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The Impact of Tour Guides' Competencies on Tourists' Satisfaction in Rwanda Case Study of Volcanoes National Park in Musanze District

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of tour guide competencies on tourists' satisfaction in Rwanda. It examined the roles of tour guides, the behavioral impact on tourists' satisfaction, and the challenges they faced. This descriptive research design used mixed-method approach, and data was collected from 85 respondents using universal sampling. Findings revealed that tour guides function as destination interpreters, cultural mediators, destination ambassadors and engagement facilitators. Their professionalism and behavior significantly enhanced visitor comfort, experiential quality, and repeat visitation. However, guides experience regional insecurity, substandard hospitality services, limited training, language barriers, and seasonality as thus, strategic interventions were recommended such as enhancing communication skills, ongoing professional development, and greater promotion of domestic tourism to address seasonal fluctuations. The findings have significant implications for policymakers and tourism practitioners by highlighting the centrality of tour guide capacity in shaping visitor satisfaction and sustaining competitive tourism experiences. The key contribution of this study lies in its integrated and context-specific analysis of tour guide roles, behavioral influences, and systemic constraints an underexplored area in tourism literature. It offers a conceptual and empirical foundation for future research and informed policy development aimed at strengthening human capital within the tourism sector.

Keywords: Competencies, tourist guide, conduct, tourists' satisfaction

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Introduction

The global growth of tourism has highlighted human capital, particularly the quality of tour guides, as a critical driver of destination competitiveness (Alazaizeh et al., 2019). The tourism sector worldwide is predominantly composed of micro and small enterprises (MSEs), which are vital to local economic development and community livelihoods (Ateljevic & Doorne, 2003; Pham et al., 2021). Rogerson & Sixaba (2021) emphasise that in developing economies, MSEs are central not only to service delivery but also to inclusive tourism growth and sustainability. Rwanda's tourism regulatory framework supports this through mandatory licensing, continuous professional development, and adherence to national service quality standards, aligning with broader goals of sustainable tourism and local empowerment. For this reason, the tour guiding sector in Rwanda heavily relies on individual guides and small operators as the primary interface between destinations and visitors. Thus, competent tour guides skilled in interpretation, destination knowledge, customer service, and cross-cultural communication are key to enhancing tourist satisfaction and promoting responsible visitor behaviour. Core competencies such as communication proficiency, destination knowledge, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness are essential for guiding excellence (Ap & Wong, 2019; Cetinkaya & Öter, 2016). Tour guide competence is inherently multidimensional, comprising cognitive (e.g., historical knowledge), behavioural (e.g., adaptability, communication), and affective (e.g., enthusiasm, interpersonal skills) domains (Ap & Wong, 2001; Cetinkaya & Öter, 2016). These competencies enable effective group management and personalised, culturally relevant experiences that boost perceived service quality and allow guides to adjust leadership style to ensure group cohesion, safety, and meaningful engagement. Guides act as cultural interpreters and facilitators, shaping tourist perceptions and satisfaction through effective communication, particularly in foreign languages, and demonstrating local knowledge and professionalism (Al Najdawi et al., 2017; Tsai et al., 2016). Competent, well-trained guides contribute to higher satisfaction, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth, supporting long-term destination competitiveness (Al Najdawi et al., 2017; Sri & Elfitra, 2019). The SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988) aids in understanding how tour guide competencies influence service quality and satisfaction, where guides who meet or exceed expectations generate positive disconfirmation and destination loyalty. This suggests that well-trained guides are more likely to engage tourists positively, raising service standards and encouraging favourable word-of-mouth. Such competencies—cultural knowledge, language proficiency, and interpersonal effectiveness—are crucial to tourist satisfaction, as shown in Volcanoes National Park, where guides' detailed knowledge of biodiversity and heritage enriches the visitor experience. Conversely, the expectancy disconfirmation theory (Oliver, 1980) posits that exceeding tourist expectations leads to increased satisfaction, while failure results in negative disconfirmation. For instance, tourists interacting with knowledgeable guides develop more favourable destination perceptions, while those with poor communication or limited knowledge experience dissatisfaction. Additionally, the cognitive-affective model of tourist satisfaction highlights that guide performance influences satisfaction both cognitively and emotionally, with enthusiasm, interpersonal skills, and storytelling fostering emotional

connections and encouraging repeat visits. This aligns with the Service Profit Chain theory (Heskett et al., 1994), which links guide competence with improved service quality and tourist loyalty.

However, despite their pivotal role in enhancing tourist experiences, tour guides in Rwanda face numerous professional challenges that hinder service quality. Key issues include limited training opportunities, language barriers, job insecurity linked to tourism seasonality, and weak collaboration with stakeholders such as tour operators, conservation bodies, and local communities (Liu & Deng, 2017). Observations from attractions like Volcanoes National Park and Nyungwe Forest reveal recurring concerns over guides' limited communication abilities, insufficient destination knowledge, and lapses in professional conduct, all of which negatively affect tourist perceptions and satisfaction. A critical gap lies in interpretive competence, particularly regarding Rwanda's historical, ecological, and cultural heritage. Tourists increasingly expect engaging, informative narratives, which are often lacking. This disconnect between expectations and actual service delivery underpins the rationale for this study. The paper contributes to academic discourse and sector performance by identifying key competencies and outcomes of tour guiding in Rwanda, using a mixed-method approach. Specifically, it explores: (i) the role of tour guides in Rwanda, (ii) the influence of guide behaviour on tourist satisfaction, and (iii) the challenges tour guides face.

Literature review

Theoretical and conceptual framework

The quality of tour guiding plays a crucial role in shaping tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness. As illustrated in Figure 1, professionally competent guides i.e., those equipped through education, training, and a customer-oriented mindset, are more likely to deliver high-quality services (Alazaizeh et al., 2019). The SERVQUAL theory explains service quality as the gap between expected and perceived service, a gap tour guides help close through cultural interpretation, language proficiency, and destination knowledge (Parasuraman et al., 1988). For instance, in Rwanda's Volcanoes National Park, guides who accurately and engagingly convey information on mountain gorillas and conservation efforts significantly impact satisfaction, particularly for international tourists. Thus, tour guiding has evolved beyond transactional roles, aligning with experiential marketing and the concept of customer delight (Schmitt, 1999; Torres & Kline, 2006, 2013). Guides who demonstrate a blend of technical skills, empathy, storytelling, and cultural sensitivity are more likely to exceed expectations, foster emotional connections, and build loyalty, reflecting SERVQUAL dimensions such as responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory complements this view, suggesting satisfaction arises when actual performance exceeds expectations (Oliver, 1980). When guides are knowledgeable, professional, and responsive, they trigger positive disconfirmation, increasing tourist delight, loyalty, and favourable destination perceptions (Torres & Kline, 2013; Gatera & Manirakiza, 2020). This experiential satisfaction supports repeat visitation and positive word-of-mouth, aligning with experiential marketing theory's emphasis on emotional engagement (Schmitt, 1999). Further conceptualisation is provided by the activity competency model, grounded in job characteristics Theory (JCT), which outlines three competency levels: core roles and functions, key activities, and foundational competencies (knowledge, skills, attitudes) (Wu et al., 2018; Hussein, 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). JCT posits that motivation and satisfaction are heightened when roles are meaningful and involve skill variety. Tour guiding fits this profile, demanding cultural literacy, safety awareness, language skills, and customer service. When these competencies are effectively developed, they enhance motivation, guide performance, and ultimately enrich the tourist experience, supporting sustainable tourism outcomes.

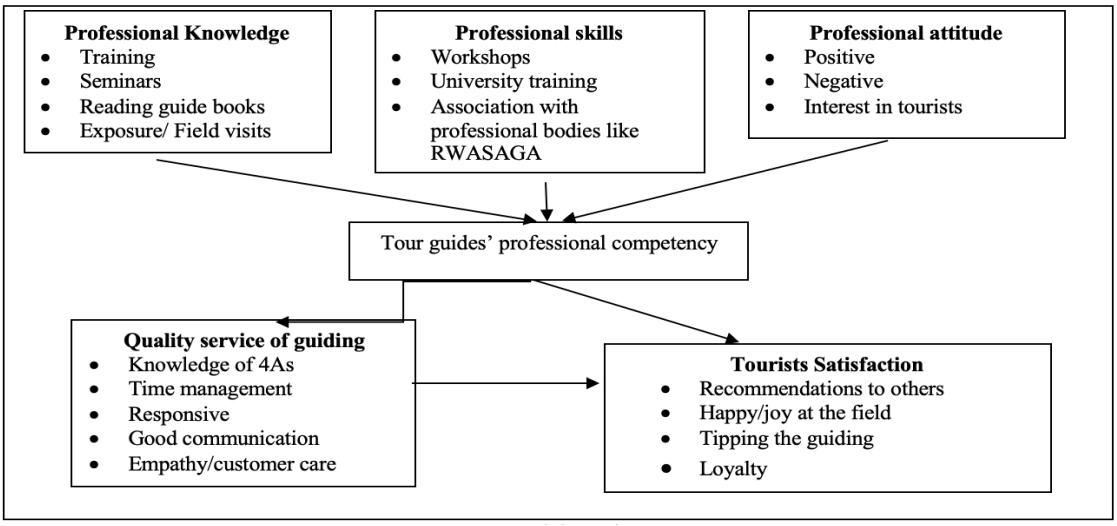

Figure 1: Conceptual framework

The role of tour guide competence in enhancing tourist experience and satisfaction

In the contemporary tourism landscape, emotional engagement and the delivery of memorable experiences are increasingly recognised as central to tourist satisfaction and destination competitiveness. Traditional models framing tourists as rational

decision-makers have been replaced by experiential and relational frameworks emphasising affective and immersive dimensions of travel (Vanhamme, 2008; Lashley, 2008). Within this context, tour guide competence has emerged as a critical determinant of service quality, particularly in experience-driven destinations such as Rwanda. Tour guides serve not only as logistical facilitators but also as cultural ambassadors, interpreters of place, and mediators of emotional engagement. They convey rich narratives, foster interaction, and embody sustainability and conservation values, all pivotal in shaping tourist perceptions. In experience-intensive settings like Volcanoes National Park, tourists rated visits more positively when guides demonstrated comprehensive knowledge of mountain gorillas, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage. Similarly, in Nyungwe Forest National Park, guides who provided in-depth ecological information and engaged in storytelling and culturally relevant dialogue significantly enhanced perceived experience value (Gatera & Manirakiza, 2020). These emotionally engaging interactions not only increased satisfaction but also encouraged destination loyalty and positive word-of-mouth. In ecologically and culturally sensitive destinations such as Rwanda, tour guides are central to delivering interpretive and ethically grounded experiences by effectively communicating scientific knowledge and cultural narratives that enhance visitor understanding while ensuring safety and respect for host environments. Guides contribute to tourists' cognitive, emotional, and social well-being by providing engaging, personalised experiences that foster satisfaction and loyalty (Liu & Deng, 2017; Lin et al., 2017). Thus, tour guides play a pivotal role in shaping both immediate and long-term destination perceptions, functioning as cultural interpreters, information leaders, and brand ambassadors. In today's experience-driven tourism landscape, tour guiding is no longer a basic operational function but a strategic lever for destination differentiation and competitiveness. The Rwanda Development Board (RDB, 2022) has invested in tour guide training focused on multilingualism, environmental education, and customer care to boost tourist satisfaction, repeat visitation, and positive destination branding. This aligns with SERVQUAL theory, which posits that service quality arises from the alignment between expected and perceived service, a gap that competent guides help close through subject mastery, cross-cultural communication, and interpersonal sensitivity (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Their role extends beyond factual narration to emotional engagement and leadership, acting as mentors, facilitators, and safety officers (Hwang, 2019; Cetinkaya & Öter, 2016). These multifaceted competencies include technical skills such as wilderness first aid, ecological literacy, and hiking experience, alongside interpersonal and meta-skills like situational judgement, adaptability, and group management (Ap & Wong, 2019). Beyond enhancing service delivery, guides support the operational sustainability of tourism enterprises by aligning tour content with visitor expectations (Wu et al., 2018). Guide performance, measured through attributes such as friendliness, reliability, and emotional intelligence, directly influences service quality (Tsegaw & Teressa, 2017). Ultimately, tour guides act as vital bridges between tourists, providers, and local communities, transforming ordinary tours into meaningful, educational, and emotionally resonant experiences that support sustainable tourism development.

Adherence to the World Federation of Tourist Guide Associations (WFTGA) Code of Guiding Practice ensures a high level of professionalism and provides value-added services offered by individual guides to their clients (Francis, Wandaka, Wamathai & Jilo, 2019). Tourist guide associations affiliated with the WFTGA accept, on behalf of their members, the principles and aims established by the WFTGA, as outlined below:

- welcome and greet customers before proceeding
- introduce yourself first
- to provide a professional service to visitors, professional in care and commitment, and professional in providing an objective understanding of the place visited, free from prejudice or propaganda.
- to ensure that as far as possible what is presented as fact is true, and that a clear distinction is made between this truth and stories, legends, traditions, or opinions.
- to act fairly and reasonable in all dealings with all those who engage the services of guides and with colleagues working in all aspects of tourism.
- to protect the reputation of tourism in our country by making every endeavor to ensure that guided groups treat with respect the environment, wildlife, sights and monuments, and also local customs and sensitivities.
- as representatives of the host country to welcome visitors and act in such a way as to bring credit to the country visited and promote it as a tourist destination.

In the realm of tourism particularly in guiding services, evaluating and improving performance necessitates a robust framework built on well-defined competency models. Drawing on foundational research by Bakker & Demerouti (2017) and Tsegaw & Teressa (2017), four interrelated competency models have been identified as essential for enhancing guide effectiveness and supporting organisational performance. These models provide a structured approach for assessing, developing, and aligning the skills required across various levels of the tourism workforce.

Organisational core competency model

At the base of the framework is the organisational core competency model, which encompasses a set of universal competencies expected of all employees, regardless of their specific roles. These competencies are reflective of the organisation's mission, values, and service philosophy. By promoting competencies such as customer orientation, effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and teamwork, this model fosters a unified and performance-driven workforce. It serves as a foundational platform upon which more specialised competencies can be developed.

Functional competency model

The functional competency model builds upon the core by addressing the technical and role-specific skills required within distinct departments or operational areas of a tourism enterprise. These competencies are tailored to the specialised nature of roles, ensuring both service quality and operational efficiency. In the guiding context, this includes knowledge of geographical landscapes, interpretation of wildlife (e.g., the Big Five), botanical expertise, museum guiding techniques, meticulous record-keeping, and proficiency in outdoor navigation such as hiking. This model ensures that employees are technically equipped to fulfil the responsibilities of their respective functions.

Job-specific competency model

Further narrowing the focus, the job-specific competency model identifies the precise skills and attributes necessary for success in individual roles. As highlighted by (Francis et al. 2019), this model is performance-oriented, focusing on the competencies consistently exhibited by high-performing individuals in particular positions. For tour guides, this may include multilingual communication, engaging presentation skills, safety and risk management, and the capacity for adaptive problem-solving in dynamic field conditions.

Leadership competency model

At the top of the competency hierarchy lies the leadership model, which is designed for individuals in supervisory or managerial positions. This model requires a broader, strategic skill set that combines technical mastery with strong interpersonal capabilities. Within the tourism guiding context, essential leadership competencies include itinerary design and interpretation, group leadership during treks or camping excursions, advanced driving skills, in-depth destination knowledge, ethical judgement, and mentoring abilities. Leaders in this domain play a pivotal role in shaping organisational culture, upholding professional standards, and coaching junior staff, thereby ensuring service excellence and long-term organisational sustainability.

The influence of tour guide behaviors on tourist satisfaction

Tourist satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional construct that encompasses both cognitive evaluations and affective responses to various service encounters throughout the tourism experience. Among the primary determinants of satisfaction, the behaviour and professionalism of tour guides are particularly influential. Tour guides function not only as information providers but also as cultural intermediaries, facilitators of emotional security, and managers of group dynamics (Kassawnh et al., 2019;). A guide's capacity to communicate effectively, demonstrate intercultural sensitivity, and adapt responsively to tourists' evolving needs significantly shapes perceived service quality and overall satisfaction (Apollo et al., 2020; Syakier & Hanafiah, 2022). A critical element in this service relationship is rapport, characterised by trust, emotional engagement, and interpersonal alignment, which empirical studies have shown fosters affective satisfaction and personalised service experiences (Ap & Wong, 2019; Gatera & Manirakiza, 2020). Although some critics question its relevance in standardised package tourism (Amani, 2019), recent research underlines its positive role in deepening tourists' emotional connections with destinations, thereby enhancing experiential quality (Francis et al., 2019). Consequently, satisfaction functions not only as a performance indicator but also as a strategic driver of enterprise sustainability, influencing behavioural intentions such as destination loyalty, revisit likelihood, and positive word-of-mouth, all of which impact profitability and brand positioning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Kalulu et al., 2020; Kayira et al., 2022). Theoretical frameworks commonly define satisfaction as the psychological outcome of comparing expected service levels with perceived outcomes (Han, 2021). This evaluative process is moderated by variables including human interaction quality, destination authenticity, and emotional resonance (Francis et al., 2019; Tsegaw & Teressa, 2017). Tour guides thus perform a multifaceted role beyond logistical coordination. High-performing guides exhibit local expertise, narrative competence, interpretive skills, and cultural empathy (Cetinkaya & Öter, 2016). These competencies enable them to deliver immersive, meaningful experiences that transcend superficial sightseeing. Additionally, by reducing travel uncertainties and providing reassurance, guides enhance tourists' psychological comfort and well-being (Hussein, 2018). As key influencers of destination image and tourist behaviour, guides play a significant role in post-visit outcomes such as satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy (Kayira et al., 2022; Cetin & Yarcan, 2017). Empirical evidence reveals a strong correlation between guide behaviour and tourist satisfaction, especially when guides demonstrate empathy, adaptability, and effective storytelling (Sri Rahayu & Surya, 2019; Nicolaides & Zigiriadis, 2011). Ultimately, satisfaction emerges from integrated, emotionally and cognitively meaningful experiences facilitated by professional guides (Francis et al., 2019; Kalulu et al., 2020).

Methodology

The present study followed a descriptive study design and both qualitative and quantitative techniques were used and data was collected, using semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires with visiting tourists at Volcanoes National Park in Musanze which is a major city in Rwanda and a popular tourism destination featuring the mountain gorillas as key attractor. The study targeted a total population of 85 participants, comprising 20 leisure tourists, 4 tour operators, 20 Volcanoes National Park (VNP) tour guides, 40 local guides, and one VNP marketing manager. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit leisure tourists who had stayed in luxury safari accommodations, specifically at Bisate Eco Lodge and Buffalo Safari Lodge, both located in Kinigi Sector, Musanze District. This selection aimed to gather a diverse range of perspectives on tourists' experiences with tour guiding services, guide competencies, and overall satisfaction with the

destination. Tourists were approached during their stay at the selected accommodations, and participation was entirely voluntary, with informed consent obtained prior to the interviews. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; consequently, all hotel names have been anonymised as either "safari accommodations" or "private lodges" in the documentation. Guest satisfaction was assessed across several dimensions, including the quality of accommodation, guiding competence, technical expertise, interpretive skills, destination attributes, and the guide's ability to convey the cultural and natural significance of the site. To minimise subjectivity in interpreting responses, only those interview statements indicating experiences perceived as "unexpected" or "conducive to well-being" were included in the analysis. The application of a mixed-methods approach allowed for a nuanced understanding of how tourists construct and articulate their satisfaction, facilitating the identification of key factors that contribute to memorable and emotionally resonant experiences. The guest interview protocol was adapted from established tourism service quality instruments, specifically those developed by Crotts et al. (2008) and Torres et al. (2014a) was administered in English, French, and Kinyarwanda to accommodate linguistic diversity among respondents. The final sample of interviewed guests consisted of 20 participants, with a gender distribution of 59% male and 41% female. This gender imbalance reflects both the demographic composition of VNP guides, who are predominantly male, and the observed tourist profiles, where male international travellers constituted the majority (56%) compared to female visitors (44%). These tourists originated from a wide range of countries, including Kenya, Belgium, Spain, France, the United States, Germany, Uganda, and China, and were exclusively adult travellers. The findings suggest that Rwanda's branding initiatives, such as its high-profile partnerships with international football clubs like Arsenal and Paris Saint-Germain under the "Visit Rwanda" campaign, have been effective in attracting a global leisure market. However, guest satisfaction levels remained notably low, with only 38% of participants reporting satisfaction with their experience, a figure well below the internationally recognised tourism satisfaction benchmark of 80%. While the majority (78%) of tourists had travelled for leisure purposes, a smaller proportion (12%) identified business as their primary travel motivation. These findings highlight the critical need for improvements in guiding services and destination management to enhance Rwanda's competitive positioning in the luxury ecotourism market. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for content analysis, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes. The transcriptions were examined through qualitative content analysis by segmenting texts into meaningful units to gain deeper insights. To ensure credibility, thematic analysis was applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving familiarisation with the data, coding, theme identification, review, definition, and reporting. For the quantitative component, survey data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics. Frequency distributions were summarised in tables to identify patterns in respondents' perceptions. Combining both analyses allowed for a comprehensive interpretation of participants' experiences, perceptions, and satisfaction with tour guiding services in Rwanda.

Results and discussion

The thematic analysis of both the administered questionnaires and in-depth guest interviews identified three key dimensions influencing customer satisfaction within Rwanda's tour guiding services. First, the functional role of tour guides was highlighted as crucial, with respondents emphasising the importance of guides' ability to convey destination knowledge, manage logistics, and ensure safety. Second, behavioral competencies and interpersonal skills, including empathy, patience, professionalism, and effective communication, were repeatedly cited as vital for creating a comfortable and engaging experience. Third, the conduct and demeanour of the guides significantly impacted tourists' overall perceptions and satisfaction. Guests noted that respectful, enthusiastic, and culturally sensitive behaviour fostered a stronger emotional connection to the destination and influenced their willingness to recommend Rwanda. These findings align with the research of Kumar-Kaushik et al. (2022) and Rivera et al. (2021), confirming that guide-related factors are central to tourist satisfaction and destination loyalty.

The roles of tour guides

This breakdown underscores the diverse role of tour guides, highlighting their importance not only as information providers but also as cultural mediators, motivational figures, and ambassadors of national identity. Guides act as the primary interface between tourists and destinations, offering narratives that enhance visitors' understanding of local heritage and culture (Cohen, 1985; Ap & Wong, 2001). Respondents noted that guides share vital information on the historical, geographical, and cultural aspects of destinations, particularly at heritage sites and landmarks, where they are expected to deliver engaging and accurate commentary (Weiler & Black, 2015). Employed by tour operators, hotels, resorts, or institutions like museums, guides must demonstrate interpersonal skills, cultural sensitivity, and professionalism in their service. As Verma (2003) notes, guides are also trained to respect guest diversity and ensure all visitors are treated with dignity, as further elaborated in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Showing summary of key roles of tour guides based on respondent feedback

Role of Tour Guides	Percentage Respondents	Description
Interpretive Role	41.2%	Providing detailed and accurate information about sites and destinations.
Linking Tourists with Host Communities	29.4%	Facilitating cultural exchange and local interaction.
Motivational Role During Tours	18%	Inspiring and energising tourists throughout the excursion.
Ambassadors of the Nation and Tourism Industry	12% & 29.4%	Representing national identity and promoting Rwanda's tourism image.

The behavioral abilities/ competences of tour guides

Tour guides play a crucial role in shaping tourists' perceptions and satisfaction. While destination features and infrastructure are important, it is often the guide's personality and behaviour that leave a lasting impact (Chang, 2014; Huang et al., 2010). This study highlights how guides' ability to establish personal connections, deliver engaging narratives, and respond empathetically to tourists' needs significantly influences satisfaction and destination image. Respondents emphasised that effective storytelling, whether historical or contemporary, transforms sites into meaningful experiences. A guide's ability to share personal anecdotes and enthusiasm bridges the emotional gap between tourists and the location, enhancing connection and memory retention, as engagement with stories is often preferred over factual recitations (Kim and Lee, 2011). The study further found communication skills to be the most essential competency, with 60% of respondents affirming its importance for clarity and emotional connection (Ap & Wong, 2001; Kim & Lee, 2011). Additionally, 30% highlighted destination knowledge, interpretive ability, and technical skills as vital for providing accurate information and ensuring safety (Cohen, 1985; Salazar, 2006), while 10% emphasised people skills for building rapport and personalising service (Huang et al., 2010). These findings underscore the multifaceted role of guides as informants, interpreters, and facilitators, with competencies crucial for enhancing service quality, satisfaction, and Rwanda's tourism image (Kalulu, 2024; Rivera et al., 2021).

The influence of tour guides' behavior on tourists' destination satisfactions

Tour guides play a pivotal role in shaping tourist experiences in destinations. Their professionalism, empathy, enthusiasm, effective communication, and adherence to ethical standards significantly impact visitor satisfaction and loyalty (Chang, 2014; Huang et al., 2010). This study found that 36% of respondents considered respectful, courteous, and attentive behaviour the most influential factor in a positive tourism experience, aligning with Kim & Lee (2011), who highlight that service-oriented behaviour enhances emotional satisfaction. A further 27% emphasised the importance of guides providing accurate information while being attuned to individual tourist needs. Additionally, engaging storytelling, emotional communication, and creative interpretation of intangible experiences were deemed essential for satisfaction. These skills, combined with destination knowledge and cultural sensitivity, were seen as crucial for delivering memorable experiences and reinforcing Rwanda's position as a leading tourism destination. Another attribute was personal appearance and presentation, valued by 14% of respondents, who noted that well-groomed and composed guides foster confidence and loyalty. A blend of simplicity, self-assurance, and approachability in a guide's demeanour was viewed as enhancing trust and rapport. Guides with appropriate vocal tone, cultural awareness, and active listening were perceived as more competent and professional. Conversely, 13% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction when guides were ill-prepared, disengaged, or failed to maintain ethical standards, echoing findings by Ap & Wong (2001) and Salazar (2006). Guides who upheld high ethical standards, refrained from exploitative practices, and respected local and foreign cultures were regarded as representatives of national values. Emotional intelligence also emerged as a key competency, with 10% of respondents noting the importance of guides managing diverse behaviours, expectations, and group dynamics. Guides who ensured comfort, adapted to feedback, and facilitated emotionally enriching experiences positively shaped the mental image of the destination, encouraging repeat visits. These findings underline the significance of qualified tour guides in promoting tourist satisfaction and supporting Rwanda's goal of becoming a premium tourism destination in East Africa (Rivera et al., 2021).

The challenges tour guides experience in Rwanda

Rwanda's goal of becoming a premier luxury destination in East Africa faces significant challenges, influenced by socio-cultural, linguistic, and structural factors that impact tour guiding services. Studies highlight these issues and their direct effect on both guide performance and tourist experiences. A major challenge is language barriers, with 50% of respondents noting that many local guides struggle with proficiency in English, French, and Kiswahili. This impedes their ability to provide accurate interpretations and engage effectively with international tourists, leading to anxiety and reduced confidence (Amani, 2019; Kassawnh et al., 2019). Furthermore, cognitive challenges arise when tourists ask complex or provocative questions, particularly those attempting to assert dominance. This creates additional stress for guides, especially those without formal qualifications, hindering the sector's ability to standardise services and elevate professionalism (Al Najdawi et al., 2017).

Managing difficult tourist behaviour is another challenge identified by the study. Aggressive, disruptive, or domineering tourists undermine group dynamics and cause emotional strain on guides (Cetinkaya & Oter, 2016). Disruptive behaviours, such as intoxication or dominance assertion, create tension and negatively impact tour quality. Additionally, customer dissatisfaction arises when tourists' unrealistic expectations are not met. For example, in Akagera National Park, tourists may fail to spot iconic wildlife like lions or leopards, despite being promised such sightings during booking. The absence of formalised complaint management systems limits guides' ability to address these issues effectively (Lin et al., 2017). A further challenge is commission-based income, where guides receive payments from local vendors, introducing ethical dilemmas. Tourists often feel pressured into making unwanted purchases, eroding trust between guides and clients (Apollo et al., 2020). While financially beneficial for guides, this practice risks damaging the destination's reputation. Moreover, Rwanda's tourism sector faces structural challenges, as many guides work through intermediaries like tour operators, limiting their control over working conditions, tour content, and schedules. This lack of flexibility reduces guides' ability to offer personalised experiences, diminishing the overall quality of the tourist experience (Hwang, 2019). Rigid itineraries and time constraints imposed by tour operators further restrict the ability to deliver high-quality, customised tours. Against the above challenges, several studies (e.g., Apollo et al., 2020; Cetinkaya & Oter, 2016) suggest targeted language

training, tour guide retooling and comprehensive training to address the above issues. They believe that enhancing training programs is thus critical to improving guide performance and mitigating service anxiety (Lin et al., 2017), improved communication and incorporation of management strategies.

Conclusion

This study reaffirms the critical role of tour guides in shaping tourist satisfaction, loyalty, and perceptions of a destination. The behaviour of tour guides, including professionalism, empathy, ethical integrity, communication skills, and emotional intelligence, significantly impacts the overall visitor experience. Respectful and attentive conduct, alongside the ability to provide accurate information and deliver emotionally engaging, memorable experiences, were highly valued by tourists. These qualities not only foster trust and comfort but also strongly influence tourists' intentions to revisit and promote the destination. The research further underscores the importance of guides demonstrating cultural sensitivity, adaptability, and a personable approach. Elements such as storytelling, humour, and organisational efficiency were also identified as enhancing tour quality. Conversely, dissatisfaction was reported when guides were perceived as disengaged, unprepared, or lacking ethical standards, consistent with prior studies (Ap & Wong, 2001; Salazar, 2006). To sustain Rwanda's position as a high-value tourism destination, there is a critical need to prioritise continuous professional development for tour guides, particularly in soft skills, cultural competence, and ethical practices (Rivera et al., 2021). Tour guides serve not only as facilitators of travel but also as cultural ambassadors and emotional connectors, with their ability to create meaningful and memorable interactions being central to delivering high-quality tourism experiences and enhancing Rwanda's competitiveness in both the East African and global tourism markets.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study offers both theoretical insights and practical guidance for enhancing tourist satisfaction through tour guide behaviour, particularly in culturally immersive and ecotourism contexts like Rwanda. The findings extend several key models in tourism and service management, including the SERVQUAL model (Parasuraman et al., 1988), by highlighting the importance of empathy, responsiveness, and assurance in guiding. The study also aligns with the emotional labour framework (Hochschild, 1983), showing that guides' emotional expression impacts service perceptions and satisfaction. Additionally, it contributes to the emotional intelligence theory in tourism (Goleman, 1995; Wong & Law, 2002), demonstrating that guides' ability to empathise and manage group dynamics is crucial to the overall experience. The research further supports Pine and Gilmore's (1999) theory of the experience economy, highlighting the value of personalised interactions in creating lasting service value, and reinforces intercultural competence theory (Ang et al., 2007), validating guides' roles as cultural interpreters. From a managerial standpoint, the study offers actionable recommendations for tour operators, destination managers, and policy-makers. The emphasis on guide behaviour, particularly friendliness, ethical integrity, and knowledge sharing, suggests that recruitment and training should focus not only on factual knowledge but also on soft skills such as empathy, humour, and problem-solving. Continuous professional development (CPD) programmes integrating emotional intelligence and intercultural communication should be institutionalised. Regulatory bodies should enforce national certification systems that assess both behavioural and technical competence, ensuring standardisation and flexibility. Performance appraisal systems should incorporate tourist feedback for continuous improvement. Furthermore, strategic HR policies should position guides as key agents in branding Rwanda as a high-end, culturally rich destination. Incentives such as awards or career progression could boost motivation, while integrating guide performance into destination marketing strategies can enhance Rwanda's competitive advantage by leveraging guides as cultural ambassadors and experiential co-creators.

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