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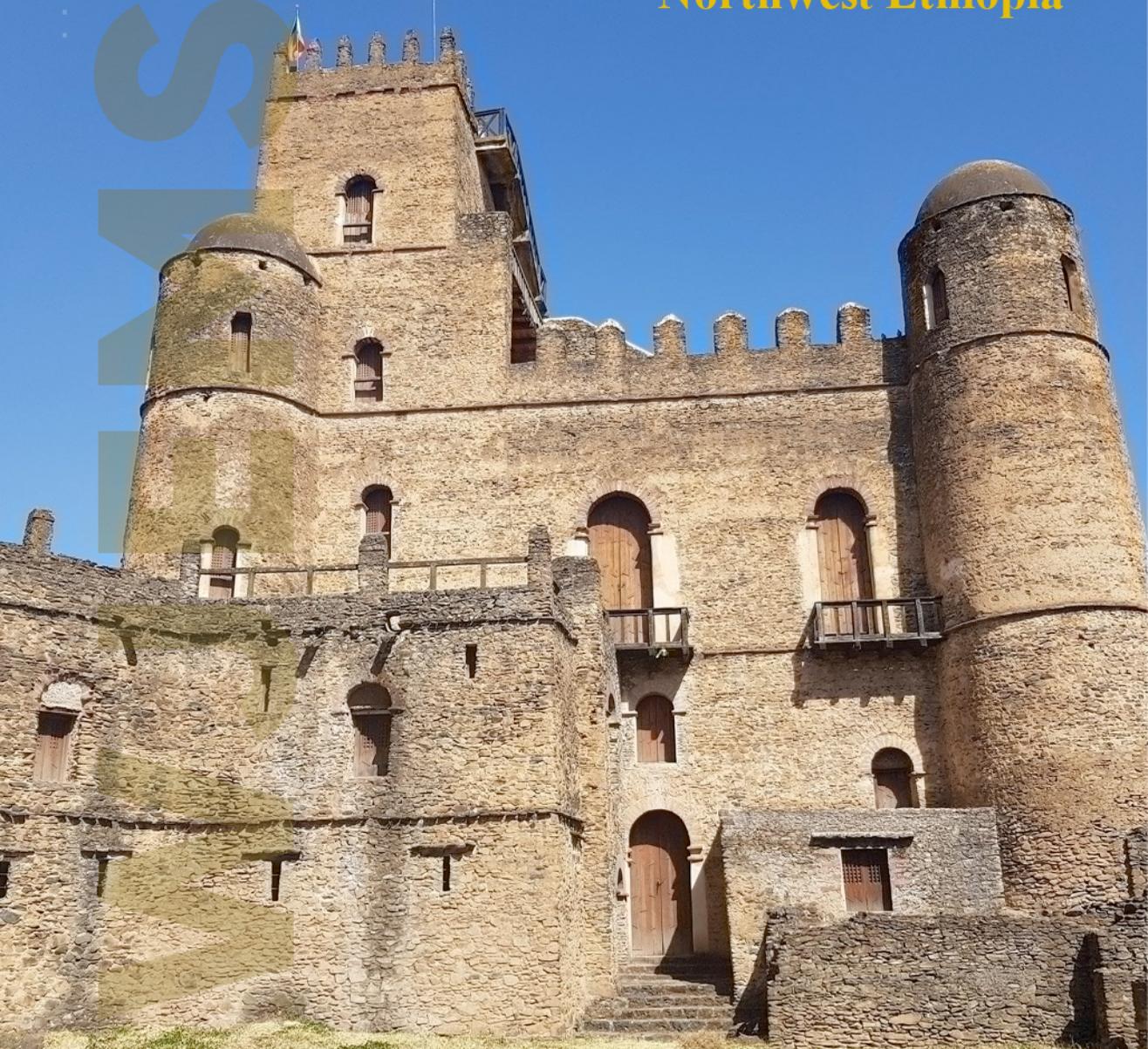
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# Tour Guides' Service Quality in the World Heritage Sites of Gondar City, Northwest Ethiopia



## RESEARCH PAPER

# Tour Guides' Service Quality in the World Heritage Sites of Gondar City, Northwest Ethiopia

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## ABSTRACT

**PURPOSE:** The study intends to investigate tour guides' service quality in the World Heritage sites of Gondar City, using Weiler and Black's (2015) four domains of service quality assessment tool.

**DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH:** This research adopts a cross-sectional descriptive study design and employs a quantitative research approach with a systematic sampling technique to address its objectives.

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**FINDINGS:** Based on the four tour services quality domains of Weiler and Black (2015), Gondar City's tour guides provide a relatively good quality of service. Among these four domains, mediating physical access and mediating encounters were properly delivered through enhanced interactions of tourists with local communities. Moreover, in the domain of mediating understanding, tour guides deliver consistent service and information for all visitors in line with the pre-planned tour package. However, the study reveals limitations of engaging visitors to co-create service experience.

**RESEARCH LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS:** This study has some shortcomings. The research would result in more robust findings had it adopted a mixed-method research approach. Another limitation is related to the lack of methodological sophistication for the quantitative data. However, that was done intentionally since we aim to provide research beneficiaries with a straightforward and much simpler analysis for a better understanding.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS:** The research findings offer crucial practical implications to the tour guides of Gondar City and Gondar City Administration Culture and Tourism Office in terms of enhancing the skills and professionalism of guides so that they execute their job efficiently and thereby satisfy tourists. Moreover, as the study specifically points out gaps and weaknesses of tour guides, it implies essential information for other stakeholders to take action.

**ORIGINALITY/VALUE:** Despite Gondar City's rich accounts of history, culture and heritage with a promising tourism sector, thus far the tour guides have not been given adequate attention. This is a pioneering study in this respect that suggests crucial and timely implications.

**KEYWORDS:** *Tour guiding; Service quality; Co-creating experience; Mediating encounter; Gondar; Ethiopia*

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## INTRODUCTION

Gondar is a city that has served as a capital to the medieval Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia for about 250 years (Wondirad *et al.*, 2021). According to Pankhurst (1990), the establishment of Gondar marks the commencement of a fixed capital since early medieval times and goes down in Ethiopian history. The city is a major tourist and business hub and the home of several UNESCO registered World Heritage Sites (Tegegne *et al.*, 2018). Gondar has been experiencing a progressive growth of the inbound tourism market over the past decade (Gondar City Administration Culture and Tourism Office, 2017). According to data obtained from the city administration, around 130,000 tourists visited the city in 2017. This rapid growth in tourism creates employment and generates income for local communities through participation in a variety of tourism-related activities, such as tour guiding, working in hotels, lodges and restaurants, providing transport services, making and selling souvenir products, and providing other miscellaneous services (Dagnachew, 2013; Mulu, 2019; WTTC, 2019).

Despite the thriving success in the tourism market, Gondar City faces strong competition not only from neighbouring countries but also other Ethiopian cultural tourist destinations such as Lalibela, Aksum, Bahir Dar and its surroundings, and Harer (Ashenafi, 2013). Therefore, to remain a favoured destination amid this competition and maintain the success in the tourism market, the provision of a standardised and quality service is extremely important (Min, 2016). Tourist destinations remain competitive only if they consistently provide quality products and services that satisfy tourists' desires (Teshome and Demissie, 2018a). Gondar city is bestowed with rich cultural attractions that need proper clarification, articulation, and interpretation. In this respect, the role of tour guides is tremendously significant. In contrast, when tour guides fail to deliver a high-quality interpretation service, it does not only greatly affect the overall tourist satisfaction but

also undermines the very essence of travel, which is learning, discovery and garnering an enriching experience (Page, 2014).

The importance of ensuring a high-quality tour guiding service for successful tourism and destination management is underscored by tourism scholars and practitioners alike. In the current stiff competition among cultural and historical destinations, improving the tour guiding service quality is instrumental (Chang *et al.*, 2012). Nevertheless, in contrast to tourist satisfaction that depends on various factors (Al-Ababneh, 2013; Black and Weiler, 2005; Ćirić *et al.*, 2014; Teshome and Demissie, 2018b; Hayati and Novitasari, 2017; Permatasari *et al.*, 2017; Wong, 2001), the role of tour guiding service quality in enhancing visitor satisfaction and improving the overall destination image and competitiveness has been overlooked, especially in developing destinations.

Despite its consistent tourist arrival over the previous decade as the home of UNESCO registered heritage sites, the level and standard of tour guiding service quality has not been empirically examined (Abiew *et al.*, 2020), and data regarding tour guiding services quality are deemed vital to the development of a competitive and sustainable tourism in Gondar City. Furthermore, since tour guides are the most significant actors when it comes to destination interpretation, investigating their service quality status is paramount. Therefore, in order to fill this research gap, the current study aims to assess tour guides' service quality in Gondar City by employing Weiler and Black's (2015) four domain assessment tools. Research findings highlight the current tour guides' service quality in the study area, and could be used as a reference for crucial interventions. It might also serve as a baseline for future large scale studies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tour guiding is often considered one of the oldest professions that has existed for several centuries (Mitchell, 2005; Weiler and Black, 2005). A tour guide, who is also sometimes known as an informal ambassador, is a person who has direct contact with visitors, whose main responsibilities are facilitating tourist visits and providing visitors with adequate and accurate information regarding the place they are visiting (Lu *et al.*, 2018). Tour guides play a vital role in tourism development by portraying and articulating crucial features of tourism, such as geographical and cultural as well as the sustainable economic and infrastructure development of a given country (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2009). According to Ashenafi (2013) and Black and Weiler (2005), the roles of a tour guide can be summarised as an interpreter/educator, information provider, leader, advocator of conservation practices, social catalyst, navigator, cultural mediator, tour and group manager/organiser, public relations/company representative, and facilitator of access to non-public areas. In order to deliver a quality service, and play their role efficiently, tour guides should be qualified, skilful, and problem-solving individuals (Mitchell and Coles, 2009).

Service quality receives a central importance in general services literature as it is directly and strongly linked with customer satisfaction (Tripathi and Munjal, 2016). Quality within the context of the tourism and hospitality sector involves the consistent delivery of products and guest services in

line with expected standards (Kapiki, 2012). Service quality has been defined in terms of the degree and the direction that exists between customer service expectations and perceptions (Gronroos, 1984; Permatasari *et al.*, 2017). As studies suggest, visitors are willing to pay more when they visit destinations offering services and products that meet or exceed their prior expectations. The level of quality service is, therefore, an important factor in the experience that guests receive during their visits to tourist destinations (Kempiak *et al.*, 2017).

To meet the growing and dynamic needs of consumers, service production and provision should make quality a non-compromisable component that should be supported by companies' policies to progressively excel quality while maximising profit (Mak *et al.*, 2010). A tour guide needs to be well-qualified, skilful in communication and a problem-solver in order to perform their duties successfully (Mitchell and Coles, 2009). These qualities correspond to the general information need, flexibility, interaction skills, and attitude towards visitors (Chowdhary and Prakash, 2009; Collins, 2000; Osman and Santosa, 2013). Tour guides should have detailed information about the destination and tourism features at the sites and must be enlightened to understand fundamental characteristics (age, ethnic background, and capacity) of visitors while delivering information (Weiler and Black, 2015). Delivering quality services are increasingly vital for successful tourism development, and influence the sustainability of the industry and its ability to survive in today's extremely competitive market (Al-Ababneh, 2013; KPMG, 2019). Income generation and employment opportunities from the tourism sector have been affected by the standard and quality of services (Bednarska, 2013). Quality service is a management tool that provides companies with a means of monitoring service from the customers' perspective (Kapiki, 2012).

When tourists are satisfied with the quality of service delivered, they pass on positive information about a destination through word of mouth (Soleimani and Einolahzadeh, 2018). In turn, this promotes a positive image of the country as a whole (Lai *et al.*, 2018). All tourism businesses intend to gain a competitive advantage by reinforcing customer loyalty through increasing technical and functional quality, and improving business image (Gronroos, 1984). Several scholars use different approaches to measure service quality in the tourism and hospitality sector. For example, Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) employed the five dimensions of quality services while Millan and Esteban (2004) developed an approach with six dimensions that help to evaluate service quality in travel agencies. Recently, however, Weiler and Black have summarised these dimensions into four key domains (i.e., mediating access, mediating encounter, mediating understanding, and mediating empathy). These four domains are useful concepts that promote the delivery of a valid and reliable service quality, and are also considered as the cornerstones of an effective marketing strategy (Weiler and Black, 2015).

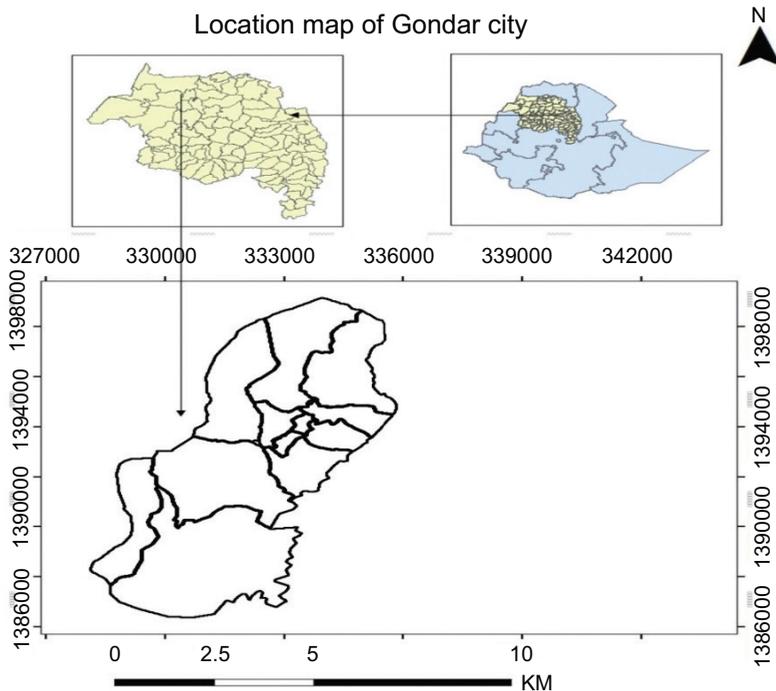
## METHODS

### Description of the Study Area

The ancient town of Gondar (see Figure 1) represents the historical and cultural heritage of Ethiopia in the Medieval Era (Wondirad *et al.*, 2021). The then Christian Ethiopian kings are reported to

have begun establishing their courts around this region from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Emperor Fasil, also known as Fasilides, who come to the throne in 1632, chose Gondar as the Royal Capital and moved his courts there, building the magnificent castle in the centre of the town (see Figure 2). Emperor Fasilides abandoned the nomadic tradition of his predecessors and founded Gondar as a permanent capital of Ethiopia by the end of 1635 (Solomon *et al.*, 2016).

Gondar is, therefore, one of the oldest cities in Ethiopia, once served as the capital of the country, and is now the seat of the Central Gondar Zone under the Amhara National Regional State. The Royal Enclosure, the remains of the palaces built by Emperor Fasilides and his successors, was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979. It is located to the north of Lake Tana and southwest of Simien Mountains National Park, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. Geographically, the city of Gondar is located at latitude 12°36' N and longitude 37°28' E, with an elevation of 2,133 metres above sea level. It is surrounded by the Gondar Zuria district. Gondar has served as a strong political, historical, religious and economic centre for many years. Based on the 2007 national population census (CSA, 2007), the population of Gondar was estimated at 207,044, of which about 98,120 were men and 108,924 women. Nevertheless, due to high rural to urban immigration and a considerably high population growth, the current overall population of Gondar could be estimated around half a million (Tegegne *et al.*, 2018; Alene and Worku, 2009).



**Figure 1: Gondar Town Map**

Source: Authors' plot, 2019



**Figure 2: Some Views of the Royal Enclosure and Inner Murals of Debre Berhan Selassie Church**

Source: Addis Herald, 2019

Plate 1. Partial view of Emperor Fasiledes Castel

Plate 2. Partial view of the Royal enclosure

Plate 3. Inner murals of Debre Berhan Selassie Church, with its glorious frescos

## Research Approach, Design and Target Population

We adopted a cross-sectional study with a quantitative research approach in order to address the objectives of the study. The target population of the study were foreign tourists who have visited Gondar City and its World Heritage Sites during a month of field survey (January 2019). Subsequently, the target population comprises a total of 1,776 international tourists.

## Sample Size Determination Technique

A systematic random sampling technique was implemented to select research participants. According to Gondar City Administration Culture and Tourism Office's (2019) annual report, between 2017 and 2018, 42,635 foreign tourists visited Gondar City. From this report we estimate the average monthly flow to be 1,776 foreign tourists to determine the sample size for the current study, using single population proportion formula to determine the sample size by employing Cochran's (1977) formula.

$$n_o = \frac{Z^2 pq}{e^2}$$

where:  $n_0$  = is the required sample size,  $z = 1.96$  at 95% confidence level,  $p$  = is the estimated proportion of an attribute assumed 42% (Teshome and Demissie, 2018b) from previous findings from the Simien Mountains National Park that is present in the population,  $q = 1 - p$  and  $e$  = is the desired level of precision assumed 5%. Therefore, the sample size calculated becomes 374 and after correcting for population size using finite population correction formula,  $n = \frac{no}{\left(\frac{1 + (no - 1)}{N}\right)}$  the final sample size becomes 309.

## Data Collection Techniques and Tools

Data were collected using self-administered structured questionnaires that allowed respondents to respond freely. The data collection tools were checked for content and face validity by senior researchers, and pre-tested for applicability prior to the main data collection. Questionnaires were distributed to the visitors through hotel front officers. The questionnaire has five sections. Section one consists of demographic information and the remaining four sections consist of the mediating domains that measure service quality, namely, physical access, empathy/emotion, understanding and encounter (Weiler and Black, 2015). Overall, there are 21 items with a 5-point Likert rating scale to indicate participants' level of agreement and disagreement, where 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree. For the qualitative aspects of the study, we asked participants to schedule a convenient time for an interview, and semi-structured interviews were conducted.

## Data Analysis

Data were coded, cleaned, and then entered into a statistical software (SPSS, version 24) for subsequent analysis. Descriptive analyses, such as frequency, mean, and percentages, were computed, and tables and texts were utilised to present study findings.

## Ethical Considerations

During data collection, all respondents and key informants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study. Due consideration was given to the culture, social norms and values of the community. Oral consent was also sought from research participants and confidentiality of the information was assured.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We distributed 309 questionnaires to foreign tourists who visited Gondar City by guided tours. Out of these 309 questionnaires, 295 of them were completed and returned, resulting into a response rate of 95.5%.

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic information of respondents includes age, gender, marital status, academic status and income categories illustrated, as displayed in Table 1.

Out of the total sample, the number of male respondents was 189 (64.1%) while their female counterparts account for 106 (35.9%) of the respondents. The greater proportion, 239 (81.1%) of respondents fall within the age group of 51 and above, and 233 (79%) of respondents were or had been married. With regard to the respondents' education level, the majority of 245 (83%) had a Master's Degree or above (Table 1).

**Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (n = 295)**

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	189	64.10
Female	106	35.90
<b>Age</b>		
21-30	16	5.40
31-40	16	5.40
41-50	24	8.10
51 & above	239	81.10
<b>Monthly income</b>		
Less than \$1000	17	5.80
\$1001-3000	36	12.20
\$3001-5000	50	16.90
Above \$5000	192	65.10
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	42	14.20
Married	161	54.60
Divorced	72	24.40
Widowed	20	6.80
<b>Education</b>		
Diploma holder	20	6.80
BA Degree	30	10.20
MA & above	245	83.00
<b>Nationality</b>		
Africa	8	2.70
Asia	27	9.20
Australia	12	4.10
Europe	158	53.60
North America	78	26.30
South America	12	4.10

Source: Authors' survey, 2019

As can be seen in Table 1, the vast majority of respondents, 236 (80%) came from Europe and North America. Almost a similar percentage (82%) of the entire respondents (tourists) receive a monthly income of more than \$3,001, indicating their higher potential for spending (Table 1). This information is essential to design marketing strategies in order to retain a high tourist generating region and attract more customers to increase the revenues of the community in the study area.

### **Tour Guides' Service Quality and Standard Level of Agreement on Tour Guides' Mediating Physical Access**

The majority of respondents, 259 (87.8%), agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "Guide provides tourists with opportunities to use their senses to appreciate the host culture and experience/custom". Some of the respondents, 19 (6.4%), disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Table 2). This may not only be due to the result of guide mediating skills but also because the host communities who live in Gondar City are charming and welcome tourists to interact and deliver their products.

The majority of respondents, 218 (73.9%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that, "Tour guide channels and controls tourists to be in the right place at the right time". This result shows that tour guides provided relatively good service in controlling and managing their time and space, as time and space management is the most important aspect of tour guiding service delivery. Since most service providers in Gondar City only communicate via the local language, there will be a communication gap between them and the tourists visiting the area. This challenge is usually bridged by tour guides who channel and control tourists to be in the right place at the right time so that they experience local culture, engage in local activities, and explore the physical attributes of the surrounding landscape. Bringing tourists to the right place at the right time, facilitating local experience and proactively managing visitors' movement to enhance the level of tourist satisfaction are among the key roles of a tour guide (Weiler and Walker, 2014).

**Table 2: Mediating physical access (n = 295)**

Variables	1+2		3		4+5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Guide provides tourists with opportunities to use their senses to appreciate the host culture and experience/custom	19	6.4	17	5.8	259	87.8	4.01
Guide channels and controls tourists to be in the right place at the right time	44	14.9	33	11.2	218	73.9	3.83
Guide facilitates what tourists need to see and share experience to the group	195	69.5	13	4.4	77	26	2.45
Guide introduces tourists to real and authentic Gondarian period of civilization, and acknowledge visitors for their contribution	187	63.4	68	23.1	94	28.9	2.73

Note: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree

Source: Authors' survey, 2019

However, about two-thirds of respondents, 195 (69.5%), disagreed or strongly disagreed that, “Guide facilitates what tourists need to see and shares their experience to the group members”, with a mean value of 2.45 (see Table 2). Usually, tourists are interested in sharing their experiences, knowledge, and emotions, but the finding reveals a limitation in this regard and more work is required to facilitate what tourists need to see and share their experience. Tourist guiders operate in a tour chosen by participants themselves and its informal character enables efficient dissemination of information and contributes towards achieving a safe and quality tourist experience (Rabotić, 2010). The tour guide is responsible for initiating spending time together and fostering socialisation in a heterogeneous group. In addition, individual tourists value knowledge, skills, and experiences to be shared within tour group members (Kapiki, 2012; Modlin *et al.*, 2011).

About one third of respondents, 94 (28.9%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Guides introduce tourists to real and authentic Gondarian period civilisation, and acknowledge visitors for their contribution”. However, a large number of respondents, 187 (63.4%), disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement, with a mean value of 2.73. The result shows that tour guides provided insufficient physical access mediation. This may be due to the fact that tour guides show only most physical properties of the city such as castles, monuments, churches, historical and contemporary heritage, and archaeological sites (Abiew *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, mediating physical access also includes other important elements, such as cultural night clubs, handicraft products and souvenirs, local markets, communities’ lifestyle, and other facilities and amenities of a particular destination (Kassawneh *et al.*, 2019; Osman and Santosa, 2013). Regarding acknowledging visitors for their contribution, some tour guides perceive that acknowledging visitors is the duty of government officials, rather than tour guides as they are information providers and interpreters. From the tourists’ point of view, however, in many tourist destinations the guides act as destination representatives and informal ambassadors (Rabotić, 2010).

### ***Tour Guides’ Mediating Encounters (Interaction)***

A greater proportion of respondents, 263 (89.2%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Guide mediates social interaction between tour group members and host communities”. Another 18 (6.1%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, with mean values of 4.1 (see Table 3). The findings indicate that tour guides encourage interaction among tourists and host communities through the process of social encounters by creating a barrier-free atmosphere between host communities and tourists. Therefore, guides created friendly and self-contained spaces in which the tourists could feel comfortable, providing language translation and facilitating two-way communication, which in turn, improves visitors’ experience. This is because mediating is a central position in creating tourist interactions with the indigenous community, to maximise the tourist experience and to select and explain cultural distinctiveness (Rabotić, 2010). Particularly, tour guides play a crucial role in the tourism industry and help to bring enormous benefits to the Ethiopian tourism sector through not only mediating social interaction between tour group members

and host communities, but also acting as a spokesperson for the nation's unique cultural heritage, ambassadorship, and commentators of the country's unique history (Ashenafi, 2013; Teshome and Demissie, 2018a).

**Table 3: Response to Variables Under Mediating Encounter ( $n = 295$ )**

Variables	1+2		3		4+5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Guide mediates social interaction between tour group members and host communities	18	6.1	15	5.1	263	89.2	4.1
Guide actively mediates encounters between tourists and staff working in hotels and tourist attractions	44	14.9	41	13.9	210	71.2	2.75
Guide has adequate knowledge to mediate interaction among tour group members	187	63.4	68	23	94	28.9	2.73
Guide encourages and acknowledge visitor for their contribution	195	69.5	13	4.4	77	26	2.45

Note: 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = not sure, 2 = disagree and 1 = strongly disagree

Source: Authors' survey, 2019

A large proportion, 210 (71.2%), of respondents, agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "Guide actively mediates encounters between tourists and staff working in hotels and tourist attractions". However, a few, 44 (14.9%) of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed on the statement, with a mean value 3.75 (see Table 3). The result uncovered that guides actively mediate encounters between tourists and staff working in hotels and tourist attractions. This helps to improve the quality of service delivery through collecting feedback from tourists, and also enables the tourist to learn all the practices being employed by the service providers and the staff. As literature notes, mediating encounters within the group is both a joyful and beneficial activity (Parsons *et al.*, 2019).

More than a quarter of respondents, 94 (28.9%), agreed or strongly agreed on the item that states, "Guide has adequate knowledge to mediate interaction among tour group members". However, two-thirds of respondents, 187 (63.4%), disagreed or strongly disagreed, with a mean value 2.73. Although mediating social interaction between or within tour group members has a great impact on visitor satisfaction, in this study tour guides do not encourage interaction within tour group members. A guide's mediation is important when it comes to igniting interactions within a tour group, regardless of their socio-cultural and economic backgrounds (Rabotić, 2010). Transparent discourse and participatory activity planning may enable the creation of a good level of interaction among tour groups and between tourists (Bednarska, 2013; Dahles, 2002).

Some 94 (28.9%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Guide encourages and acknowledges visitors for their contribution". However, 195 (69.5%) respondents

disagreed or strongly disagreed, producing the mean value of 2.45, as can be seen in Table 3. Encouraging and acknowledging visitors by tour guides in the study area was found to be limited. Since tourists can increase income and wealth, their contribution to the economic recovery of our region is immense; they should be acknowledged for their contribution and encouraged to revisit the site. In fact, tourism accounts for a major part of the global economy and the service sector plays an important role in the economic growth of both developed and developing countries (Khan *et al.*, 2020).

### **Level of Agreement on Tour Guides' Mediating Understanding**

More than half the respondents, 176 (59%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Guide provides credible information and well-organised presentation to convey the significance of a place with good knowledge of site". A total of 35 respondents (12%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with a mean value of 3.7 (see Table 4). This result demonstrates that the guides were not only engaged with knowledge transfer but also served as agents of cultural mediation. This was evidenced through the use of a variety of interpretative communication strategies (i.e., analogies, personal references, anecdotes, and non-verbal communications) that aimed to reveal meanings and relationships rather than simply factual information (Abiew *et al.*, 2020). This is supported by previous research that tour guides can mediate understanding by using organised information as a tool for conveying the values of cultural and historical attractions or tourism products (Ap and Wong, 2001).

The majority of respondents, 253 (85.7%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The tour guide delivers consistent services and information for all visitors as per pre-planned tour package". However, a further 25 respondents (8.5%), disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, with the mean value of 3.7. This demonstrates that the tour guides in the study area deliver consistent services and information for all visitors as per the pre-planned tour package. This is because the guides know almost all tourist attraction sites and products that are found in Gondar and its surroundings, i.e., castles, monuments, churches, archaeological sites, other historical places (Ashenafi, 2013). Most Gondar town professional tourist guides have a welcoming positive personality, and ethical and moral characteristics, including honesty, modesty, dignity, and credibility. It is increasingly important that the tour guide has credible knowledgeable and is well-mannered; they should be confident, trustworthy and inspiring (Permatasari *et al.*, 2017).

The majority of respondents, 221 (74.9%), also agreed or strongly agreed with the expression, "Guide fosters understanding and appreciation through using non-verbal communication, asking questions, and personal references". Nevertheless, a small proportion of respondents, 22 (7.5%), disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean score of 3.95 (as shown in Table 4). The result highlights that Gondar City guides foster visitors' understanding and appreciation by using non-verbal communication tactics, probing, and personal references. Tour guides usually use their multi-lingual skills, non-verbal communication cues, asking questions, making use of anecdotes

and using props like artefacts and old photographs to foster understanding and appreciation of the inbound visitors in many tourist destinations (Soleimani and Einolahzadeh, 2018; Weiler and Black, 2015).

**Table 4: Response to Variables Under Mediating Understanding (n = 295)**

Variables	1+2		3		4+5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Guide provides credible information and well organized presentation to convey the significance of a place with good knowledge of site	35	12	88	29.8	176	59	3.7
The tour guide delivers consistent services and information for all visitors as per pre-planned tour package	25	8.5	17	5.8	253	85.7	3.97
Guide fosters understanding and appreciation through using non-verbal communication, asking questions, and personal references	22	7.5	52	17.5	221	74.9	3.95
Guide uses multi-lingual skills to bridge communication gaps and provide service on tourist language of choice	189	64	23	7.8	83	28.8	2.6
Guide uses effective communication during and post-tour to enhance memorable and meaningfulness of the tour	177	58	26	8.8	92	21	2.59
Guide uses different communication skill sets involving listening and facilitating rather than only presenting	204	69.2	27	9.2	64	21.7	2.46

Source: Authors' survey, 2019

A larger proportion of respondents, 189 (64%), agreed or strongly agreed that, “Guides use multi-lingual skills to bridge communication gaps and provide service on tourist language of choice”. However, a significant number of respondents, 83 (28.8%), disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement, with the mean value of 2.6 (see Table 4). This suggests that several guides in Gondar City lack multi-lingual skills, and deliver services using the English language only. English is an international language and comes with endless benefits. However, knowing other additional languages will make destination interpretation more effective. In the tour guiding profession, owning multi-lingual skills can bridge communication gaps and provide tourists with their language of choice, creating great satisfaction (Soleimani and Einolahzadeh, 2018).

More than half the respondents, 177 (58%), agreed or strongly agreed that, “Guide used effective communication during and post-tour to enhance the meaningfulness of visitors' experience”. However, another 92 respondents (21%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the

statement, with the mean value of 2.59 (see Table 4). Tour guides' performance and expressive ability using verbal and non-verbal communication with tourists determines the quality of service and level of tourist satisfaction. In many parts of the developing world, including Ethiopia, tour guides tend to rely on one-way communication that only shows the resources with their narration without involving visitors to share their knowledge and reflect about their experience (Teshome and Demissie, 2018b). For instance, important events, such as pre-contact, farewell, and evaluation of the tour via questionnaire, interview, and checklist, were not common among the tour guides of the study area.

Two-thirds of respondents, 204 (69.2%), agreed or strongly agreed that, "Guide provides different communication skill sets involving listening and facilitating rather than only presenting". However, another 64 respondents (21.7%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, and the mean value was 2.46. This result depicts that some of the tour guides failed to utilise diverse and complex communication skills, and rather their interpretation tended to be one way. In conventional tour guiding service delivery, the techniques of communication, such as facial expression, gestures, and body language accompanied with eye movements, enhance service quality and thereby tourist satisfaction. Proper communication skills with the use of verbal utterances and vocal signs, control, and a constant maintenance of interaction between mediator and visitors during a conversation are profoundly important (Weiler and Black, 2015).

### **Visitors Level of Agreement on Tour Guide Mediating Empathy**

The majority of the respondents, 233 (79%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "Guide provides an excellent level of professional, ethical and friendly service that can create a good first and lasting impression", while 38 respondents (12.9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed on this item, with the mean value of 3.9 (see Table 5). The result indicates that Gondar town guides provide an excellent level of professional, ethical, and friendly service to create a good first and lasting impression on visitor experience. This may be because of the indigenous culture of the community that develops empathy, underscores the welcoming treatment of customers, and promotes the provision of friendly services. This intellectual access is among a key role of tour guides that impact on tour guide service quality (Kassawneh *et al.*, 2019).

About a quarter of respondents, 73 (24.8%) agreed or strongly agreed that, "Guide uses interpretive techniques such as storytelling to create affective connections with saint, emperor and other famous people". However, another 205 respondents (69.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean value of 2.48, as Table 5 displays. The result shows that visitors were unsatisfied with the guides' interpretive techniques. This is especially important when the visitors face a language barrier that undermines their communication abilities since the translation of information relating to religious artefacts and other spiritual objects, as well as other indigenous stories, are pretty challenging and require special customised training.

**Table 5: Response to Variables Under Mediating Empathy (n = 295)**

Variables	1+2		3		4+5		Mean
	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Guide provides excellent level of professional, ethical and friendly service that can create a good first and lasting impression	38	12.9	24	8	233	79	3.90
Guide uses interpretive techniques such as storytelling to create affective connections with saint, emperor and other famous people	205	69.5	17	5.8	73	24.8	2.48
Guide provides opportunities for groups so that they can add value to the aspects of tour product	205	69.5	21	7	69	23.4	2.39
The tour guide communicates with tourists individually and as a group to identify their expectations prior to the start of the tour	224	75.9	32	10.8	39	13.2	2.19
Guide allocates different times time slots to foster group discussion and create a friendly atmosphere within the guide group and improve about all aspects of the tour experience	257	87.2	15	5	23	7.8	1.71
Guide provides time for group's personal reflection and encourages the group to discuss the tour on their own	226	76.7	29	9.8	40		2.20
Guide keeps safety of tourist and look after tourists	121	41	18	6	156	52.8	2.5

Source: Authors' survey, 2019

Only a few respondents, 69 (23.4%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that, "Guide provides opportunities for groups so that they can add value to the aspects of tour product". However, another 205 respondents (69.5%) disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean value of 2.39 (see Table 5). The result demonstrates that guides in Gondar City fail to provide opportunities for tour groups so that they can add value to the aspects of the tour product. Since feedback from visitors is paramount to improve tourism products and services (i.e., cultural attractions such as handicrafts, and natural attractions), and thereby enhance tourist satisfaction, offering the chance to visitors and collecting their reflections is crucial for tourist destinations. Scholars confirmed that from the friendly and social atmosphere of a tour activity, each visitor contributes valuable opinions to improve the tour in a variety of ways (Modlin *et al.*, 2011).

Very few respondents, 39 (13.2%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The tour guide communicates with tourists individually and as a group to identify their expectations before the start of the tour". However, three-quarters of respondents, 224 (75.9%), disagreed or strongly disagreed, with mean value of 2.19. The result depicts that Gondar City tour guides do not communicate with tourists to identify their respective expectations before the start of the tour. Although this is a component of empathy, the result shows a probable lack of interpersonal skills, such as creating

interaction through an informal, friendly, and social atmosphere. A friendly and informal atmosphere established at the beginning of a tour allows attendees to feel comfortable and be relaxed (Weiler and Walker, 2014). Furthermore, communicating and engaging customers in the service production, which is also known as co-creating service experience, is highly expected from guides (Helkkula *et al.*, 2012). In fact, satisfactory service experiences stem from a proper interaction between actors (Ramaswamy, 2011). Especially due to the advent of Web2.0 technology, experience co-creation is increasingly taking place, not only in provider-customer dyads, but also among networks of actors who share common interests (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola, 2012).

Very few respondents, 23 (7.8%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Guide allocates different time slots to foster group discussion and create a friendly atmosphere within the group and improve all aspects of the tour experience”. However, the majority of respondents, 257 (87.2%), disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean value of 1.71. The result denotes that despite its critical value as an experience creator, the role of mediating empathy is greatly missed compared to the status of other tour guide roles; in turn, this compromises a visitor’s overall satisfaction. In previous studies, scholars have suggested that the most meaningful and transformative moments on a tour occurs as a result of group reflection and discussion (Kassawneh *et al.*, 2019; Hu and Wall, 2012; Parsons *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, gatherings foster moments of interconnection, and create a space where tourists can touch something a little deeper within them and their world (Weiler and Black, 2015).

Only a very few of the total respondents, 23 (7.8%), agreed or strongly agreed that, “Guide provides time for the group’s reflection and encourages the group to discuss the tour on their own”. However, more than three-quarters of respondents, 226 (76.7%), disagreed or strongly disagreed, with the mean value of 2.2. The result indicates that tour guides in Gondar City do not provide time to stimulate group discussion and reflection. Both in the tourism and hospitality sectors, visitor reflection is necessary as it points out drawbacks from the consumers’ points of view. Moreover, social interaction among group members, and personal reflection creates positive experience and satisfaction with the destination (Mak *et al.*, 2010; Weiler and Black, 2015), because having time for group reflection and discussion gives freedom and autonomy to contribute to service quality and the tour’s dynamic nature.

About half of the respondents, 156 (52.8%), agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Guide keeps the safety of tourists and looks after tourists”. However, another 121 respondents (41%), which is also a significant number, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (see Table 5). The result shows that tour guides’ attention to the safety of tourists and care for tourists is less than desirable. Although there are tourist polices in Gondar City, an incidence of violent robbery, theft, beggar children, harassment, verbal abuse, and hassling at markets and souvenir shops are often observed. This makes the role of tour guides in protecting visitors’ safety and security crucial. This result was also supported by the findings of Teshome and Demissie (2018a) where tourists traveling to the Simien Mountains National Park suffered from safety and security issues, as tourist police are generally not doing enough to protect tourists from harassment, hassle, and street beggars.

This puts tour guides' associations under pressure to protect tourists from such issues. If any health-related incident occurs, the local tour guide association might find itself unprepared in areas such as first aid kits and other evacuation tools and materials.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the four tour guide service quality domains of Weiler and Black (2015), Gondar City's tour guides provide a relatively good quality of service with a cumulative mean score of 3.0. Among the four domains, mediating physical access and mediating encounter were properly delivered via enhanced interactions between actors through the translation of language, and by socialising tourists with local residents. In the domain of mediating understanding, tour guides deliver consistent service and information for all visitors as per the pre-planned tour package. However, in terms of involving visitors to reflect their perception and experience, these were not well-practiced. As this might undermine the co-creation of service experience, serious attention must be given to this area in the future. Facilitation of interactions within tour group members and acknowledging visitors for their contribution was also limited. Although tour guides are expected to have sufficient knowledge to be empathic with tourists' needs, research findings reveal that still there was a gap in adequately mediating empathy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the findings of the study, the authors forward the following recommendations.

- 1) Guides should make time and encourage visitors to reflect on their own knowledge and personal tour experiences.
- 2) Tour guides' should underline the importance of service co-creation and properly implement it during the actual tour.
- 3) Skill training should be given to Gondar tour guides on empathy, and diverse languages to strengthen and boost their guiding services.
- 4) Guides should design tour programmes that incorporate pre-contact, an efficient and entertaining itinerary, and a farewell evaluation of their tour via questionnaire, interview, and short checklists.

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## BIOGRAPHY



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