



Research Article

DOI: 10.54493/jgtr.1527725

Investigation of E-Complaints of Hotel Guests Towards 4 and 5-Star Kayseri City Hotels

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ARTICLE INFO

Background:

Received:27/08/2024

Accepted:26/09/2024

Published:28/10/2024

Keywords:

E-Complaints; Hotels;
Word-of-mouth; Online
reviews; Service quality;
Kayseri

ABSTRACT

In recent decades Kayseri has emerged as a prominent destination for winter, nature, and cultural tourism, attracting visitors to its natural and cultural resources, and gastronomic offerings. The increase in tourist numbers has also led to a corresponding expansion in the accommodation sector, accompanied by a significant rise in hotel room numbers and available bed capacity. Despite this increase, academic studies examining the quality of accommodation services in the province or addressing customer perceptions of these services are relatively limited. This exploratory study aims to analyze e-complaints regarding 4 and 5-star city hotels in Kayseri, identify the most prevalent issues articulated by guests in these complaints, and categorize and assess them. For this purpose, the researchers first identified 497 negative reviews for seven different city hotels in Kayseri on the TripAdvisor website between August and December 2023. Then these reviews were subjected to content analysis. The content analysis findings revealed that guests were mostly unhappy with "rooms and housekeeping department services", "staff attitudes and performance", "food and beverage department services" and "physical characteristics and atmosphere" of hotels.

Introduction

Kayseri has long been regarded as one of Türkiye's most significant industrial and commercial hubs. Consequently, it has become a favored destination for business travelers. In recent two decades, it has also begun to emerge as a prominent center for winter, nature, and cultural tourism, drawing visitors to its natural, historical, and cultural resources, winter attractions, and gastronomic offerings (Çeşmeci & Ertan, 2022: 234). Erciyes Mountain, which hosts many tourists from abroad, especially in the winter months, is very prominent for winter sports as well as for other nature-based tourism types. Furthermore, as a result of the considerable emigration from the province during the 1970s for work opportunities in Europe, Kayseri today also receives a substantial influx of tourists from various European countries during the summer months. These expatriates mostly visit friends and relatives, but they also accelerate the development of tourism in general and especially health tourism by benefiting from affordable and quality health services offered in the city. With all these, the number of accommodation establishments in the city has increased, accompanied by a parallel expansion in the number of rooms and bed capacity. According to data provided by the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, in 2017, the Kayseri province possessed 23 certified accommodation establishments, which offered a total of 1859 rooms and 3760 beds. By June 2024, this numbers nearly doubled to 2556 rooms and 5182 beds in 39 ministry-certified accommodation establishments (Kültür ve Turizm

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Bakanlığı, 2017; 2024a). Majority of these businesses are either city hotels, located in Kayseri city center or mountain resort hotels located in Erciyes Ski Resort. In addition to these certified accommodation establishments, in the province there are also 73 establishments with simple accommodation business certificates with 1898 rooms and 3796 bed capacity (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2024a). Some of the executives of these enterprises, totaling 112 in number, took the initiative and came together to form an association. Hence in February 2024, the Kayseri Hoteliers Association (KAYOTED) was formally constituted (Barut, 2024), thereby facilitating the organization and operation of the hospitality industry on a destination basis. Despite these developments and the rapid increase in the number of accommodation establishments in the province, academic studies addressing the quality of services offered or customer complaints handling related to these hotel services are quite limited.

Today, customer complaints are seen not just as negative feedback. They function as opportunities for learning and improvement for businesses (Plymire, 1991), and as such, they play a guiding role in the search for better design and delivery of high-quality, customer-satisfying services (Tax et al, 1998). There are various types of consumer complaining behavior but negative word-of-mouth (WOM) can be regarded as one of the principal constructs, affecting organizations' performance directly and indirectly (Singh, 1990: 12-13; Bach & Kim, 2012: 60-61). Negative WOM is "the communication of dissatisfaction to family and friends, which is often in the form of a warning not to buy a certain product or to buy from a certain outlet" (Boote, 1998: 143). As new technologies emerged and the internet proliferated, consumers began to disseminate their experiences with products or producers, not just to family and friends, but also to a wider audience. The nature of complaints or negative WOM metamorphosed and electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) gained momentum as customers began utilizing the internet to generate and share reviews with others. (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; López & Piñero, 2014). The role of electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) especially in tourism purchases today is of paramount importance due to the intangible nature of tourism products and services. The ascendancy of e-WOM channels has resulted in consumer opinions exerting greater influence over purchase decisions than the information provided by suppliers (Litvin et al., 2008; Ip et al., 2010). For many tourists, one of the most effective methods for overcoming the intangibility of services in the tourism industry is using travel review websites (Sezgin, 2013). This is particularly relevant in the context of the accommodation industry (Cantalops & Salvi, 2014), where reviews from previous guests highly influence customers' decisions. The increasing reliance on travel review websites as a source of information for decision-making regarding tourism products underscores the necessity for further research on e-WOM (Sparks & Browning, 2011; Berezina et al., 2015) and hospitality-compliant behavior (Au et al., 2009). It would also be highly beneficial for hotel managers to gain a deeper comprehension of their guests and enhance their establishments' service quality and overall performance. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of data generated on travel review websites may pose a significant challenge in ensuring a comprehensive and objective evaluation. To address this challenge, this study employs a content analysis approach, which enables the extraction of meaningful patterns from large textual data sets (Nicmanis, 2024). Based on the entirety of this information and, within the specified context, the objective of this study is to identify, categorize, and assess the most prevalent types of e-complaints in Kayseri 4 and 5-star city hotels by utilizing content analysis on a leading travel review platform, TripAdvisor. It is hoped that examining this issue will contribute to the relevant literature on the subject and guide future research. It is also assumed that it may help hotel managers see the main weaknesses of the businesses and take measures to eliminate them. Thus, it is thought that the study can contribute to an increase in the service quality and customer satisfaction of the enterprises, as well as in the average length of stay and repeat visits.

Literature

In line with the purpose of this study, this literature review examines the associated concepts within three primary headings. The initial section of the review provides a concise overview of the fundamental concepts of complaint, complaint management, and e-complaints. Subsequently, word of mouth (WOM) and electronic word of mouth (eWOM) are elucidated. The concluding part of the review presents a brief analysis of e-complaint-related hospitality research, conducted utilizing the TripAdvisor website as an eWOM environment and data source.

Complaints, Complaint Handling and E-Complaints

From a broad perspective, complaints are defined as "expressions of dissatisfaction, whether subjectively experienced or not, for the purpose of venting emotions or achieving intrapsychic goals, interpersonal goals, or both." (Kowalski, 1996: 179). In marketing literature complaint is often seen as a customer's "voice" of dissatisfaction with

a good, service, or purchasing situation. For example, Crié (2003: 60) defines customer complaint behavior as "one of the responses to perceived dissatisfaction in the post-purchase phase". Singh (1988: 94) defines it as a "set of multiple (behavioral and nonbehavioral) responses, some or all of which are triggered by perceived dissatisfaction with a purchase episode". Similarly, complaints are regarded as a form of negative customer feedback, resulting from the failure to meet expectations following the purchase of goods or services (Ergün & Kalıpçı, 2020). Complaints are an inherent aspect of consumer behavior, serving as vital feedback mechanisms, especially in the hospitality industry (Berry et al., 2014). Guest complaints are of great importance for hotel managers to gain insight into guest preferences regarding their hotel as well as their competitors (Lee & Hu, 2004). Furthermore, complaints are essential for formulation of strategies for improving service quality (Sparks & Browning, 2010). However, to reap the benefits of complaints and to maintain customer satisfaction and loyalty, complaint handling, and management are key elements of success (Mate et al., 2019; Morgeson et al., 2020). Sparks and McColl-Kennedy (2001) emphasize that the way a complaint is handled can significantly influence the customer's future behavior. Unresolved complaints often lead to negative word-of-mouth, which can harm a hotel's reputation. On the other hand, accurate, fast, and fair (Tax et al., 1998) complaint handling not only addresses the complainant's individual needs but also contributes to long-term customer relationships (Holloway & Beatty, 2003) and improved customer satisfaction and loyalty through one-to-one marketing (Kunathikornkit et al., 2023). Today the landscape of complaints and complaint handling is evolving with internet-based and digital advancements. Traditional complaining methods are supplemented by digital tools. E-complaints or online complaints refer to complaints lodged through electronic channels, including email, social media, and specialized online platforms. As Özer Sarı and Aşman Alikılıç (2016) note, e-complaints usually address a company or brand directly and provide evidence through supporting content (e.g. evidence such as witnesses, documents, photos, or videos). The fast growth of the number of e-complaints has also prompted customers to proactively register on user-generated content platforms, thereby facilitating the dissemination of their experiences to a broader audience. The digital nature of e-complaints has introduced new dimensions to complaint management. In response, numerous hospitality and tourism enterprises have incorporated user-generated content websites into their digital business strategies (Ayeh et al., 2013).

Word-of-Mouth (WOM) and Electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) Concepts

The ideal situation for businesses is one in which customer complaints are directed toward their staff or complaint-handling channels and subsequently resolved. Berry et al., (2014: 92) name this as an "optimal complaint" and define it as "the channels that come to the business and do not reach the outside consumer base". However, for the customer dissatisfied, there are several response styles he or she can choose from. Customers may choose to complain actively to the firm or engage in formal third-party (legal) complaining action. Singh (1990) names this kind of complaint as "voice". Customers may also take no action, or end the relationship with the firm, which is called "inactivity" or "exit" (Boote, 1998; Singh, 1990; Crié, 2003; Bach & Kim, 2012). Another important type of complaining behavior is negative word-of-mouth or "Negative WOM / NWOM" which includes dissatisfaction-related communication with family and friends and warning them not to buy or use a certain service or product (Boote, 1998; Crié, 2003; Tosun et al., 2018). Westbrook (1987: 261) defines word-of-mouth (WOM) as "informal communications directed at other consumers about the ownership, usage, or characteristics of particular goods and services and/or their sellers". Word-of-mouth communication has been recognized as a pivotal and most efficacious communication channel within consumer behavior research (Keller, 2007). As outlined by Vázquez et al. (2013) it is characterized by two primary attributes. First, the message recipient must perceive that the sender is unattached to any commercial organization. This implies that for a WOM recommendation to be considered credible, it must originate from a natural dialogue between the two individuals involved, and it should result from the sender's expertise and the recipient's desire to learn more. Secondly, WOM can be classified as positive, negative (Vázquez et al. 2013), or neutral (Filieri & McLeay, 2013). When positive WOM encourages purchase decisions, negative WOM acts as a deterrent (Vázquez et al. 2013). Mazzarol et al. (2007) highlighted that the effectiveness of WOM in the tourism and hospitality industry is primarily due to the intangible nature of services offered in this sector. Since potential customers cannot experience the service before purchase, they rely heavily on WOM to assess the quality and suitability of the service. Similarly, Litvin et al. (2008), point out that WOM plays a significant role in shaping consumer behavior in tourism, as travelers often rely on the opinions of others when making travel decisions. The interpersonal nature of WOM, combined with its perceived credibility, makes it a vital source of information for potential tourists.

The advent of the internet and new communication technologies has not only transformed the impact and character of word-of-mouth among consumers but has also shaped the strategies companies employ in response to consumer-generated WOM (Bach & Kim, 2012). Today customers engage in virtual interactions on the web and communicate their opinions, knowledge, and information, about all kinds of goods, services, and brands through online platforms such as blogs, social networks, or online review websites (Filiari & McLeay, 2013). These technological advances and the metamorphosis in communication style have begun to replace traditional WOM with e-WOM to a significant extent. Traditional word-of-mouth (WOM) encompasses offline interpersonal communication, and electronic WOM (e-WOM) denotes the dissemination of consumer feedback about products and services via the Internet. E-WOM is defined as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, that is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39). Roughly, e-WOM can be considered as the digital equivalent of word-of-mouth (Çevrimkaya et al., 2024). In the context of the travel industry, online reviews can be seen as electronic equivalents of traditional word-of-mouth communication. They comprise comments and evaluations published by travelers regarding the tourism products, services, and brands they have personally experienced (Filiari & McLeay, 2013). The motives behind tourists' online reviews are sharing experiences and satisfaction degrees with a particular service and assisting other travelers in making informed decisions (Yoo & Gretzel, 2008). E-WOM is different in several keyways from traditional WOM (Xie et al., 2011): Firstly, it is typical for consumers to obtain word-of-mouth recommendations from a relatively small number of individuals, such as friends and family members. In contrast, the online environment allows a producer or service provider to be reviewed by many customers with diverse backgrounds (Litvin et al., 2008). Secondly, WOM typically pertains to opinions from acquaintances, whereas e-WOM encompasses comments from strangers. Consequently, the source credibility of e-WOM is frequently less readily established than that of WOM. To reduce this anonymity, some travel review websites ask review writers to disclose their personal identifying information. Finally, consumers can readily interact with the individuals offering WOM, obtain comprehensive information about their experience with a product or service provider, and make more confident judgments (Xie et al., 2011).

E-WOM and E-Complaint Studies in the Field of Accommodation

In recent decades, electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) has become a key element in the decision-making processes of consumers in the tourism and hospitality industry (Litvin et al., 2008; Mauri & Minazzi, 2013). This is why a considerable number of studies examine both the positive and negative effects of word-of-mouth (WOM) on tourism products across the various geographical regions of the world (Litvin et al., 2008). For example, Sparks and Browning (2011) examined the impact of e-WOM on hotel booking intention and found that online reviews significantly influence customers' intentions. Positive reviews increase consumer trust and the likelihood of bookings, while negative reviews deter potential customers. Consumers are more susceptible to initial unfavorable information, particularly when the majority of the available reviews are negative. The study also revealed that the quantity of reviews plays a critical role, as a higher number of positive reviews about interpersonal service leads to greater consumer trust (Sparks and Browning, 2011). The findings of other research by Ye et al (2009), demonstrated that an increase in reviews especially positive online reviews can significantly increase the number of bookings in a hotel. They found that a 10% increase in review ratings is boosting online bookings by more than five percent. It was also found that the variance or polarity (negative-positive) of e-WOM for a hotel harms the hotel's online sales (Ye et al., 2009). Vermeulen and Seegers (2009) found that both positive and negative online reviews (e-WOM) about hotels are raising awareness and enhancing the consideration of hotels among consumers. Furthermore, they discovered that positive online reviews are associated with a more positive perception of the hotel among potential guests. Another study by Anderson (2012) discovered that a rise in user-generated content quantity and quality (positive e-WOM), can increase hotel performance, increasing occupancy rates and revenue per available room (RevPAR). Berezina et al. (2015) analyzed 2,510 online reviews of hotel guests on TripAdvisor.com for Sarasota, Florida, USA. Their findings revealed that both positive and negative reviews could be classified into common categories, including place of business, room, furnishing, members, and sports. Additionally, the study revealed that satisfied customers are more likely to cite intangible aspects of their hotel experience, such as staff attitudes than their less satisfied counterparts. Conversely, dissatisfied customers tend to focus on the tangible aspects of their stay, including the hotel's furnishings and financial aspects (Berezina et al., 2015).

One of the most influential aspects of e-WOM is related to negative reviews and complaints online (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2017). Negative e-WOM may have a destructive impact on the reputation and image of a tourism provider (Litvin et al., 2008; Sparks & Browning, 2010; Levy et al., 2013), particularly because it can reach an audience that has the potential to try the product (Berry et al., 2014). Despite all, for those consumers planning to buy a tourist product or service, e-complaints and negative E-WOM (bad reviews) constitute a particularly useful source of information, as they can assist consumers in avoiding unfavorable experiences. (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2017). To gain insight into the nature of negative reviews, Levy et al. (2013) analyzed 1,946 negative reviews and 225 management responses from 86 hotels in Washington, D.C., USA in 10 popular tourism review platforms. An analysis of the complaint database identified front desk staff, bathroom hygiene, room cleanliness, and guestroom noise as the four most common areas of complaint. Examining the management responses to complaints, it was found that highly rated hotels frequently respond with expressions of gratitude, apologies, and explanations for the shortcomings experienced (Levy et al., 2013). In another study examining online holiday reviews, Papathanassis and Knolle (2011) found that negative online reviews have a greater impact on reader than positive ones. The respondents of the study allocated a significantly greater amount of time to the examination and commentary of critical reviews. It was also found that a small number of negative reviews doesn't affect the selection of a holiday, and that the existence of negative reviews is mostly perceived as a credibility indicator for the online source (Papathanassis & Knolle, 2011). Ekiz et al., (2012) analyzed 320 reviews containing e-complaints for luxury hotels in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on TripAdvisor. After conducting a thematic analysis, the researchers identified 1,453 incidents, which were grouped into 54 themes. A frequency analysis of the extracted themes revealed that the most frequent e-complaint themes were related to rooms, arrogant and/or clueless staff, and failure to respond. Fernandes and Fernandes (2017) analyzed 1,191 guest reviews on TripAdvisor of hotels in Oporto, Portugal, including 463 e-complaints. They identified 12 main complaint categories. Major categories of complaints were rooms, service, customer care, and cleanliness. The "rooms" category was found to be the dominant category, followed by "service" (Fernandes & Fernandes, 2017). Au et al. (2009) identified nine e-complaints categories through a content analysis of 453 negative reviews on Tripadvisor for Hong Kong hotels. These categories were service, space, cleanliness, utilities/amenities, bedding, price, provision of amenities, decor, and miscellaneous. It was also found that overall service delivery failure (slow/rude/incompetent staff) represents more than half (54%) of all reported complaint cases and was a prominent issue among all categories. Another study employed content analysis of 424 negative reviews on Tripadvisor for Jordan luxury hotels. 11 major categories were identified, and the most common e-complaints categories were found to be service quality, efficiency of hotel facilities, and cleanliness and hygiene. Additionally, the study revealed that approximately 43% of the reviews received a response from management, with 56% of these responses posted within a week (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017).

Numerous studies examining customer e-complaints or E-WOM based on TripAdvisor data for accommodation facilities in different cities, provinces, or regions in Turkey have been found in the literature. For example, Kızırmak et al. (2015) examined e-complaints to Eastern Black Sea region hotels and Ünal et al. (2020) to Marmara region hotels. E-complaints or e-WOM related studies for hotels in cities as İstanbul (Alrawadieh & Demirkol, 2015), Isparta (Çuhadar et al., 2018), Afyonkarahisar (Kızıldemir et al., 2019), Eskişehir (Çoban et al, 2019), Uşak (Mazan & Çatır, 2019), Bursa-Uludağ (Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, 2020), Aydın-Kuşadası (Yazıcı Ayyıldız & Baykal, 2020), Sivas (Işkın & Baştürk, 2020), Sakarya (Zengin & Haliloğlu, 2020), Ankara (Eşiyok & Öztürk, 2021), Kırklareli (Tanrıverdi & Çıkı, 2022), Trabzon (Öksüz & Erkılıç, 2022), Alanya (Sezgin & Duman, 2023) and Antalya (Şahin et al., 2017; Gençer & Keşkekci, 2023) have been also identified. While there is a substantial body of research on hospitality e-complaints in Türkiye, there has been limited investigation related to hotels in Kayseri and about complaint categorization and handling in these hotels. Moreover, it is anticipated that this research will facilitate the acquisition of valuable insights concerning e-complaint management and customer satisfaction in city hotels.

Method

This study aims to analyze e-complaints regarding 4 and 5-star city hotels in Kayseri, identify the most frequently expressed issues by guests in these complaints, and categorize and assess them. For this purpose, an exploratory study with a qualitative approach design was employed, utilizing a document analysis as an extant data collection tool and a content analysis method for analyzing the collected data.

Population and Sampling

Kayseri hotels were chosen as the primary focus of this research. Kayseri province is a popular and rapidly growing destination for cultural tourism, business travel, and winter sports, with emerging natural, cultural, and gastronomic attractions. The province offers a wide range of accommodation options, reflecting the diversity of tourism types that have emerged here. According to the aim of the study, four and five-star city hotels were selected as representative sample properties. Located mostly in the city center or surroundings, city hotels generally serve tourists visiting the city for cultural and business purposes. During the winter season, some tourists who visit the Erciyes Ski Center also stay at these hotels. There were determined 35 ministry-certified accommodation establishments in August 2023 in Kayseri (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2023). The sampling method used in our study was criterion sampling. The criterion sampling method is founded upon the inclusion of all subjects that satisfy the criteria established by the researcher in advance (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2021: 120). In this study, the criterion for the sample was to include the e-complaints of travelers who had stayed in four and five-star city hotels in Kayseri and who rated their hotel experience as "average," "poor," or "terrible" on the TripAdvisor website. Even though some researchers took into account just the reviews of guests rating the stay in the hotel "poor," and "terrible" (Ekiz et al., 2012; Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017), this research added "average," hotel rating reviews, because they also can include a lot of complaints.

As evidenced by the literature review, a considerable number of studies on e-WOM and e-complaints in tourism and hospitality literature have been conducted using the TripAdvisor website as a data source. TripAdvisor is seen as the biggest travel platform and travel review website in the world, available in 49 markets in 28 languages, assisting monthly more than 450 million travelers. There are over 860 million opinions and reviews from 8.7 million diverse travel and accommodation experiences (TripAdvisor, 2024). That's the main reason for choosing this travel review website as a data source for the study.

A total of 11 hotels with 4 or 5 stars in Kayseri province were identified by searching the hotel database of the Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2024b). Of these, four were situated within the Erciyes Ski Center area and were subsequently excluded from consideration because they did not meet the criteria for inclusion as city hotels. Consequently, the remaining 7 hotels were selected as the research sample. Three of the selected hotels are 5-star and four of them are 4-star hotels. For these 7 hotels in Kayseri city center, a total of 497 reviews (e-complaints) written by tourists who rated their hotel experience as "average," "poor," or "terrible" were identified on the TripAdvisor website. A review was classified as an "e-complaint" if it contained at least one negative statement or incident. A total of 497 reviews were included in the sample, as at least one negative statement was identified in each. In the majority of reviews, multiple negative statements or incidents were observed, thus meeting the criteria for classification as an e-complaint.

Data Collection and Analysis

Document analysis was used as an extant data collection tool. The extant data comprises a range of materials, including documents, visual or voice records, Big Data, and other types of materials, which the researcher examines to identify evidence and background details pertinent to the research aim and problem (Salmons, 2022). Document analysis has been preferred because it facilitates access to hard-to-reach data without encountering reaction problems, enabling long-term data collection and having a relatively low cost (Bailey, 2008). The data for this study were collected manually from the TripAdvisor website between August and December 2023. E-complaints identified for each of the seven hotels in the sample were recorded separately and prepared for content analysis. The basic objective of content analysis is to transform verbal and non-quantitative data into quantifiable information (Bailey, 2008). After familiarization with the data obtained, the coding process has begun. The coding process was conducted following the methodology proposed by Nicmanis (2024). This entailed a line-by-line examination of the dataset, identifying pertinent textual elements aligned with the research aim, and categorizing them into a code that was subsequently defined by the information they conveyed. The process of coding was conducted manually in the coding workbook. Furthermore, the data set included information on whether the hotel managers responded to e-complaints on TripAdvisor. The authors first conducted an independent coding to identify the structure of complaints. In the initial stages of coding, complaints related to different hotel departments were identified as key considerations. Where there was a disagreement about coding between the authors, the areas in question were subjected to further scrutiny until a common view was reached. The analysis of the 497 reviews yielded 2491 different

complaint cases which were grouped and structured into subcategories and categories. The extracted subcategories, which had been agreed upon and categorized by the two authors, were then subjected to further examination by a third researcher, who has experience in the implication of the content analysis method in the hotel industry. Thus, researcher triangulation was performed to reduce researcher bias and increase the validity and reliability of the study (Archibald, 2015). Based on this procedure, seven different categories of e-complaints were identified, including: "rooms and housekeeping department services", "staff attitudes and performance", "food and beverage department services", "physical characteristics and atmosphere", "price and management policies", "front office and concierge" and "facilities, amenities, and additional services".

Findings and Discussion

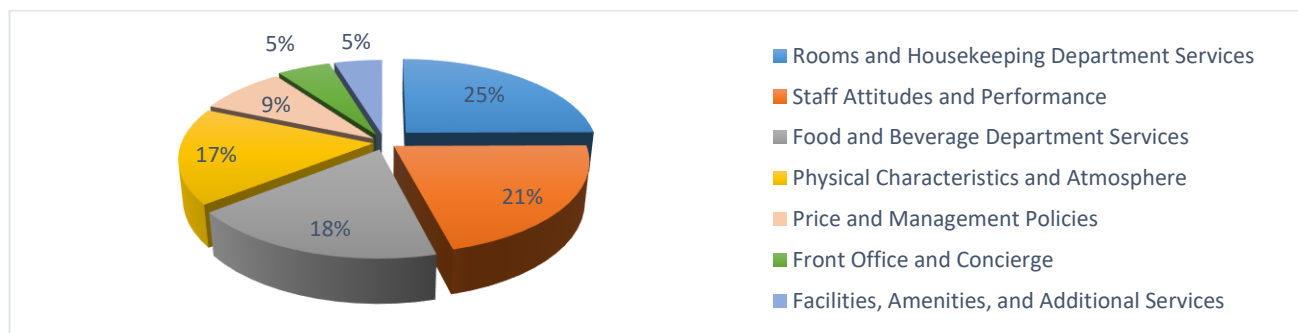
A total of 3399 reviews were identified on the TripAdvisor website for the 7 hotels comprising the sample. 497 of them (14,6%) were reviews of guests rating the hotel experience as "average," "poor," or "terrible" and containing e-complaints. As can be seen in Table 1., out of a total of 497 reviews analyzed, 222 (44.67%) were from guests who rated their hotel experience as "average", 121 (24.35%) from guests who rated it as "poor," and 154 (30.98%) from guests who rated it as "terrible". Not all reviewers provided demographic details but, nearly half of the analyzed reviews were written by males (47,68%), and most of the reviews analyzed were written in Turkish (83,10%). There were no hotel management responses to 169 (34%) out of 497 online reviews and 328 (%66) received responses. This response rate can be considered a satisfactory level compared to the findings of a study on Jordan’s luxury hotels, where 43% of the e-complaints received a response (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017). The response rate to negative reviews on TripAdvisor is generally below 50%. Many hotels recognize the importance of addressing negative reviews but often fail to do so due to resource constraints or a lack of structured response strategies (Xie et al., 2017).

Table 1. Profile of analyzed reviews and identified reviewers

Profile of Reviews or Reviewers	Response to Review		Reviewer Rating of Hotel			Reviewer Gender			Review Language	
	Yes	No	Average	Poor	Terrible	Male	Female	No answer	Turkish	English
N	328	169	222	121	154	237	78	182	413	84
Percent %	66	34	44,67	24,35	30,98	47,68	15,70	36,62	83,10	16,90

Content analysis, of the 497 reviews yielded 2491 different complaint cases (compliant statements). An average of five negative cases per review is close to the studies of Şahin et al., (2017) and Ekiz et al., (2012), who respectively extracted 4,11 and 4,54 cases per negative review. But in some other studies, this ratio was about 3 (Dinçer & Alrawadieh, 2017; Çoban et al., 2019) or even 2 cases per negative review (Fernandes and Fernandes, 2017; Öksüz & Erkilç, 2022). This finding suggests that although the number of negative reviews about a hotel could be low, the number of negative cases in every review may be higher.

Figure 1. Main E-Complaint Categories Identified and Their Distribution



Upon examination of 497 reviews, the identified 2491 cases were grouped and classified into 7 main categories, comprising 50 subcategories. As shown in Figure 1, the majority of complaint cases (25%) pertain to "rooms and housekeeping department services" (620 cases); 21% to "staff attitudes and performance" (525 cases); 18% to food and beverage department services (458 cases); and 17% to "physical characteristics and atmosphere" (426 cases). Other complaint categories where the number of complaint cases is lower included "price and management policies"

(9% - 213 cases); front office and concierge" (5% - 131 cases) and "amenities facilities and additional services" (5% - 118 cases). Some other studies in the literature on the subject have similarly categorized e-complaints and obtained similar categories and subcategories. For example, studies conducted by Kızılırmak et al. (2015), Fernandes and Fernandes (2017), Şahin, et al. (2017), Çoban et al. (2019), and especially Öksüz and Erkiş (2022) are illustrative of this.

A substantial percentage of complaint cases examined in this study fall within the "rooms and housekeeping services" category. As shown in Table 2 this category has 9 subcategories and the most frequent e-complaint subcategory in it is inadequate room or bathroom cleanliness accounting for 25% of the total complaints in the category. Many previous studies highlighted cleanliness as a critical factor in service quality perception and guest satisfaction (Ryan & Huimin, 2007; Barber & Scarcelli, 2010). Cleanliness is often considered a fundamental expectation not just in the hotel industry but in all service industries (Vilnai-Yavetz & Gilboa, 2010), and failure to meet this standard can lead to negative e-WOM, which can significantly affect a hotel's reputation and future bookings. Additionally, the high frequency of complaints about broken or non-functioning furniture or equipment (17.10%) and the physical structure of rooms or bathrooms (16.13%) suggests that maintenance and upkeep are crucial aspects of hotel operations that directly impact guest experiences. According to Jiang and Zhou (2024), the tangible elements especially in high-class hotels play a significant role in shaping customer quality perceptions and satisfaction, and issues in this area can result in negative e-WOM that could deter potential customers. Furthermore, the analysis shows that complaints about the poor quality of materials (12.26%) and lack of amenities (8.55%) are also notable. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of the SERVQUAL model, which emphasizes the importance of tangible elements in service delivery (Parasuraman et al., 1988). The quality and availability of amenities contribute to the overall perception of value and can influence guest satisfaction and their likelihood of recommending the hotel to others (Kim et al., 2016).

Table 2. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to Rooms and Housekeeping Department Services*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Inadequate room or bathroom cleanliness	155	25
Broken or non-functioning furniture or equipment in the room or bathroom	106	17,10
Complaints about the physical structure of rooms or bathrooms	100	16,13
Poor quality of materials in the room or bathroom	76	12,26
Lack of amenities in room or bathroom	53	8,55
Odour in the room or bathroom	47	7,58
Lack of cleanliness in the common areas of the hotel	42	6,77
Linens or towels not changed often enough	38	6,13
Complaints related to laundry services	3	0,48
Total	620	100

The second most important category of e-complaints was "staff attitudes and performance". As seen in Table 3, this category has 4 subcategories and accounts for 21% of the total complaint cases examined. The high frequency of complaints related to staff apathy (41.71%), unqualified or inexperienced staff (30.10%), and staff rudeness (27.05%) suggests that these issues are critical areas for improvement in Kayseri city hotels. Hotels can overcome complaints of staff apathy and rudeness by and hiring and recruiting more service-oriented staff. Existing research emphasizes that the service orientation of staff is strongly related to service quality, customer satisfaction, and loyalty (Kuşlivan & Eren, 2011). Moreover, studies on service quality in hospitality suggest that empathetic and proactive staff behavior is essential for building a positive guest experience (Umasuthan et al., 2017). Another important subcategory that constitutes the "staff attitudes and performance" category is "unqualified or inexperienced staff" (30.10%). Kuşlivan et al. (2010), highlight the importance of staff orientation, training, and development in the hospitality industry. Unqualified staff can negatively impact service delivery, leading to guest dissatisfaction. This underscores the need for recognizing the diversity of staff skills and talents (Baum, 2008) and continuous staff training programs, as noted by Baum (2002), who points out that investing in employee development is crucial for maintaining high service standards.

Table 3. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to Staff Attitudes and Performance*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Staff apathy	219	41,71
Unqualified or inexperienced staff	158	30,10
Staff rudeness	142	27,05
Personal hygiene of staff	6	1,14
Total	525	100

The third most important category of e-complaints was “food and beverage department services”. As seen in Table 4, this category accounts for 18% of the total complaint cases examined and has 11 subcategories. The content analysis of e-complaint cases reveals a significant concentration of customer dissatisfaction in specific areas, particularly poor taste or presentation of meals and poor food or meal quality, which together account for over 53% of the total complaints. These findings suggest that guests place a high value on the sensory and aesthetic aspects of their dining experience, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes the critical role of food quality and presentation in shaping guest satisfaction in hospitality settings (Namkung & Jang, 2007). The substantial number of cases related to poor, slow, or improper service (%13,54) further underscores the importance of efficient service delivery, which is often highlighted as a key determinant of customer satisfaction in food service contexts (Kivelä, & Chu, 2001). The presence of complaints regarding limited menu variety (10,04%) and poor beverage quality or absence of alcoholic beverages (%7,64) indicates a gap in meeting diverse guest expectations, consistent with studies that stress the importance of offering varied and high-quality options to cater to different customer preferences (Baiomy et al., 2019). Additionally, issues such as lack of cleanliness or bad odor in the restaurant (3,93%), and dirty or insufficient dinnerware (1,09%), though less frequently mentioned, highlight potential concerns with restaurant hygiene, which is critical to the overall dining experience (Truong et al., 2017). The relatively lower frequency of complaints about room service and minibars suggests that while these areas are important, they may not be as central to guest satisfaction as the core dining experience.

Table 4. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to Food and Beverage Department Services*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Poor taste or presentation of meals	126	27,51
Poor food or meal quality	120	26,20
Poor, slow, or improper service	62	13,54
Limited menu variety	46	10,04
Poor beverage quality or absence of alcoholic beverages	35	7,64
Lack of cleanliness or bad odor in the restaurant	18	3,93
Complaints related to the room minibars	18	3,93
Complaints related to room service	17	3,71
Lack of tables or chairs in the restaurant	7	1,53
Dirty or insufficient dinnerware	5	1,09
Small meal portions	4	0,87
Total	458	100

The fourth most prevalent category of e-complaints examined was "physical characteristics and atmosphere." This category represents 17% of the examined complaint cases and as illustrated in Table 5, encompasses 6 subcategories. The high frequency of complaints about old or non-functional furniture and fixtures (28.64%) and lack of adequate heating, cooling, ventilation, and lighting (28.40%) indicates that the physical upkeep of the hotel infrastructure plays a significant role in guest satisfaction. Lack of adequate sound isolation and noise in the building cases, which make up 17.37% of complaints, further emphasize the importance of creating a tranquil and restful atmosphere for guests, particularly in urban environments where external noise can be a significant disturbance. The findings of previous studies emphasized the importance of maintaining high standards in the physical environment and indoor environmental quality to meet guest expectations and enhance overall satisfaction (Barber & Scarcelli, 2010; Han & Hyun, 2017; Torres et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). The relatively lower percentage of complaints regarding the hotel's interior or exterior design (18.31%), location (6.10%), and view (%1,18) may indicate that while these factors are

important, they are less critical to the overall guest experience in examined hotels, compared to functional issues like furniture condition and climate control. Nonetheless, attention to aesthetic aspects and atmosphere, especially in upscale hotels is important for guest satisfaction (Choi & Kandampully, 2019).

Table 5. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to the Physical Characteristics and Atmosphere*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Old or non-functional furniture and fixtures in the hotel	122	28,64
Lack of adequate heating-cooling (thermal isolation), ventilation, and lighting	121	28,40
Complaints about the interior or exterior design of the hotel	78	18,31
Lack of adequate sound isolation and noise in the building	74	17,37
Complaints about hotel location (distance to the city center or tourist attractions, and crowd)	26	6,10
Complaints about the view from the hotel	5	1,18
Total	426	100

The fifth category of e-complaints found was "price and management policies". This category represents 9% of total examined complaint cases and as shown in Table 6, consists of 8 subcategories. The analysis reveals that the expensive services subcategory constitutes a significant portion of the complaint cases in this category (46%). This finding is consistent with existing literature. For example, Au et al. (2009) found that for Honk-Kong hotels, 24.3% of all e-complaint cases concern high hotel prices. Pricing strategies are delicate and while premium pricing can be justified by superior service and facilities, it can also lead to dissatisfaction if guests feel the price does not match the quality of received service. As demonstrated by Haddad et al. (2015), the perception of price fairness serves as a robust predictor of purchase intention and positive (WOM) among hotel guests. General complaints concerning hotel management are another important subcategory that includes a significant portion of cases (32.40%). The cases in this subcategory were highly diverse and could not be included in other categories. Rather, they represent a set of discrete complaints about management and management policies. A few of them are complaints related to the COVID-19 pandemic period. For example: "In public spaces of your hotel, there are no [Wear Face Mask] signs". Some other concerning the dress code in a 5-star city hotel, such as "There are people in ski boots in the restaurant" or complaints blaming the management: "We have nothing to say about the staff, this can be called managerial weakness, if there is no supervision, the business is always bad". These cases suggest that leadership, managerial competency, effectiveness, and overall management quality are vital to delivering high-quality service (Bharwani and Talib, 2017) and determinants of guest experiences and perceptions. A relatively smaller percentage of complaint cases regarding the low number of staff (10.33%) points to another significant issue in service delivery—staffing levels. Adequate staffing is essential for maintaining high service standards, and understaffing can lead to delays, reduced service quality, and guest dissatisfaction (Lesyk & Brown, 2017). This issue could be particularly pronounced during peak seasons or events, where demand for service is high, but the staff may be stretched thin. The analysis also shows minor yet important concerns about incomplete or incorrect information on the hotel website (3.28%), the ban on bringing food and beverages from outside (2.35%), and disturbances caused by other guests (2.35%). These findings indicate that transparency and accuracy in communication are essential and underscore the importance of policy clarity and enforcement, as well as the need for hotels to manage guest behavior to maintain a peaceful environment. The smallest percentages of complaints, regarding ongoing renovations (1.88%) and hotel security (1,41%), suggest that while these issues are less frequent, they can still significantly impact guest satisfaction when they occur. Proper communication about renovations and stringent security measures are essential to mitigate any negative impact on the guest experience.

Table 6. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to Price and Management Policies*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Expensive services	88	41,31
General complaints concerning hotel management	79	37,09
A low number of staff	22	10,33
Incomplete or incorrect information on the hotel website	7	3,28
Complaints about the ban on bringing food and beverages from outside the hotel	5	2,35
Complaints about disturbance caused by other hotel guests	5	2,35
Complaints about the ongoing renovation of the hotel	4	1,88
Complaints about hotel security	3	1,41
Total	213	100

The sixth category found was "front office and concierge" e-complaints. This category represents 5% of total examined complaint cases, and as shown in Table 7 consists of 5 subcategories. It is encouraging to observe that the rate of complaint cases in this category (department) is less than in the other categories. However, there is a clear indication that there is scope for further improvement. Analysis findings indicate that the largest proportion of complaints is evenly split between issues related to reservation-related complaint cases and cases concerning the functionality of the front office, each accounting for 32.06% of the total cases. These results show the importance of efficient and error-free operations at the front desk, which serves as the first point of contact for hotel guests and plays a vital role in shaping their overall experience (Hu et al., 2022). The relatively lower percentage of complaints about valet services and car parking (13.74%), an insufficient choice of room options (12.98%), and currency exchange services complaints (9.16%) suggests that while these issues are not the most frequent, there are still some dissatisfied guests and further enhancement is needed.

Table 7. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to Front Office and Concierge*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Reservation-related complaints	42	32,06
Complaints about the functionality of the front office	42	32,06
Complaints about valet services and car parking	18	13,74
Insufficient choice of room options	17	12,98
Complaints about currency exchange services	12	9,16
Total	131	100

The final category identified (seventh) was e-complaints related to the hotel's "facilities, amenities, and additional services". This category represents 5% of total examined complaint cases and as shown in Table 8, consists of 7 subcategories. The analysis reveals that the most frequent complaints pertain to slow or insufficient internet connections, comprising 36.44% of the total complaints in this category. This finding is particularly noteworthy in the context of contemporary hotel operations, where reliable and high-speed internet access has become a fundamental expectation for both leisure and business travelers. As highlighted by Grechyn and McShane, (2021), internet connectivity is increasingly considered a basic utility, akin to electricity and water, and its inadequacy can severely impact guest satisfaction and loyalty. Complaint cases related to wellness facilities, including the hammam, sauna, spa, pool, or fitness center, account for 34.75% of the complaints. These amenities are often key differentiators in the luxury hotel segment. Poor maintenance, overcrowding, or subpar service in these areas can lead to significant dissatisfaction, as these facilities are integral to the overall guest experience in high-end hotels (Huh et al., 2019). Hotels must therefore prioritize the upkeep and efficient management of these wellness facilities to meet guest expectations and maintain their competitive edge. E-complaints regarding animation and entertainment venues, as well as meeting and event (MICE) organizations, each one constitutes 10.17% of the complaints. Less frequent complaints include issues with paid or infrequent shuttles to ski resorts (3.39%), lack of parking areas (3.39%), and out-of-order elevators (1.69%).

Table 8. *Subcategories and Distribution of E-complaints Related to the Facilities, Amenities, and Additional Services*

Subcategories	N	Percent %
Slow or insufficient internet connection	43	36,44
Complaints about the hammam, sauna, spa, pool or fitness center	41	34,75
Complaints about animation and entertainment venues (weddings or henna night organizations)	12	10,17
Complaints about meeting and event organizations (MICE)	12	10,17
Paid or infrequent shuttles to Erciyes Ski Resort	4	3,39
Lack of parking area	4	3,39
Elevators out-of-order	2	1,69
Total	118	100

Results and Conclusions

The investigation into e-complaints of hotel guests at 4 and 5-star city hotels in Kayseri, Turkey, reveals a broad spectrum of dissatisfaction areas. The content analysis uncovered 2,491 individual complaint cases from 497 TripAdvisor reviews, categorized into seven main complaint categories. Key issues concentrated in "rooms and

housekeeping department services", "staff attitudes and performance", "food and beverage department services", and "physical characteristics and atmosphere". These four categories cover 81% of the total complaint cases analyzed. The most important e-complaint category, representing 25% of the complaints, was "rooms and housekeeping department services". This category was closely followed by "staff attitudes and performance" comprising 21% of the complaints. These findings align with previous research on e-complaints and e-WOM in both Turkish and international hospitality contexts. For example, the predominance of complaints related to room features or room cleanliness and maintenance echoes findings from studies on hotels in Hong Kong (Au et al., 2009), Kuala Lumpur (Ekiz et al., 2012), Uludağ (Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, 2020), Ankara (Eşiyok & Öztürk, 2021), Trabzon (Öksüz & Erkiçi, 2022) and Eskişehir (Çoban et al., 2019), where room conditions were also a significant source of guest dissatisfaction. This consistency underscores the critical role of cleanliness, the importance of room maintenance, and the housekeeping department's role in hotels. Additionally, the significant proportion of e-complaints about "staff attitudes and performance" (21%) in our study is consistent with the findings of Au et al. (2009), Ekiz et al. (2012), Dinçer & Alrawadieh, (2017) and Öksüz & Erkiçi, (2022) who reported similar concerns, emphasizing that staff demeanor, including apathy and rudeness, critically influences guest satisfaction. Staff behavior and competence play a crucial role in shaping the guest experience (Umasuthan et al., 2017), and especially in upscale hotels, it is essential to have strict recruitment procedures and rigorous staff training (Ekiz et al., 2012) to increase guest satisfaction and loyalty.

The study also found that "food and beverage department services" (18%), mainly including food quality and presentation-related complaints, is the third most important category of e complaints in Kayseri upscale city hotels. The high frequency of food and beverage-related complaints, particularly concerning meal quality and service speed, aligns with findings from Antalya, Uludağ, and Trabzon hotels, where dining experiences were similarly highlighted as pivotal to guest satisfaction (Şahin et al., 2017; Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, 2020; Öksüz & Erkiçi, 2022). These parallels suggest that while the specific context of Kayseri may differ, the fundamental drivers of guest dissatisfaction are consistent with broader trends in the Turkish hospitality industry. Internationally, these findings also mirror patterns observed in other markets, where food quality and services are repeatedly identified as critical areas impacting guest experiences (Namkung & Jang 2007; Au et al., 2009; Sparks & Browning, 2010). Another noteworthy finding from this study is the significant number of complaints about the "physical characteristics and atmosphere" (%17) of the hotels, including issues with outdated or non-functional furniture, inadequate heating and cooling systems, and poor sound insulation. These concerns are consistent with the findings of Arkadaş & Ayyıldız, (2020) and Çoban et al. (2019), who identified similar complaints in their studies. The fact that nearly 60% of the complaints in this category are related to the hotel's physical condition underscores the necessity for regular maintenance and refurbishment. Hotel managers must prioritize the upkeep of furniture and fixtures, as well as ensure adequate thermal and sound insulation, to meet guest expectations. Continuous investment in the physical environment is crucial for maintaining competitiveness in the hospitality industry, particularly in the high-end market segment (Han & Hyun, 2017).

The other three complaint categories found by the study, including "pricing and management policies" (9%), "front office and concierge" (5%), and "amenities facilities and additional services" (5%), had relatively lower numbers of complaints. Especially, the low number of complaints related to price in this study contrasts with the findings of Au et al. (2009) of Hong Kong hotels, where pricing issues were more prominent. This difference could be attributed to regional variations in guest expectations and the perceived value of services offered.

Overall, based on the data analyzed and the categories and subcategories formed, it can be said that e-complaints related to tangible elements of stays in Kayseri 4 and 5-star hotels are much more at the forefront. This may be because tangible elements play a more prior role in shaping customer quality perceptions and satisfaction, especially in high-class hotels (Jiang and Zhou, 2024). This view is supported by one of the findings of Berezina et al. (2015), expressing that dissatisfied customers more frequently tend to cite tangible aspects of their hotel experience in their online reviews. The findings from our study align closely with those from both Turkish and international research, highlighting universal challenges in hotel management, such as maintaining cleanliness, improving staff service quality, serving quality and diverse food, and ensuring the physical upkeep of hotel properties. These issues are consistently identified as key drivers of guest dissatisfaction across various contexts, underscoring the importance of addressing them to enhance customer satisfaction and competitiveness in the hospitality industry.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) and online complaint behavior in the hospitality industry. It underscores the importance of understanding the specific areas that lead to guest dissatisfaction, which can inform the development of more effective service recovery strategies. The findings highlight the need for further exploration of the relationship between service quality dimensions and e-WOM, particularly in emerging tourism markets like Kayseri. This study also adds to the theoretical discourse on service quality models, by providing empirical evidence of the critical role of tangible elements and employee behavior in guest satisfaction.

For hotel managers and practitioners, the findings of this study underline the importance of focusing on key areas of guest dissatisfaction to improve service quality and enhance guest experiences. Especially hotel managers in upscale city hotels have considerable opportunities to improve their decision-making processes based on the study findings. The comprehensive analysis of e-complaints highlights the key areas for targeted interventions. The high frequency of complaints related to rooms and housekeeping suggests that hotel managers should prioritize maintenance and cleanliness, ensuring that these basic expectations are consistently met. Furthermore, the issues related to staff attitudes and performance highlight the need for continuous staff training and development programs to improve service delivery. Enhancing food quality and presentation, as well as maintaining the physical infrastructure of the hotel, are also critical areas that require attention. Upgrading physical facilities requires substantial capital investment without immediate visible returns, making it less appealing to management. The hotel managers may not be willing to invest adequately in the physical aspects and staff-related issues due to their prioritization of short-term financial performance over long-term service quality improvements. This tendency often leads to underinvestment in infrastructure and recruitment of mostly unskilled and uneducated employees, which are critical factors for sustaining high service standards. However, as elucidated by Demydyuk and Carlbäck (2024), in the hospitality industry to achieve long-term financial success, customer satisfaction is of greater importance than short-term gains.

Even though it was found that the response rate to e-complaints is not too low (66%), hotel managers need to develop more structured and proactive strategies for responding to guest feedback, which could improve guest satisfaction and loyalty. Hotel management should actively monitor travel review sites or online booking sites and respond to negative reviews and online complaints. But besides that, and even more importantly, employees should be trained to ensure they are able and willing to inquire about the quality of the service provided and to offer solutions in the event of a failure to deliver (Berry et al., 2014).

It is important to note that the findings of this study are subject to some limitations, which should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Firstly, the study is limited to 4 and 5-star city hotels in Kayseri, and the results may not be generalizable to other types of hotels or different geographical locations. It is plausible that the factors contributing to guest dissatisfaction may differ according to the hotel classification or location. Secondly, the study relies on e-complaints from TripAdvisor, which may not capture the full spectrum of guest experiences, particularly those on other online platforms or those who do not use online platforms to voice their complaints. The exclusion of reviews in languages other than Turkish and English might also limit the comprehensiveness of the findings. Additionally, while the qualitative approach is valuable for identifying patterns in guest complaints, may be subject to researcher bias despite efforts to ensure triangulation and reliability. Future research could expand the scope of this study by including a broader range of hotel types and locations, both within Turkey and internationally, to explore whether the findings are consistent across different contexts. Comparative studies between different regions or between urban and rural hotels could provide deeper insights into e-complaints and the factors influencing guest satisfaction. Additionally, future studies could incorporate a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative content analysis with quantitative measures, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that drive e-complaints in the hospitality industry. Finally, further research could explore the impact of e-complaint responses on guest satisfaction and loyalty.

Ethics Statement

During the writing process of this study titled "**Investigation of E-Complaints of Hotel Guests Towards 4 and 5-Star Kayseri City Hotels**", scientific rules, ethics and quotation rules were followed; No falsification has been made on the data collection and this study has not been sent to any other journal for evaluation.

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