INFO PAGE

Investigating visitor experiences of Ayder Plateau, a natural world heritage site

Abstract

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Keywords: *Visitor experiences, Natural areas, Sustainability, Ayder, Tripadvisor.*

Authors

Full Name	Author contribution roles	Contribution rate
Berna Mazlum:	*Conceptualism, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision*	*100%*

This paper does not required ethics committee report

Justification: The methodology of this study does not require an ethics committee report.

Investigating visitor experiences of Ayder Plateau, a natural world heritage site

Berna Mazlum

ABSTRACT

With technological developments, the ability of visitors to easily share their experiences and easy access to these opinions affect the decisions of potential tourists. Learning positive and negative experiences can be very effective especially in planning and marketing processes. In this study, visitor experiences of Ayder Plateau, one of the touristic attractions of Rize province, were analyzed through the comments made on the TripAdvisor website, and the data obtained were evaluated by content analysis. As a result of the research in which 849 comments about Ayder Plateau, a natural world heritage, were analyzed; it was determined that although the scores given by the visitors about the destination were high (64%), negative opinions and complaints about the destination (52.91%) were higher than positive opinions (47.09%). In the research, 23 positive and 34 negative codes were identified. In addition, adjectives related to the "beauty of the destination" (excellent, magnificent, terrific, incredible, wonderful, etc.) constituted the most frequently repeated code in the positive direction, while the code "destruction of the natural beauty of the destination" was repeated the most in the negative direction. Based on the most recurrent negative opinions and complaints about Ayder Plateau, various suggestions were made.

1. Introduction

Changes in information and communication technology make it easier, faster and less costly for people to access information (Bakos, 1997, p. 1676; Shim et al., 2001, p. 399; Bei et al., 2003, p. 20; Lee et al., 2011, p. 677; Nilashi et al., 2018). The advantages that technology provides to people today help visitors to obtain information and make decisions before going to a destination and to easily transfer their experiences after their visit. Considering the "intangibility" of touristic products, it is frequently stated that the products cannot be experienced and evaluated beforehand and therefore these experiences shared by visitors are very important. Positive visitor experiences can be of interest to tourists who are in the decision-making process and can make the destination attractive, increase trust in the region, encourage them to visit, and help them gain knowledge about the region, which can benefit them in the planning process of tourists. However, negative experiences can also have a negative impact on tourists' decisions by encouraging them to search for other alternative destinations. In this respect, when evaluated in terms of its impact on potential tourists, the way in which the comments shared by visitors about destinations are shaped and how complaints can be resolved are very important for the future of destinations. On the other hand, the protection of diminishing natural areas is one of the common problems of the whole world today. Although many initiatives and efforts have been made to protect natural resources, these areas face various threats. Considering that natural areas are critical not only for today but also for many needs such as water, food,

clean air in the future, it is imperative to protect and sustainably use these areas (Kesici et al., 2018, p. 3). This is also a necessity for the tourism sector, which feeds on the environment and is highly affected by environmental factors.

Tourism is a multifaceted economic activity that develops on the basis of the environment and natural resources. When the relationship between tourism and the environment is analyzed, two dimensions are encountered. On the one hand, environmental resources provide one of the necessary and critical resources in the production of touristic products, while on the other hand, tourism can create negative impacts on the environment consciously or unconsciously. In addition, tourism changes by consuming environmental resources (Tuna, 2007, p. 17). According to Sunlu (2003), the relationship between tourism and the environment is complex. It is because, although tourism includes many activities that cause negative environmental impacts, it also has the potential to create beneficial effects on the environment by contributing to the protection of the environment. What makes it important to examine the relationship between tourism and the environment is that environmental values are indispensable for tourism. One of the most important elements that shape touristic demand and form the touristic product is the environmental resources of the destination. While the richness of these resources provides an advantage for the destination in attracting tourists, any deterioration in these resources causes the destination to lose its attractiveness (Kahraman & Türkay, 2014, p. 44).

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Natural areas, which are of great importance in terms of diversification of tourism activities and environmental sustainability, are frequently visited with their unique features and make significant contributions to the development of rural areas and thus to the economy. In addition, the planning and management of natural resources in accordance with the balance of conservation and utilization contributes to tourism activities by supporting sustainable development. The aim of this study is to examine visitor experiences of Ayder Plateau and to determine the categories subject to comments. Since Ayder Plateau has a very rich potential in terms of natural tourism resources, the research was conducted specifically on Ayder Plateau, which is located in Kaçkar Mountains National Park. Ayder Plateau plays an important role in the economic development of the Eastern Black Sea region (Bilici, 2014). It is thought that the research is important in terms of determining the situation at the point of ensuring sustainability by protecting natural resources, determining the points complained about the destination and developing suggestions, increasing visitor satisfaction and increasing the number of visitors in parallel with increasing customer satisfaction, supporting rural development, supporting the economy and thus contributing to both regional and national tourism.

2. Literature Review

Revolutionary developments in information technology have led to significant changes in the way travelers search for information, plan travel (Kim et al, 2007, p. 423), and communicate with each other and with businesses (Parreira, 2021 p. 3). Visitor-generated content, in particular, has rapidly gained relevance in the consumer purchase decision-making process and has therefore become increasingly important in tourism (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021, p.1). This is because travel websites that allow visitors to express their opinions provide detailed and rich information for consumers to use in their travel planning (García-Barriocanal et al., 2010). It is stated that visitors make decisions based on content shared on digital platforms such as Tripadvisor, and that such content acts as a cognitive shortcut, facilitating the selection process (Karakuş, 2023). Moreover, in the eyes of consumers, content created by different users gains a lot of credibility as unbiased data. When consumers are in search of information, they find content created and shared by other consumers more credible (Çamlıca & Karakuş, 2016, p. 200). Bellman et al. (2006) emphasize that the ever-increasing amount of excess information may have negative effects in addition to the aforementioned benefits. In this context, it is stated that too much information can complicate the decision-making process and consumers may not have enough time to compare all alternatives.

Consumers have access to large pools of data to help them evaluate and choose between alternatives during their purchase decision-making process (O'Connor, 2010, p. 755). One way to gain trust in a tourism product is to seek information about it before purchasing (Urbany et al., 1989). Considering that potential travelers have difficulty evaluating the quality of tourism products before they experience them, consumer-generated content is beneficial (Lee et al., 2011, p. 675). It is stated that visitor experiences, especially when shared online, strongly influence the decisions of other

travelers (Stoleriu et al., 2019, p. 194). Miguens et al. (2008) also state that online information sources have changed the way tourists plan their trips. In this context, visitors tend to buy experiences and minimize their cognitive costs by reading reviews on digital social networks. However, it is also noted that user-generated content has different meanings and is used to different degrees in travelers' decision-making processes. Moreover, visitors use these travel platforms not only to obtain information during the pre-travel selection process, but also to share their experiences during and after the trip (Amaral et al., 2014, p. 137). In other words, consumers have the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions, interact and compare with other consumers through social platforms (Costa et al., 2023, p. 49). The rapid growth of information generated by touristic consumers is noteworthy not only for potential tourists but also for other tourism stakeholders. Understanding tourists' experiences and opinions about tourism destinations provides more information to tourism product producers and managers. Identifying sentiments, and topics of interest, and discovering loyalty behaviors from user-generated content provides valuable guidance for management decisions (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021, p.1).

Touristic consumers can share their experiences in many areas such as hotels, restaurants, tourist attractions (Miguens et al., 2008). One of the places where experiences are often shared is natural areas. Natural areas offer visitors the opportunity to recognize, appreciate and experience natural and cultural heritage (McCool, 2006, p. 2). The use of natural areas from a tourism perspective contributes to the economic development of the region (Maldonado-Ore & Custodio, 2020, p. 2). Today, environmental awareness and increased interest in nature-based experiences have increased the tendency to visit natural areas (Stoleriu et al., 2019, p. 192). Natural areas, which are among the important resources of the tourism sector, play an important role in both diversifying tourism activities and ensuring environmental sustainability. These regions attract attention with their unique ecosystems and attract more and more people with the changes in tourism trends. This contributes to the development of rural areas and brings significant benefits to the economy. However, these benefits depend on the sustainable use of resources (Adewumi et al., 2019). The main goal of sustainability is to preserve resources and pass them on to future generations without degradation. This approach aims to benefit from nature without harming it and to be in harmony with nature (Koçak & Balcı, 2020). Considering that the natural resources that humanity will need to sustain its life are limited (Kozak, 2014), management and planning based on the basic understanding of "sustainability" is required to protect and transfer these scarce resources to future generations (Yıldırım et al., 2008). Otherwise, the damage to resources as a result of careless and excessive use will threaten the future of tourism (Özdemir, 2014, p. 34).

3. Method

With the advancement of information and communication technologies, today's tourists can review visitor reviews to learn about a destination before visiting it and share their experiences, positive or negative, during or after their visit. There are many forums for visitors to have an idea about the

places they plan to visit in advance and share their own experiences (Nicoli & Papadopoulou, 2017, p. 319). "TripAdvisor", which is described as the world's largest travel platform, is one of these forums and the data in the study were obtained with the help of this forum. TripAdvisor is defined as the travel content site created by the world's largest user base (Eröz & Doğdubay, 2012). The main reason for choosing TripAdvisor travel site for data collection is that "visitors around the world can use the TripAdvisor application to consult more than 859 million reviews and opinions about 8.6 million accommodations, restaurants, experiences, airlines and cruises." TripAdvisor assists 463 million travelers every month to have better travel experience (TripAdvisor, 2019). TripAdvisor is a website where most of the information published is created autonomously by its users. The site publishes reviews and ratings about a destination, a hotel, a restaurant or an attraction (Miguens et al., 2008).

In this study, it is examined which positive and negative opinions tourists who visit Ayder Plateau focus on while sharing their experiences about the destination. Nowadays, as the frequency of visitors sharing their experiences increases, it has become very important to determine the thoughts shared about destinations and to take necessary measures against negative evaluations or complaints. In addition, it is thought that analyzing visitor experiences towards Ayder Plateau, a natural world heritage located in Kaçkar Mountains National Park, is important in terms of ensuring the development of the tourism sector in the region with a sustainable approach. Accordingly, the aim of the study is to examine the travel comments shared about Ayder Plateau and to determine the positive and negative opinions of tourists about the destination.

Visitors' experiences are considered as one of the determinants of satisfaction (Su et al., 2020, p. 1), encouraging the intention to revisit, recommend other travelers (Sim & Lee, 2013, p. 127), and share their experiences through travel review sites (Okazaki et al., 2017, p. 107). With the impact of technological developments, individuals share their experiences more in digital environments, which increases the research on examining visitor experiences in different destinations through reviews. However, there is no research examining visitor experiences in Ayder Plateau, a natural world heritage. In this direction, it is thought that examining visitor comments on Ayder Plateau will contribute to the literature by revealing the current perception and positive and negative factors towards the region. Furthermore, the research will contribute both to the formulation of policies to increase visitor satisfaction and to determine which aspects should be strengthened in terms of sustainable tourism policies.

In the study, content analysis, one of the qualitative research methods, was preferred because it enables systematic identification of visitors' opinions (Altunışık et al., 2015, p. 324). Content analysis is an ideal method in terms of reaching conclusions by examining which concepts and thoughts are emphasized the most and least by looking at the content of written texts (Kozak, 2015, p. 138). The essence of this approach lies in categorizing what is written and said and counting how often they occur (Balcı, 2004, p. 184). The basic process in content analysis is to bring together similar data

within the framework of certain concepts and themes and to interpret them by organizing them in a way that the reader can understand. Within the framework of this basic purpose, there are a number of stages that are followed during content analysis. These stages are (1) coding the data, (2) finding themes, (3) organizing the codes and themes, (4) defining and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018, pp. 242-243).

On the TripAdvisor travel platform, which is created by the world's largest user base, there are a total of 849 comments about Ayder Plateau in all languages. While collecting the data, no sample selection was made and all comments made until 02.06.2024 were taken into consideration. In addition, the research was limited to 02.06.2024 since the TripAdvisor travel platform, which was used while scanning the data, has a dynamic structure and new comments can be added. Within the scope of this research, first of all, all comments made on the platform in question throughout the destination were brought together with the help of microsoft excel program and transferred to the program in a form suitable for coding. MAXQDA 2024 software was used in the analysis phase. Open coding method was used to analyze the data in depth and to discover new themes. The open coding stage is the stage where the data are examined in detail, and ideas, concepts and themes are discovered (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 12). After the comments on Ayder Plateau were examined and coding was done, the opinions of 3 academicians from different institutions were taken to ensure validity and reliability, and the codes were cross-checked until a common opinion was reached.

4. Findings

A total of 849 comments posted on the TripAdvisor travel platform for Ayder Plateau were analyzed. There is a 5-point rating system developed by the TripAdvisor travel platform for the comments shared by tourists about their visits. The ratings given by visitors regarding their experiences are given in Table 1.

Table 1. General distribution and ratings of comments

Ratings	Number of comments	Percentage (%)
5 (Excellent)	377	44.41
4 (Very good)	163	19.20
3 (Average)	130	15.31
2 (Bad)	74	8.72
1 (Terrible)	105	12.37
TOTAL	849	100

Source: TripAdvisor

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that 44.41% of the comments about Ayder Plateau are evaluated as excellent (n= 377), 19.20% as very good (n= 163), 15.31% as average (n= 130), 8.72% as bad (n= 74), and 12.37% as terrible (n= 105). In addition, it is seen that approximately 64% of the visitors' comments on Ayder Plateau are rated as excellent-very good and 21% as bad-awful. In this direction, it can be said that visitors to Ayder Plateau are largely satisfied with the destination and have a generally positive experience in the plateau. All visitors' comments were subjected to content analysis, and a word cloud was

first created with using the qualitative data analysis program MAXQDA. The word cloud of the comments shared by visitors about Ayder Plateau is shown in Figure 1.
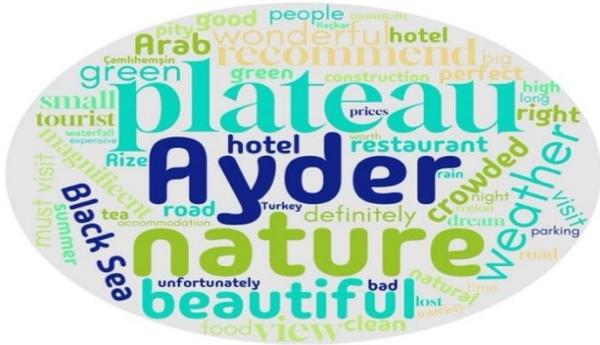

Figure 1. Word cloud generated from visitor comments
Source: Author

An examination of the word cloud formed by the most emphasized words in all comments about Ayder Plateau in Figure 1 shows that the words "Ayder, beautiful, plateau, nature" are among the most frequently used words. Besides, although the words are generally positive, it is seen that negative words such as "crowded, construction, small, expensive, pity" are also included in the word cloud. Sub-codes were created with the help of the data obtained from the comments about Ayder Plateau. The sub-codes were then divided into main categories as "positive-negative". The number of coding for the main categories is given in Figure 2.
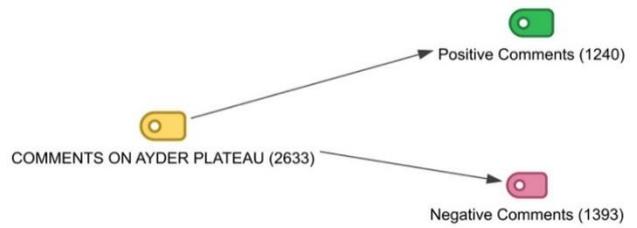

Figure 2. Distribution of codes by main categories
Source: Author

The distribution of comments according to categories in Figure 2 shows that 2,633 codings were made from 849 comments shared by visitors about Ayder Plateau, and 1,240 of these codings were positive and 1,393 were negative. While 52.91% of the codings are in negative opinions, 47.09% are in positive opinions. In this direction, it has been determined that although the scores given by the visitors to Ayder Plateau are high, the negative opinions and complaints about the destination are higher than the positive opinions. In other words, although the visitors gave high scores for the destination, they also shared their negative opinions and complaints to a great extent while sharing their experiences. The distribution of positive codes for Ayder Plateau according to all subcategories is presented in Figure 3.

When Figure 3 is analyzed, it is seen that 23 positive subcategories were identified for Ayder Plateau. When the positive codes (n=1,240) obtained from the comments shared by the visitors about Ayder Plateau are analyzed; the most frequently repeated code belongs to the beauty of the
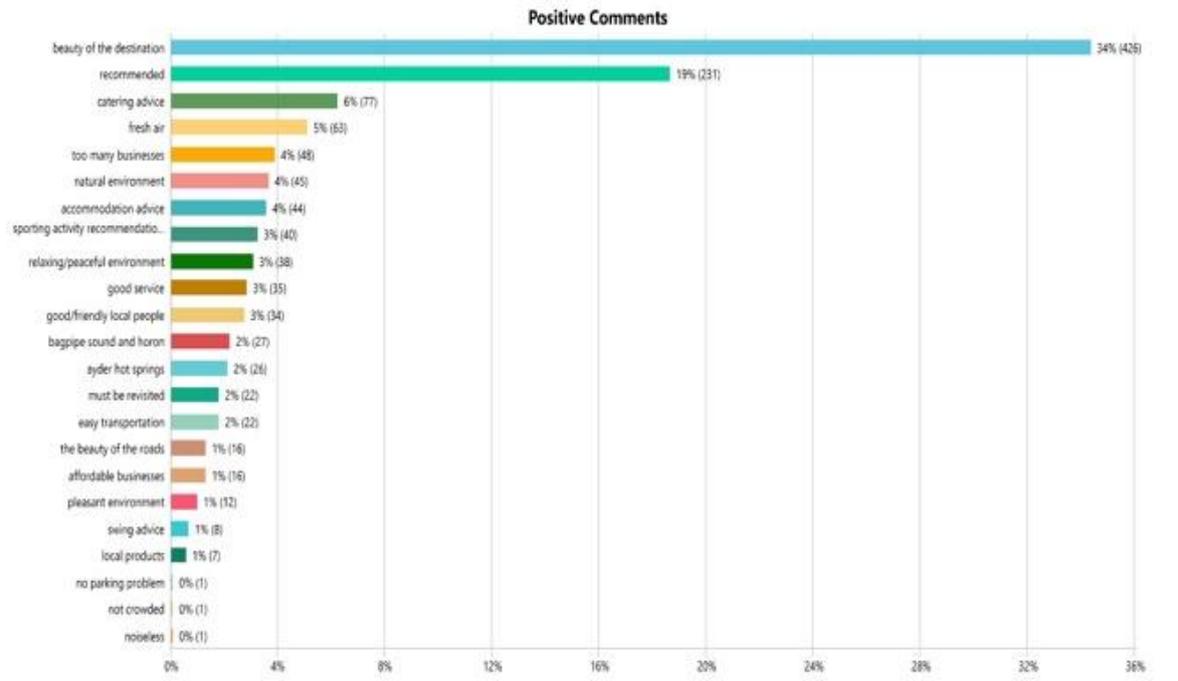

Figure 3. Distribution of positive codes by subcategories
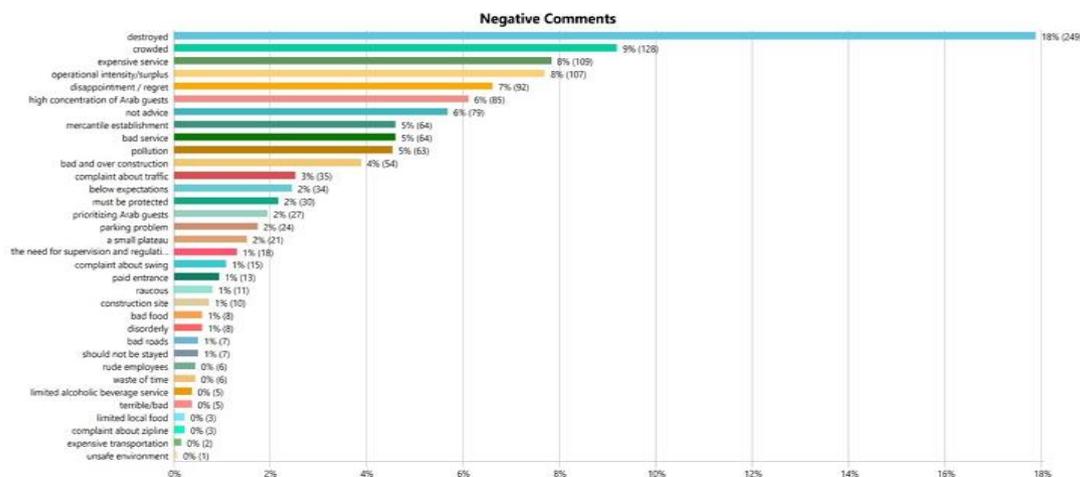*Source: Author*

Table 2. Examples of positive comments and associated codes from visitors

	Positive Comments
beauty of the destination	*"...The magnificent views of the Kaçkar Mountains and its wonderfully clean air make Ayder a place to fall in love with. It is beautiful in every season..."(K62)* *"...I have never seen such nature. It is definitely a wonderful place. Its streams, waters, and greenery literally fascinate people. A corner of heaven..." (K235)* *"...We can say that it is the most beautiful plateau of the Black Sea region. There are hot springs and the Bridal Veil Waterfall here. The plateau, surrounded by amazing colors, is truly a place to visit. Going there was one of the greatest joys for me..." (K606)*
recommended	*"...We cannot find words to express our admiration as a family. The Black Sea, especially in autumn, has a special beauty. We strongly recommend everyone to see this unique paradise of our country..." (K49)* *"...It is a perfect place with its extraordinarily clean nature and air, adorned with every shade of green. It is definitely a must-visit..." (K75)* *"...Definitely a must see. It is a natural wonder that everyone living in Turkey should definitely visit..."(K490)*
catering advice	*"...There are restaurants and small souvenir shops around the plateau. There was a dessert shop. They were making very delicious Laz pastry, fresh..." (K337)* *"...I especially recommend the buttered trout cooked on a tile and the meatballs. Muhlama (kuymak) was also very delicious. The dried beans were good too, but I had eaten better ones. The black cabbage wrap was also good. Among the desserts, the Laz pastry was too syrupy for me, but if you are curious, try it. It is definitely not bad..." (K359)* *"...You can find accommodation options and places serving local dishes here. The trout in butter and muhlama will appeal to your taste..." (K364)*
fresh air	*"...Whenever I come here, I admire the unique scenery. I breathe in the fresh air and drink the healing tea prepared by the local women living there. This place is really beautiful..."(K367)* *"...Ayder Plateau captivates everyone with its natural beauty, warm-hearted people, and exceptionally clean air. I think it is among the top five places to visit..." (K411)* *"...The pure air, the coolness and vitality that touches your face. It feels as if you are walking through dozens or even hundreds of paintings..."(K668)*
too many businesses	*"...There are many shops where you can find souvenirs, numerous restaurants, and a variety of activities..." (K133)* *"...There are many small and comfortable motels to stay in, as well as numerous restaurants in the area..." (K599)* *"...Because Ayder Plateau has become very popular, it is well developed in terms of tourism and the hotel industry, and there are numerous accommodation options..." (K788)*

Source: TripAdvisor

destination (n=426). Visitors used many words to describe the beauty of the destination such as "excellent, magnificent, wonderful, very beautiful, incredible, unique, natural wonder, paradise, etc.". The following codes were used to describe the beauty of the destination: the destination is a must-see or recommended destination (n=231), food and beverage recommendations in the destination (n=77), the air is clean in the destination (n=63), and there are many businesses in the destination (n=48). Some comments on the most frequently recurring positive subcategories are presented in Table 2.

Positive comments indicate that Ayder Plateau has left a strong impression on visitors with its natural beauty, clean air, local flavors and the touristic opportunities it offers. Visitors especially praise the scenery, greenery and natural atmosphere. It is emphasized by the visitors that the destination offers a different beauty in every season. It is also frequently stated that Ayder is a destination that stands out with its natural beauty and is recommended by visitors. The distribution of negative codes for Ayder Plateau according to all subcategories is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Distribution of negative codes by subcategories

Source: Author

Table 3. Examples of negative comments and associated codes from visitors

	Negative Comments
destroyed	*"...Unfortunately, Ayder Plateau, is now lost in the construction and remains small in the hands of the "occupy" tourism understanding..." (K494)* *"...We searched for the plateau. One side is completely occupied by small local businesses, and the other side by hotels and hostels. Everywhere is concrete, and if you do not want to walk on it, there is very little space left to walk. It is a complete destruction of nature, as you can imagine. I will never go there again; such pollution is unacceptable..." (K593)* *"...I am sure that the nature and climate used to be magnificent. Unfortunately, the increased construction resulting from the influx of people has destroyed the highland characteristics of my beautiful Ayder. I hope that no further buildings will be allowed..." (K619)*
crowded	*"...It's too crowded, like a city. There is traffic. After waiting for exactly 30 minutes, we returned before reaching the plateau. People were coming in droves. There is absolutely no such calmness expected from the plateau. Istanbul can even be called empty on the holiday. Research well before you leave for sure..." (K117)* *"...A big crowd. Go to more beautiful places. Go to the highlands. This place is no longer a plateau, it's a disgrace..." (K245)* *"...Ayder is no longer what it used to be. It is full of people staying there all year round. Even when I reach the furthest point accessible by car, I find it as crowded as the city I left below..." (K370)*
expensive service	*"...It is a plateau entirely aimed at taking advantage of tourists. There is not a single decent place to sit, eat, or drink. Everything is either overpriced or lacks quality..." (K148)* *"...Why can't people in our country travel around their own homeland? It ıis because if they weren't ashamed, they'd even charge for breathing. A swing costs money. A photo costs money. A cable car costs money. Eating and drinking already cost money. At one point I was afraid they'd even charge for sitting on the grass. Maybe I'm wrong. I'm not against paying money, but what's with the exaggeration..." (K188)* *"...Tradesmen who are always ready to rip you off, expensive hotels, ruthless bills in restaurants, and many other negativities I can't even count yet..." (K344)*
operational intensity/surplus	*"...Unfortunately, the Ayder plateau is no longer a plateau, it has become a pile of hotels you know. There is no area to see the greenery plateau, only the mountains around it remain green..." (K127)* *"...I liked it very much when I came before. However, my second visit was a complete disappointment. It has lost its old beauty. Everywhere has become cafes, restaurants and hotels. This situation really upset us..." (K237)* *"...The magnificent place I visited years ago has turned into a commercial area. Hotels are everywhere. The beauty once provided by the greenery has been replaced by hotels. Don't harm nature..." (K453)*
disappointment / regret	*"...It was a complete disappointment. At first, I wondered if I had come to the wrong place, and I wanted to go further. I asked an old lady what there was to see further ahead. She said, 'What do you want to see? You can have a picnic up ahead..." (K21)* *"...This is not a plateau or anything. Everywhere has become a business city. We were incredibly disappointed. There is no place left to see. Unfortunately, it destroys the place where people enter. Instead of this plateau, look at the surrounding plateaus..."(K80)* *"...We went to Ayder Plateau today. Because of the construction of businesses, there's no longer any plateau left. It's just a tiny area. If you want to see Ayder, you can. However, if you're going just to see the plateau, I wouldn't recommend it at all; it's a complete disappointment..." (K324)*

Source: TripAdvisor

An analysis of Figure 4 shows that 34 negative subcategories were identified for Ayder Plateau. When the negative codes (n=1,393) obtained from the comments shared by the visitors about Ayder Plateau are analyzed; the most frequently repeated code is that the destination is destroyed (n=249). Visitors used many words such as "nature massacre, ruined, no natural beauty left, no plateau left, concretized, invaded, occupied, plundered, etc." to indicate that the destination was destroyed. This is followed by crowdedness of the destination (n=128), expensive services provided in the destination (n=109), busyness of the businesses in the destination (n=107), disappointment or regret about the destination (n=92). Some comments on the most frequently recurring negative subcategories are presented in Table 3.

Negative comments indicate that Ayder Plateau faces problems such as dense construction, overcrowding, high prices, and loss of natural texture. Visitors state that instead of the tranquil plateau environment they expected, they encountered a crowded and expensive destination full of commercial enterprises. Especially the destruction of nature and the uncontrolled growth of tourism stand out as the biggest disappointing factors. This situation reveals the need to develop sustainable policies.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is inevitable to experience service errors and deficiencies in tourism enterprises. This is because services are produced in tourism, and the expectations and satisfaction level of each person receiving the service are different. Being successful in the tourism sector depends on how complaints about these errors and deficiencies are handled (Büyükkuru, 2016, p. 152). Any dissatisfaction received in writing or verbally is called a complaint, and evaluating and resolving complaints is vital for the tourism sector in terms of increasing revenues and profitability (Avcıkurt, 2010, p. 195). At this point, it is necessary to consider complaints as an opportunity and to produce and implement solutions in this regard, being aware that customer loss will be inevitable if complaints are not valued. Research shows that dissatisfied customers can tell 10 to 20 people about bad experiences (Mattilla, 2001, p. 583). This situation has become more complex with technological developments. When visitors have negative experiences, they tend to share these experiences more on online travel platforms (Ghazi, 2017, p. 110). Therefore, the speed at which a bad experience is shared and the number of people to whom it is shared increases considerably.

The fact that the products in the tourism sector are predominantly intangible necessitates more detailed and meticulous marketing research than other industrial products. In other words, when making decisions in this field, relatively more information sources are needed to support the decision (Karakuş, 2021, p. 35). The rapid growth of information produced by touristic consumers with the effect of technological developments provides more information to all tourism stakeholders as well as to touristic product producers and managers (Mirzaalian & Halpenny, 2021). Miguens et al. (2008) also state that rich content that influences tourists' choices informs many decisions for management and is extremely valuable in understanding preferences, needs and reactions. In this context, the content created by touristic consumers is useful both to provide solutions based on negative opinions and complaints, to ensure customer satisfaction and thus increase the revenue generated, and to provide guidance for management decisions. In this study, visitor experiences towards Ayder Plateau in Kaçkar Mountains National Park were analyzed through their comments. Data was collected through TripAdvisor, which is considered as the world's largest travel platform. The 849 comments shared by visitors about Ayder Plateau were analyzed by content analysis, and 2,633 codings were made. Of these, 47.09% were positive (n=1,240) and 52.91% (n=1,393) were negative. On the other hand, it was observed that the scores given by the visitors on the travel platform while sharing their experiences about the destination were high. Approximately 64% of the visitors' comments on Ayder Plateau were rated as excellent-very good, 15% as fair and 21% as bad-terrible . Therefore, it has been concluded that although the scores given by the visitors to the destination are high, the negative opinions and complaints about the destination are higher than the positive opinions. In other words, although visitors gave high scores to the destination, they also shared their negative opinions and complaints to a great extent while sharing their experiences. This result can provide an important resource in terms of the way visitor evaluations are handled by pointing to different dynamics in the scoring and interpretation processes of touristic experiences. This may be due to the fact that "Ayder Plateau is imagined as a natural and untouched plateau, but these expectations are not fully met due to increasing construction and touristic intensity" as frequently stated in the comments of the visitors. This expectation-reality mismatch may cause a critical language to prevail in the comments despite the positive ratings. In other respects, the evaluation of tourism services in terms of price-performance balance may lead visitors to express their experiences in a negative way, especially if high prices do not match the service quality. In Ayder Plateau, high-cost services expressed by visitors were reflected in the comments and frequently criticized by visitors despite the high scores given to the destination. Finally, from a sustainable tourism perspective, the transformation of Ayder Plateau into an increasingly commercial destination in the eyes of visitors and the damage to its natural texture cause visitors to be concerned about the future of the destination. In this regard, the increase in criticism despite high ratings points to the necessity of sustainable tourism practices.

In the study, 23 positive and 34 negative subcategories were identified. In describing their experiences, visitors used words such as "beautiful, wonderful, incredible, amazing, magnificent, excellent, terrific, etc." to describe the beauty of the destination in a positive way, and therefore the most frequently repeated code is related to the "beauty of the destination". In addition, the most frequently recurring codes were the necessity of visiting the destination, food and beverage recommendations, fresh air and the presence of many businesses.

Globalization and changing social, environmental, technological and economic conditions have a significant impact on consumption patterns, and tourism demands are changing day by day accordingly. One of these changes is the shift of tourists from mass tourism products to special interest tourism (Kahraman & Türkay, 2014, p. 44). On the other hand, the increasing demand of tourists for environmental awareness has become an important factor determining vacations and travels (Tuna, 2007, p. 18). In this respect, while the natural resources of destinations constitute an attractive factor for tourists, at the same time, the negativities experienced in the destination can be the subject of complaints. The fact that there are close links between tourism and the environment, that the environment is one of the main attraction factors for tourists, that environmental factors affect tourism and that tourism affects the environment can make these processes complex. Excessive use of natural areas, which constitute one of the most important resources that provide income increase to the tourism sector, negatively affects the environment by disrupting the ecological balance (Uçar et al., 2010, p. 143). Overuse of touristic resources also causes the destination to lose its attractiveness. In addition, it is stated that the rapid and mass development caused by tourism negatively affects the quality of the environment and many effects such as the change of existing land use, the destruction of vegetation and the entire natural environment, the proliferation of structures incompatible with the natural environment, the formation of sewage and garbage problems that the existing infrastructure cannot handle, and the destruction of protected areas may occur (Tuna, 2007, p. 18). As a matter of fact, the most frequently repeated negative code in this study, in which the experiences related to Ayder Plateau were examined, is that "the destination has been destroyed". Visitors expressed these thoughts with the help of many words such as "nature massacre, ruined, no natural beauty left, no plateau left, concretized, invaded, occupied, plundered, etc.". Similar to the results of the research, Mutlu & Keleş (2024) also concluded that there is significant environmental degradation as a result of the research comparing the old and new photographs of Ayder Plateau. In addition, "crowded, expensive, busy businesses, disappointment or regret about the destination" are among the most frequently repeated codes by visitors in this study. In this direction, first of all, negative opinions and complaints should not be seen as a cost factor; on the contrary, it should be considered as a warning that directs visitors to think about what needs to be done for the future of the destination and emphasizes the need to take action quickly. Negative opinions and complaints in the region should not be ignored in order to gain an advantage over competing destinations, to increase the rate of conscious

visits for nature conservation, to improve the regional image, and to gain new customers by increasing customer recommendation rates.

It is clear that tourism that develops to the detriment of nature and the environment will consume its own resources. Therefore, a clean, organized and protected environment is needed for successful and sustainable tourism (Şanlıöz Özgen, et al., 2016, p. 15). Considering the intense interaction of the sector with the environment, it is imperative to be a solution partner in environmental issues. Today, as the popularity of nature-based tourism increases, many destinations face challenges in sustaining their ecological resources (Adewumi et al., 2019, p. 1). In this context, investments should be made in the development of the most appropriate tourism types to be carried out according to sustainable tourism principles in the destination, and tourism types that attach importance to the protection of natural balance should be popularized. The touristic supply values in the region should be inventoried, and natural resources with high supply potential should be utilized in a planned manner and with a balance between protection and utilization. According to Özdemir (2014), a destination that has a rich potential in terms of resources but can use very few of its resources effectively is less competitive than another destination that knows how to utilize its resource wealth. In this direction, it is important to be aware that it is not how many resources are available, but how they are utilized, and to act with an understanding of sustainability.

National parks provide visitors with recreational opportunities to experience and enjoy nature, but they require consistent and sustainable support from the community (Weiler, Moore & Moyle, 2013). One of the important conditions for ensuring sustainability is the cooperation of stakeholders with each other (Gümüş Dönmez, 2016, p. 8). Gibbs & Jones (2000) state that environmental sustainability can only be achieved through the collective efforts of local government and environmental policy makers. All tourism stakeholders within the destination should act with common ideas with the understanding of ensuring a balance between conservation and utilization. In this direction, macro-level plans should be implemented in a micro sense, integrating the expectations of businesses and local people, but mostly based on the sustainability of the environment and tourism. In addition, the carrying capacity of the destination should be taken into account and restrictions should be imposed on the number of activities, facilities and visitors in the region. One of the most frequent complaints of visitors is that the destination is "crowded". This issue is of great importance both in terms of solving the complaint and increasing satisfaction and in terms of protecting and using the resources. It should be kept in mind that utilization of natural resources in amounts exceeding their utilization capacity will negatively affect the future of the resources and thus the duration of their use in tourism. On the other hand, various measures need to be taken in terms of supply capacity. As a matter of fact, visitors frequently repeated the phrase "excess of businesses". At this point, new investments should be restricted, illegal construction should be prevented, businesses that are not suitable for the regional texture should be inspected and made suitable for the environment in the plateau where it is thought that its natural beauty has deteriorated due to the increase in building density.

According to Kıvılcım & Bilici (2020), illegal buildings in the region and concrete structures that are not suitable for the local architecture prevent the correct promotion of the local culture. Mutlu & Keleş (2024) also conducted in-depth interviews with people living in Ayder Plateau and drew attention to the problem of uncontrolled and illegal construction in the region. At this point, the demolition of illegal structures initiated by the state in the region should be completed rapidly.

Ayder Plateau, located in the Kaçkar Mountains National Park, attracts attention with its thermal facilities and plateau settlement and faces increasing visitor demand in domestic tourism activities (Fettahoğlu Şenkaya et al., 2012, p. 151). It is stated that the number of visitors to the region increases every year compared to the previous year (Çakır & Sandalcılar, 2018, p. 357). Increased visitation of destinations contributes to regional development along with economic, environmental and social sustainability (Thapa & Lee, 2017, p. 112). Given the dual goals of increasing visitor numbers as well as promoting conservation and development, it is important to monitor and manage visitor experiences in Ayder Plateau. In this direction, it would be useful to first adopt technology to follow the platforms frequently used by visitors and evaluate their activities. Afterward, it is necessary to address the issues frequently mentioned by visitors. One of the frequently repeated negative opinions of visitors is "expensive". In this regard, prices should be determined for all services with the joint decision of all tourism stakeholders producing touristic products in the destination, and the management should prevent exceeding these prices throughout the season with various sanctions. Although it is not among the most frequently recurring codes, visitors also complain about prices varying according to nationality and prioritization of services according to nationality. At this point, in-service training can be provided to tourism employees in the destination periodically to improve service quality. These training courses can be organized in cooperation with regional universities and can be made more effective by bringing together academic knowledge and industry experience.

In the data collection phase of the study, TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel content platform, was used to determine visitor experiences. The main limitation of this study is that visitor experiences were obtained only from an online platform (TripAdvisor). In this sense, in future research, the results can be combined or compared by examining the comments on different travel platforms, and the opinions of visitors about the region can be examined in depth with interviews or survey techniques. In addition, such data showing visitors' satisfaction with the destination should be measured periodically, and the success of any solutions implemented to address complaints should be monitored.

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