grouped under 5 themes.
Temizkan & Ar (2017). Analysis of E-complaints Against Tourist Guides.	Your 1337 complaints against the guides; 41.36% in the behavior dimension, 24.53% in the knowledge transfer dimension, 12.78% professional experience, 12.04% other dimension (not following the program and not knowing a foreign language) and 9.19% was found to be in the sales dimension.
Zorlu & Erkuş (2018). Tourist Complaints and Complaint Behaviors in Cultural Tours.	Main complaint issues in cultural tours; Sourced from tour content, Guide sourced, Break welded and It is due to the attitude of the bus staff
Cansu (2018). Professional tourist guides' professional adequacy of the foreign language education they receive during their education and training periods (Unpublished master's thesis).	Approximately 35% of the participants received additional foreign language training through the course in order to obtain a cock card or to add an additional language. The majority of these courses were in English. Approximately 40% of the participants think that the hours of foreign language training provided at their universities are sufficient. However, about 36% of the participants think that it is insufficient. It was observed that most of the foreign language training provided as practical training was inadequate, but theoretical training was found to be more adequate than practical training.
Kanlı (2019). Investigation of E-Complaints Against Tourist Guides with Content Analysis.	As a result of the examination of 397 e-complaint texts against tourist guides, 45% on the behavior of tourist guides, 41% on professional competence, 9% complaints about the sales made by the guides and 5% complaints about the information provided by the guides.
Çakmak & Kurnaz (2020). A research on complaints of tourist guides of accommodation businesses: Safranbolu Case	It was observed that overly demanding and rude behavior of the tourist guides of the accommodation establishments, misinformation about the accommodation establishment and acting contrary to the tour program were the reasons for complaints.
Luşak (2023). Complaints about the Performance of Tourist Guides: A Review on Package Tour Consumers (Unpublished Master's Thesis).	The top five complaints of domestic package tour consumers about the performance of the tour guide were found to be that the tour guide was not polite, the tour guide was not respectful, the tour guide did not provide information about reliable shopping stores, the tour guide did not fulfill what was promised in the tour program, and the tour guide was not punctual.

When the complaints against tourist guides (Table 1) are analyzed, it is seen that the subject is still a new field of study in the literature. The majority of the studies were conducted with the survey method. When we look at the studies on the analysis of e- complaints against tourist guides in the national literature, we see Kanlı (2019), Avcı & Doğan (2018) and Temizkan & Ar (2017). It is thought that this study is important due to the fact that time has passed since the studies and everything is changing rapidly today. In addition, it is envisaged that the comparison with these studies will be useful in terms of seeing the change in complaints from past to present.

METHOD

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative research design to examine online complaints against professional tourist guides. In the study, netnography method was used to analyze online customer feedback (Bartl et al., 2016). Netnography is a qualitative research method used to understand consumers' behaviors and interactions in the digital environment and is increasingly adopted in tourism research (Kozinets, 2015). However, one of the strengths of the study is that the netnography method allows for the natural contextualization of consumer experiences.

Within the scope of the research, "www.sikayetvar.com", one of the leading online platforms where consumers in Turkey share their complaints, was used as a data source. On January 10, 2024, 1213 complaints were identified as a result of a search with the keyword "tour guide". However, 320 of these complaints were excluded from the analysis as they were not directly related to professional tour guides and a total of 893 complaints were included in the study.

Content analysis method was used to analyze the data. Content analysis is a qualitative research technique that allows large amounts of data to be systematically categorized and organized into meaningful themes (Krippendorff, 2018). Complaint data were coded and thematic analysis was applied through the MAXQDA 2022 program. In order to increase the reliability of the data during the analysis process, two different researchers independently coded the data and the agreement between the codes was measured by Cohen's Kappa coefficient (Fleiss et al., 1969). The agreement coefficient was above 0.80 and it was determined that the coding process was reliable. In line with the findings obtained from the literature and preliminary analyses, the data were divided into three main categories: personal attitudes and behaviors, professional incompetence and wage policies. These categories were further elaborated by dividing them into sub-themes:

Personal Attitudes and Behaviors: Indifference and neglect, discrimination, inappropriate and rude behavior.

Professional Inadequacy: Lack of foreign language, lack of knowledge, schedule changes and disruptions, lack of communication and organization, lack of experience. Fee Policies: Extra remuneration, wage transparency issues.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the 1431 coding made for professional tourist guides, it was concluded that the most common complaint was related to personal attitude and behavior with 747 (Table 2). The second most common complaint is professional incompetence with 557. Although numerically small, it was also found that there were serious complaints about wages.

Table 2. Distribution of E-Complaints About Tour Guides by Category and Sub-Issue (n = 1,431) (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Category	Sub-Issue	No. of Complaints	% of Total Issues
Personal Attitudes & Behavior	Inappropriate/Rude Behavior	400	27.9%
	Indifference/Neglect	323	22.6%
	Discrimination	24	1.7%
Professional Incompetence	Program Changes	245	17.1%
	Lack of Knowledge	226	15.8%
	Communication/Organizational Gaps	145	10.1%
Wage Policies	Overcharging	80	5.6%
	Extra Tour Pressure	54	3.8%
Total		1,431	100%

Complaints about Personal Attitudes and Behavior

Of the 747 complaints about personal attitudes and behaviors, 400 were inappropriate and rude behavior, 323 were indifference and negligence, and 24 were in the category of discrimination (Figure 1).

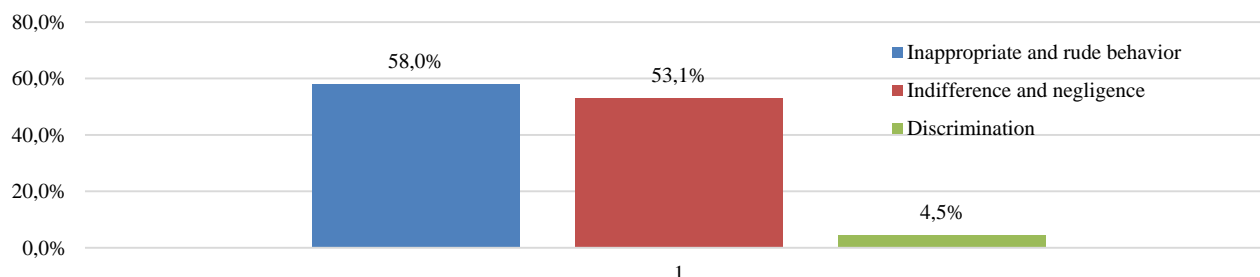


Figure 1. Graphic of sub-headings of the Personal Attitudes and Behaviors category (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

In the category of personal attitudes and behaviors, the most common complaint was inappropriate and rude behavior of the professional tourist guide with 58%. Under this heading, the professional tourist guide's behaviors that are

incompatible with professional ethics, immoral, verbally and physically violent are discussed. "He put a microphone in the mouths of people who were sleeping and snoring on the bus ride and made 40 people listen to their snoring and laughed and made everyone laugh at how they snored.", "He treated us not as customers but as his subordinates. He fought with everyone on the bus. He walked on people." As can be seen in the complaints, it is understood that there are professional tourist guides who exhibit rude behaviors that are not suitable for professional tourist guides. Again, under the heading of indifference and negligence, complaints such as "The professional tour guide said that they were free for 3 hours and did not even look at us.", "The tour guide was very indifferent. He did not accompany us to the places we visited".

The complaints that the guide did not let the group free and did not explain, did not take care of the guests, and did not help in any matter are intensely common. Under the heading of discrimination, there are complaints of discrimination based on nationality, such as "While he gave a humorous speech to foreigners for half an hour, he talked about Turkish citizens for two or three minutes." There are also complaints of discrimination based on nationality, such as "During the tour, he established a close relationship with some friends, chatted with them and forgot about us." There are also complaints that he established personal relationships within the group and treated others differently. At the same time, ". While he helped those who bought a tour from him with passport issues, he told those who did not buy a tour from him to go and take care of it yourself." There were also complaints that he discriminated against those who did not buy extra tours.

Complaints about Professional Incompetence

When the complaints in the category of professional inadequacy were examined, program changes and disruptions were the most common subcategory, followed by lack of knowledge, communication/organizational problems, lack of experience, and foreign language deficiency (Figure 2). As a matter of fact, Chen et al. (2022) stated in their study that the services provided by the enterprises at the specified time and in the specified manner meet the expectations of the tourists and accordingly increase customer satisfaction. Second most common complaint was lack of information with 40.6%, the third most common complaint was lack of communication and organization with 26%, the fourth most common complaint was lack of experience with 9% and the last most common complaint was lack of foreign language skills with 2.7%.

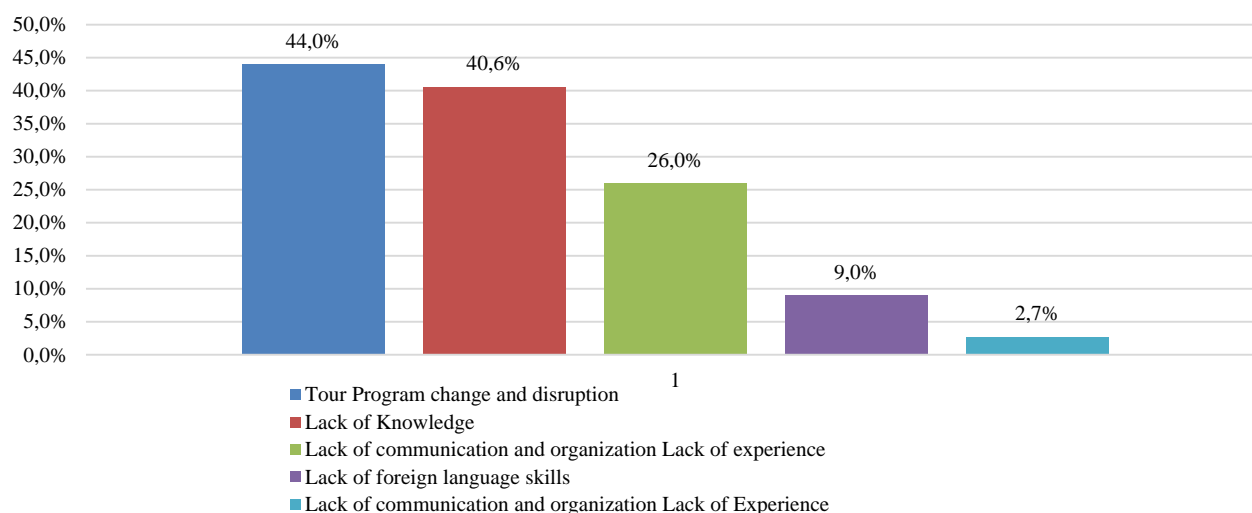


Figure 2. Graph of sub-headings of the category of occupational inadequacy (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Regarding the program change and disruption "Although Batumi was in our agreement and the fee was charged, psychological pressure was applied by the guide and it was canceled and no refund was made."

"The places we wanted to visit, which were on the list of places to visit, were passed by saying that they were no different from the places you see here."

Examples of complaints about lack of information; "He knew nothing about the Balkans."

"He had no knowledge of the area. He would read us something on Google and then let us go."

Lack of communication and organization;

"I experienced all the unplannedness thanks to your guide. Not being able to schedule breaks, not being able to control the group, managing crises with stress and more."

Lack of experience;

"Tour guide is unprofessional and amateur"

"It was his first time as a long-distance guide. They shouldn't have left an inexperienced person alone."

Lack of foreign language skills; "France tour guide who doesn't speak French"

"The guide for the tour of Italy did not speak Italian. He was trying to speak English by putting a few words together with English in mind."

Complaints Regarding the Fee Category

In the fee category, overcharging guests was the most common complaint with 62.7%. The second most common complaint was about extra tours with 42.7% (Figure 3).

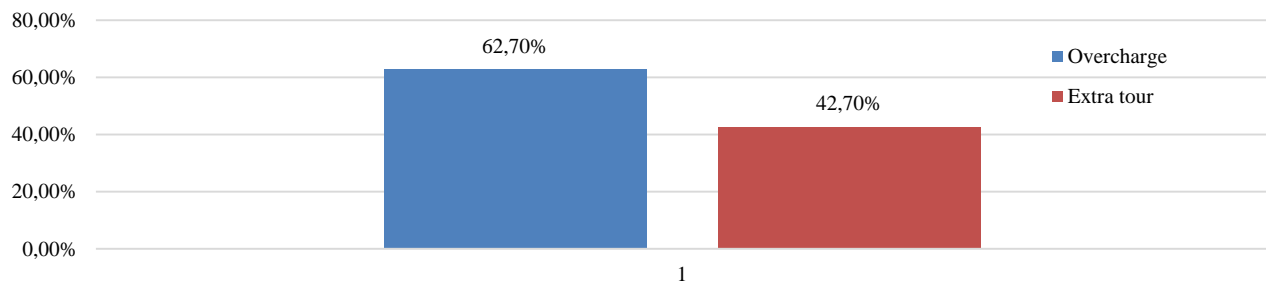


Figure 3. Graph of subcategories of the wage category (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

Regarding overcharging, "He charged 100 TL for the passage to Akdamar Island even though it was 50 TL.", "We paid 100 dollars for the Luxor tour, but it is already sold for 35 dollars." *There are similar complaints. Regarding the extra tours*, "I purchased all tour packages in the tour program. In the tour program that 11 people would participate in, they canceled my tour due to the cancellation of others and said that they would not refund the fee. I absolutely do not accept this.", "They leave those who do not buy the extra excursion packages during the tour at the gas station for the purpose of punishing those who do not buy the extra excursion packages during the tour and oblige you to buy the extra tours." *There are similar complaints.*

Overall, 893 valid complaints were analyzed, resulting in 1,431 distinct coded issues. Among them, 52.2% (747 complaints) were related to personal attitudes and behaviors of tour guides, followed by 38.9% (557 complaints) concerning professional incompetence, and 8.9% (127 complaints) regarding wage policies.

The most frequently cited issue was inappropriate and rude behavior (400 cases, 27.9% of total codes), followed by lack of destination knowledge (226 cases, 15.8%) and program disruptions (245 cases, 17.1%). Additionally, overpricing and aggressive promotion of extra tours were reported in 80 and 54 cases, respectively, indicating significant issues in ethical and transparent pricing. These figures emphasize that the core source of dissatisfaction stems from interpersonal misconduct and operational disorganization rather than technical knowledge alone.

By analyzing online complaints against professional tourist guides, this study reveals the main themes of tourists' negative experiences with guide services. The findings show that especially personal attitudes and behaviors and professional incompetence are the determining factors in terms of tourist dissatisfaction. These results are in line with other studies in the literature. For example, studies by Temizkan & Ar (2017) and Kanlı (2019) revealed that complaints against tourist guides are largely related to the personal attitudes and professional competencies of guides. In this context, the findings of our study offer important theoretical contributions when evaluated within the scope of Service Failure and Recovery Theory, which deals with service failure and recovery processes.

The findings suggest that failures in the services provided by tourist guides can negatively affect customer loyalty and trigger negative eWOM behaviors. This supports the importance of the service recovery process proposed by Morrisson & Huppertz (2010) and Naeem et al. (2024), and aligns with recent findings by Albayrak et al. (2025), who demonstrated that service failures significantly reduce customer engagement and intensify negative behavioral responses in online platforms. In particular, considering customers' reactions to service failure and the effects of recovery strategies, it becomes clear that training and supervision mechanisms should be strengthened to improve the service quality of tourist guides.

While studies such as Wahyuningsih et al. (2025) have focused on identifying the antecedents of tourist satisfaction in sustainable tourism contexts, the present findings draw attention to the inverse relationship—how specific dimensions of service failure, particularly behavioral and ethical issues in tour guiding, contribute to dissatisfaction and weaken destination image. This contrast underscores the need for integrated frameworks that address both the drivers of satisfaction and the deterrents caused by service misconduct in the tourism experience.

In terms of personal attitudes and behaviors, the most common complaints against tourist guides were inappropriate and rude behavior, indifference and discrimination. These results support the view emphasized by Hwang & Lee (2019) and Ap & Wong (2001) that tourist guides' communication skills and empathy abilities play a critical role in customer satisfaction. Developing effective communication strategies and paying more attention to professional ethics of tourist guides is seen as an important factor in reducing service failures. Recent research by Liu et al. (2025) emphasizes that perceptions of unfair treatment in customer reviews are shaped by a sense of relative deprivation. This notion helps explain why certain tour guide behaviors—such as favoritism, discrimination, or verbal misconduct—generate disproportionately negative reactions among tourists. In this context, the complaints analyzed in the present study can be seen not only as expressions of service dissatisfaction but also as responses to perceived injustice and inequality, which intensify emotional responses and contribute to stronger negative eWOM behaviors. Recent findings in Tourism Management suggest that leadership behaviors such as humor can mitigate employee stress in service failure contexts (Xu et al., 2025).

Although the focus here is on internal stakeholders, the underlying principle of interpersonal conduct impacting post-failure outcomes aligns closely with our analysis of tour guide behavior and customer dissatisfaction. These insights reinforce the importance of communication-based interventions and emotional competence training for tourism personnel.

In the category of professional inadequacy, program changes and disruptions, lack of information and organizational inadequacies were identified as the most frequently encountered problems. In particular, it is seen that tourists are dissatisfied with the changes in tour programs. This finding confirms the negative effects of not meeting customer expectations on tourists' overall satisfaction, as stated in the study by Park & Park (2016). In this context, the importance of making tour programs more transparent and flexible and the importance of crisis management skills of guides emerges.

Another important finding of the study is the significant level of complaints about tour guides' pricing policies. Issues such as extra tour fees, non-transparent pricing policies and overcharging can negatively affect destination loyalty by damaging tourists' perception of trust. Studies by Beerli & Martin (2004) and Sparks & Browning (2011) emphasize the effects of price transparency on tourist trust and destination image. Therefore, tour operators and guide associations should develop regulatory mechanisms to make their pricing policies more transparent and increase customer trust.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study aimed to examine e-complaints about professional tour guides, particularly in terms of their personal attitudes, professional competence and ethical behavior. Grounded in the framework of service failure and recovery theory, the research sought to understand the factors underlying dissatisfaction with the service delivery of tour guides and explore potential implications for improving service quality in tourism.

The findings confirm that the most common complaints are related to personal attitudes and behaviors rather than technical shortcomings. This suggests that the main problem is not only a lack of professional knowledge but also a poor understanding of service ethics and interpersonal skills. Such complaints suggest that many tourists perceive tour guides not only as information providers but as key figures shaping their overall travel experience. As a result, inappropriate behaviors such as rudeness, negligence and favoritism have far-reaching effects beyond individual dissatisfaction, affecting destination image and tourist loyalty. Moreover, the persistence of these complaints over time raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing regulatory and educational mechanisms in addressing the problem. Despite the existence of professional standards and codes of ethics, the recurrence of similar complaints over the years indicates that existing practice and training structures are inadequate. This suggests that stricter oversight, competency-based training models and systematic performance evaluations are needed to ensure sustainable service quality. The study also draws attention to the gap between technical competence and professional competence. While tour guides may meet the formal requirements for certification, issues such as program inconsistencies, inadequate destination knowledge and poor crisis management suggest that formal training may not adequately equip guides with the skills necessary for dynamic and unpredictable service interactions. The results reveal the reality that professional competence goes beyond knowledge to include qualities such as adaptability, leadership and emotional intelligence, which are critical to enhance the tourist experience.

The results underline the need for tighter regulatory oversight and professional development initiatives in the tour guiding sector. Professional tour guides serve as key representatives of both tour operators and destinations, making it imperative for them to demonstrate ethical behavior, professionalism and competence. Regulatory bodies such as the Association of Tour Guides and the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies should implement stricter monitoring and disciplinary measures to ensure compliance with ethical standards. From a management perspective, tour operators should implement greater transparency in pricing and tour policies to reduce complaints about fees. Setting clear rules for extra charges and ensuring that tour programs are implemented as advertised will contribute to increased tourist confidence and satisfaction.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the service failure discourse in tourism by showing how intangible factors such as attitudes and behaviors can significantly influence service perceptions. While much of the literature on tourism service quality emphasizes logistical and operational factors, this study highlights the need for human centered approaches in tour guiding. Addressing these issues requires a holistic intervention that combines regulatory oversight, ethical training and behavioral assessment within a tourism service excellence framework. The findings of the study offer important implications from both theoretical and applied perspectives. Theoretically, analyzing e-complaints against tourist guides in the context of service failure and recovery theory contributes to understanding the nature of customer dissatisfaction in tourism services. In this sense, it makes a unique contribution to the theory by expanding scientific knowledge. In terms of practice, in order to improve the service quality of tourist guides, it is recommended to strengthen vocational training, establish effective supervision mechanisms for guides and strictly enforce ethical rules.

Future research could extend this investigation by conducting cross-cultural analyses of tour guide complaints to identify global best practices and structural differences in guiding regulations. Furthermore, empirical studies examining the impact of different training models on guide performance can provide practical insights for industry stakeholders.

By integrating these perspectives, the tourism sector can develop more comprehensive strategies to improve service quality, reduce negative experiences, and strengthen the role of professional tour guides as cultural brokers and facilitators of meaningful travel experiences.

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