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Female Tourist Guides Experiences of Coping with Gender on Social Media and Boundary Violations

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social media has led to an increase in online harassment targeting young women, manifesting in various forms such as sexually explicit messages, cyberbullying, defamation, and verbal abuse. In this context, the primary aim of this study is to examine the impact of online sexual harassment associated with social media use on female tourist guides working in Istanbul, one of Turkiye's leading tourism destinations. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed during the data collection and analysis phases. The responses collected from 131 female tour guides in Istanbul indicate that the majority hold a bachelor's degree and have been working in the profession for less than one year. A significant finding is that the likelihood of experiencing online sexual harassment tends to increase with the length of professional experience. The findings also suggest that the advanced technical features of social media platforms particularly those enabling location tracking facilitate the online victimization of young women. In this regard, the attitudes and intentions of cybercriminals, combined with the tendency of young women to openly share personal information on social media, significantly contribute to their vulnerability to online harassment. This study provides important insights into the forms and underlying dynamics of online sexual harassment experienced by young female social media users. It also sheds light on the individual and professional coping strategies employed by female tourist guides in response to online harassment. These strategies include setting social media accounts to private, blocking abusive users, employing online silence tactics, and seeking institutional support. Furthermore, by considering the evolving nature of digital platforms, the study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of crime geography.

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Introduction

The tourism sector, particularly in developing countries, constitutes an important area of employment for women (UNWTO 2011). While the sector offers women opportunities for independent income, economic empowerment, and increased social mobility, it also harbors structural gender inequalities (Tran and Walter 2014). Women are predominantly employed in low-wage and lower-level positions within the tourism industry, whereas they remain significantly underrepresented in senior management roles (Turizm and Konseyi 2019). In addition to their concentration in lower-paid jobs, women are also disproportionately subjected to sexual harassment and workplace discrimination (Ariza-Montes et al. 2017; Carvalho et al. 2014). Due to these structural disparities, the tourism sector has

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attracted significant attention from international organizations and critical – particularly feminist – scholars in relation to gender equality, women's empowerment, and the visibility of women's labor (Ram 2021).

The nature of tour guiding requires guides to engage in intensive and sustained interactions with their clients, which often extend over several days (Alrawadıeh and Alrawadıeh 2020). Continuous guide – tourist communication may go beyond the boundaries of the workplace and create opportunities for socialization. At times, this situation can lead one of the parties to cross professional boundaries. Therefore, the phenomenon of sexual harassment constitutes an important issue within guide – tourist interactions.

On the other hand, the rapid rise in social media usage has exposed women to various risks in online environments as well. The high level of interactivity offered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has exacerbated the impact of online harassment on individuals, often leading to severe psychosocial consequences (López-Vizcaíno et al. 2021). While social media platforms offer diverse advantages in terms of communication and visibility, they also create a fertile ground for malicious actions such as digital harassment. Online harassment typically manifests through the repeated sharing of a victim's personal information, misleading content, or abusive messages in digital spaces, resulting in degradation or threats to the individual. Therefore, the early detection and intervention of cyberbullying on social networks is crucial not only for minimizing the psychological harm inflicted on victims but also for identifying the perpetrators (Abarna et al. 2022).

The widespread and unregulated use of social media especially among young adults has intensified the prevalence and impact of digital violence. While traditional bullying typically involved physical contact between individuals, today's digital violence conducted via social media leaves permanent traces, reaches large audiences, and often recurs rendering it potentially more threatening than physical aggression. Consequently, online harassment should not be viewed merely as an individual issue but rather as a structural problem requiring societal-level attention.

In this context, the present study aims to examine the online sexual harassment experiences of female tourist guides operating within the tourism sector, and to explore the coping strategies they have developed in response to such incidents through thematic analysis.

Literature review

Sexual harassment has gained widespread recognition as a global public health and human rights issue. What distinguishes all forms of sexual violence including those occurring in digital environments from other types of online behavior is the absence of mutual consent, defined as the communicated expression of internal willingness (Muehlenhard et al. 2016). This conceptualization does not assume specific forms of violence, contexts, impacts on victims, or perpetrator intentions. In fact, harms associated with technology-facilitated violence are often situated along a continuum, ranging from "extreme" physical assault to "mundane" forms of sexist harassment, and may accumulate in impact (Kelly 1987).

Sexual harassment is typically defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that contributes to an intimidating, hostile, or offensive environment (Council of Europe 2011). Psychological literature categorizes such behavior into three types: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, and Drasgow 1995; Leskinen, Cortina, and Kabat 2011). Gender harassment includes hostile or degrading sexist actions (e.g., derogatory comments, obscene jokes, or exposure to sexual material). Unwanted sexual attention refers to unsolicited gestures such as physical contact or persistent romantic pressure, while sexual coercion typically involves abuse of power, including blackmail or threats aimed at securing sexual cooperation.

Although sexual harassment can target individuals across all gender identities and occurs in both verbal and physical forms globally, the overwhelming majority of victims are women. Importantly,

sexual harassment has been shown to lead to consequences as serious as those associated with criminal sexual violence such as rape and assault, including physical, psychological, and occupational harm (Bell and Naugle 2008; Campbell 2002).

In recent years, harassment via social media platforms has emerged as a pressing global concern (Willard 2006). Through digital means such as computers and mobile phones, perpetrators disseminate hostile, insulting, or defamatory messages across websites, forums, and private channels (Patchin and Hinduja 2006). Victims may also receive threatening images or content via mobile communication, intensifying their exposure.

Online sexual harassment refers to sexually explicit behaviors carried out through electronic devices and network technologies with the intent to harm, disturb, or intimidate the target. These behaviors include sending sexual messages or images, making sexual advances, and using threatening, insulting, or offensive language in written or verbal form (Doğan, Ertürk, and Aslan 2018). Acts such as sending photos of genitalia, proposing sexual relations, or similar actions on social media platforms are also considered forms of online sexual harassment that lead to victimization (Bulut et al. 2023).

This phenomenon has gained such gravity that violence against women in digital environments is now often described as a "shadow pandemic" (Women 2020). Online harassment affects not only women's physical and psychological well-being but also undermines their social lives and economic participation. The causes of such violence span political (e.g., censorship), economic (e.g., commercial exploitation), and cultural (e.g., lack of awareness of rights) dimensions (Almenar 2021).

The tourism industry, in particular, represents a high-risk environment for women. A male-dominated organizational culture combined with the use of women as low-cost labor significantly increases the likelihood of harassment and exploitation (Morgan and Pritchard 2019; Xu et al. 2018). A U.S. study of 500 female hotel and casino employees in Chicago revealed that 58% of hotel workers and 77% of casino staff reported experiencing sexual harassment from guests (Local 2016). Similarly, a survey among tour leaders in Taiwan found that sexual harassment was more frequent than other forms of misconduct such as bribery or coercion. Most respondents adopted passive coping strategies, and more than half were uncertain whether their travel agency had a formal harassment policy in place (Ram 2021).

Parallel findings have emerged from research on hospitality interns. In Taiwan, many university students reported experiencing harassment during internships (Lin 2006), while studies in the U.S. and U.K. also confirmed similar risks among graduates and trainees (Worsfold and McCann 2000). A study in Zimbabwe by Mkono (2010) emphasized that harassment is not rare in the sector and that perpetrators include not only customers but also staff and supervisors.

Coping theory provides a valuable framework for understanding individual responses to sexual harassment (Folkman 2013). It highlights the appraisal of threatening situations, attribution of responsibility, and emotional reactions such as fear, shame, and anxiety (Ong et al. 2006; Schneider, Swan, and Fitzgerald 1997). When individuals perceive personal harm, they may develop strong emotional responses and even retaliatory cognitions aimed at restoring justice (Dixon-Gordon, Aldao, and De Los Reyes 2015). Women may respond with unplanned or involuntary behaviors such as screaming, crying, or withdrawal referred to as behavioral threat responses during an assault (Anderson and Cahill 2015). These reactions are part of broader mechanisms aimed at regaining a sense of control and countering the injustice of the situation.

Research gap

Studies addressing violence against tour guides in Turkey are considerably limited. In particular, no prior research has been conducted in Istanbul, which constitutes the field of this study and is the province hosting the highest number of tourists in the country. Moreover, research specifically focusing on harassment and violence has not been identified. This study also represents a novel contribution to the literature by relying on social media data. It is well-documented that response rates are generally low in relation to questions on harassment (Greco et al. 2015). In this regard,

our research has the potential to raise awareness among individuals who may be hesitant to participate in future studies of a similar nature. Moreover, tour guides are often overlooked in tourism research. All of this indicates that our study fills some of the significant gaps in the existing literatüre.

Research aim and objectives

This study aims to examine the experiences of female tour guides who use social media applications and are subjected to harassment through these platforms. Specifically, the study seeks to explore their perceptions and experiences related to coping strategies when confronted with online harassment. Another key objective is to understand the individual and institutional mechanisms that female tour guides develop in response to social media-based harassment, and to propose solutions that may help prevent such incidents. The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable guidance for policymakers, professional organizations, and social media platforms in their efforts to combat digital violence.

While social media enables individuals to communicate with others easily, quickly, and at low cost, it also brings with it several negative consequences. One such consequence is the rise of sexually harassing behaviors, particularly those involving sexual violence (Powell and Henry 2017). These types of harassment may result in various psychological impacts on victims, such as emotional responses including anger, fear, shame, self-blame, anxiety, sadness, depressive feelings, hatred, and a sense of worthlessness (Ringrose et al. 2013). Moreover, such experiences may also have negative academic consequences, including decreased performance and absenteeism (Li 2005). By shedding light on the problem of online harassment and aiming to develop effective prevention strategies, this study seeks to make a meaningful contribution to ongoing efforts to address this form of digital abuse.

Based on these points, the research aims to address the following questions:

(1) Do professional tourist guides experience sexual harassment via social media from tour participants?
(2) What types of sexual harassment do professional tourist guides encounter during the course of their tours?
(3) What strategies do tourist guides adopt to cope with sexual harassment or other problematic situations they face during the tour?

Method

The population of this study consists of active female tourist guides registered with the Istanbul Tourist Guides Chamber (İRO). To define the population, data from the Tourist Guides Association of Turkiye (TUREB) were utilized. The Istanbul Chamber of Tourist Guides is the professional organization with the highest number of registered female tourist guides in Turkiye. According to TUREB (2025) statistics, there are a total of 2,017 female guides registered with İRO, of whom 1,382 are classified as active tourist guides. Therefore, the study population comprises these 1,382 active female tourist guides affiliated with İRO.

The sample size for the study was determined based on the guidelines proposed by Kline (2011), who suggested that the number of participants in a study should be at least ten times the number of items in the questionnaire in order to ensure the adequacy of the analysis. The questionnaire used in this research includes a total of 13 items. Accordingly, the sample size for this study was determined to be 130 participants. As the sampling method, convenience sampling, which is one of the non-probability sampling methods, was preferred. Convenience sampling is a sampling method in which the sample is selected from the population based on the researcher's judgment. In this method, data

are collected from the population in the easiest, fastest, and most cost-effective way (Haşıloğlu, Baran and Aydın 2015).

Data collection tool and method

In this study, a survey was used as the data collection method. Between January 20 and April 20, 2025, female tour guides registered with the Istanbul Chamber of Tourist Guides (IRO) were contacted online via Google Forms and invited to complete the survey. The survey link was delivered to some guides via e-mail, whereas others received it through WhatsApp groups comprising registered guides. The study employed the Online Sexual Harassment Scale developed by Buchanan and Ve Mahoney (2021) and adapted into Turkish by Esen, Öztürk, and Kaval (2023).

The survey consisted of two sections. The first section included 12 items aimed at measuring the participants' exposure to online sexual harassment. The second section contained 3 items designed to gather demographic information about the female tourist guides. Additionally, the survey included one open-ended question.

Descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the responses to the open-ended question. Descriptive analysis involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). To facilitate the analysis, MAXQDA 24 software, a reliable tool for qualitative data analysis, was utilized (Kuckartz and Rädiker 2023).

The descriptive analysis process involves multiple close readings (typically 3–4 times) of the text to develop a deep understanding of its meaning, followed by coding. After this step, empirical themes are generated and categorized into conceptual groupings, each assigned with overarching dimensions. These steps constitute the core procedures for ensuring reliability and validity in qualitative data analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Data analysis techniques

To investigate the experiences of female tourist guides with online sexual harassment and their coping strategies, a questionnaire was distributed to 300 women registered with İRO, yielding 131 completed responses. In this context, the response rate from female tour guides was determined to be 43.6%. After reviewing the returned questionnaires, the data were transferred into SPSS 20.0 for Windows for statistical analysis.

Initially, frequency analysis was conducted for demographic variables. Reliability analysis was applied to the scale items. In order to test the research hypotheses, non-parametric tests including the Mann-Whitney U test and Kruskal-Wallis test were used. For the open-ended question, thematic analysis was again employed.

An examination of the existing literature indicates that scholarly research specifically addressing online sexual harassment targeting female tour guides is virtually nonexistent. This notable gap in the literature underscores the originality and academic contribution of the present study.Yıldırım and Özbek (2019), in their research concerning sexual harassment experienced by professional tourist guides, concluded that exposure to sexual harassment showed no significant variation with respect to age, years of professional experience or level of education

Three research hypotheses were formulated within the scope of the study:

H_1: There is a significant difference in the exposure to online sexual harassment among female guides based on age.

H_2: There is a significant difference in the exposure to online sexual harassment among female guides based on educational background.

H_3: There is a significant difference in the exposure to online sexual harassment among female guides based on length of professional experience.

Findings

To investigate the extent to which female tourist guides are exposed to online sexual harassment and how they cope with such experiences, a frequency analysis was conducted to examine the demographic characteristics of the participants.

Upon examination of Table 1, which presents the demographic characteristics of the participants, it is observed that 43.5% of the female tourist guides fall within the age range of 24–29. In addition, 74.8% of the participants reported having an associate or bachelor's degree, while 30.5% indicated that they had been working as a tourist guide for less than one year.

Reliability analysis of the scales

The reliability of the Online Sexual Harassment Scale used in the study was determined by calculating the Cronbach's alpha (α) coefficient. The results of the reliability analysis are presented in Table 2. According to George and Mallery (2010), the interpretation of Cronbach's alpha values is as follows:

(1) ≤ α < 0.40: Not reliable
(2) ≤ α < 0.60: Low reliability
(3) ≤ α < 0.80: Moderate reliability
(4) ≤ α < 1.00: High reliability

Upon examination of the values presented in Table 2, it is observed that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the *Unwanted Sexual Attention* subscale is 0.906, while the coefficient for the *Gender-Based Harassment* subscale is 0.823. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the scale used in the study demonstrates a high level of reliability.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of female tourist guides participating in the study.

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age		
18–23	14	10,7
24–29	57	**43,5**
30–35	30	22,9
36–41	16	12,2
42–47	7	5,3
48 and over	7	5,3
Education Level		
Associate Degree/Bachelor's Degree	98	**74,8**
Postgraduate (Master's/PhD)	33	25,2
Work Experience as a Tour Guide		
1 year or less	40	**30,5**
1–3 years	36	27,5
4–6 years	23	17,6
7–9 years	13	9,9
10 years and over	19	14,5
Total	**131**	**100,0**

Table 2. Reliability analysis of the online sexual harassment scale.

Subscale	Cronbach Alpha Coefficient
Unwanted Sexual Attention	**0,906**
Gender-Based Harassment	**0,823**

Table 3. Kruskal-Wallis test results for differences between age and exposure to online sexual harassment.

Subscale	Age	Frequency (n = 131)	Mean rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Unwanted Sexual Attention	18–23	14	62,96	7,586	5	0,181
	24–29	57	75,72			
	30–35	30	60,73			
	36–41	16	53,66			
	42–47	7	57,36			
	48 and over	7	52,36			
Gender-Based Harassment	18–23	14	58,86	10,950	5	0,052
	24–29	57	75,72			
	30–35	30	67,18			
	36–41	16	54,97			
	42–47	7	46,71			
	48 and over	7	40,57			

Testing the Hypotheses

H_1: The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by age.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test conducted to examine differences between age groups in terms of exposure to online sexual harassment are presented in Table 3.

Upon examining the findings presented in Table 3, it is observed that the *p*-values for both subscales are greater than 0.05. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no statistically significant difference in the levels of online sexual harassment exposure among female tourist guides based on their age. Accordingly, the hypothesis stating that "The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by age" is rejected.

H_2: The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by educational background.

To determine whether there are differences in exposure to online sexual harassment based on educational background, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The results are presented in Table 4.

Based on the results of the Mann-Whitney U test, no statistically significant difference was found between educational background and the level of exposure to online sexual harassment. In other words, both women with associate/bachelor's degrees and those with postgraduate education reported experiences of online sexual harassment. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that "The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by educational background" is rejected.

H_3: The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by length of professional experience.

The results of the Kruskal-Wallis test conducted to examine differences between years of professional experience and exposure to online sexual harassment are presented in Table 5.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test results for differences between educational background and exposure to online sexual harassment.

Subscale	Education level	Frequency (n = 131)	Mean rank	Mann-Whitney U	Sig. 2 tailed
Unwanted Sexual Attention	Associate Degree/Bachelor's Degree	98	65,84	1601,500	0,934
	Postgraduate (Master's/PhD)	33	66,47		
Gender-Based Harassment	Associate Degree/Bachelor's Degree	98	64,85	1504,500	0,544
	Postgraduate (Master's/PhD)	33	69,41		

Table 5. Kruskal-Wallis test results for differences between years of professional experience and exposure to online sexual harassment.

Subscale	Work experience as a tour guide	Frequency (n = 131)	Mean rank	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Unwanted Sexual Attention	1 year or less	40	68,89	6,314	4	0,177
	1–3 years	36	72,69			
	4–6 years	23	66,93			
	7–9 years	13	64,65			
	10 years and over	19	47,03			
Gender-Based Harassment	1 year or less	40	61,33	13,821	4	**0,008**
	1–3 years	36	80,83			
	4–6 years	23	71,48			
	7–9 years	13	62,38			
	10 years and over	19	43,58			

Table 6. Tamhane's post hoc test results for differences between years of experience and exposure to gender-based online harassment.

Subscale	Work experience as a tour guide	Mean	Sig.
Gender-Based Harassment 1–3 Years (0,9861)	10 years and over	0,3553	**0,021**

Upon examination of the analysis results presented in Table 5, it was found that there is no statistically significant difference between years of professional experience and exposure to online sexual harassment in the Unwanted Sexual Attention subscale. However, a significant difference was observed in the Gender-Based Harassment subscale based on years of experience.

To determine between which specific groups this difference exists, a Post Hoc test was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 6.

Upon examination of Table 6, which presents the results of the Post Hoc test, it is evident that exposure to online sexual harassment differs significantly between participants with 1–3 years of experience and those with 10 or more years of experience. A comparison of the mean values reveals that female participants who have worked as tourist guides for 1–3 years are more frequently exposed to online sexual harassment compared to those who have been in the profession for 10 years or more. Accordingly, the hypothesis stating that "The extent to which female guides are exposed to online sexual harassment differs by length of professional experience" is accepted.

Thematic analysis of female tourist guides' coping strategies with online harassment

An open-ended question related to sexual harassment was added at the end of the research survey. The question, "How do tourist guides cope with problematic situations such as sexual harassment approaches they encounter?" was posed to the participants, and all of them responded.

To enhance reliability in the qualitative analysis phase, the data set was coded by multiple coders, and discrepancies were reviewed and reconciled through data reorganization. Figure 1 presents the themes generated using MAXQDA 24 software.

In the qualitative data analysis phase, participants' statements regarding sexual harassment were first compiled into a Word document. Subsequently, the entire dataset was thoroughly reviewed, and the data were categorized under similar groups. Based on this organization, themes were developed using descriptive coding. The findings, grouped under three overarching themes derived from the open-ended question, are presented below.

The code frequency visualization clearly illustrates the diversity and intensity of coping strategies employed by female tourist guides in response to online sexual harassment. The most frequently used strategy is "Blocking/Reporting/Settings" (f:28), indicating that immediate and direct responses through digital platforms are the primary method of defense. This is closely followed by "Ignoring"

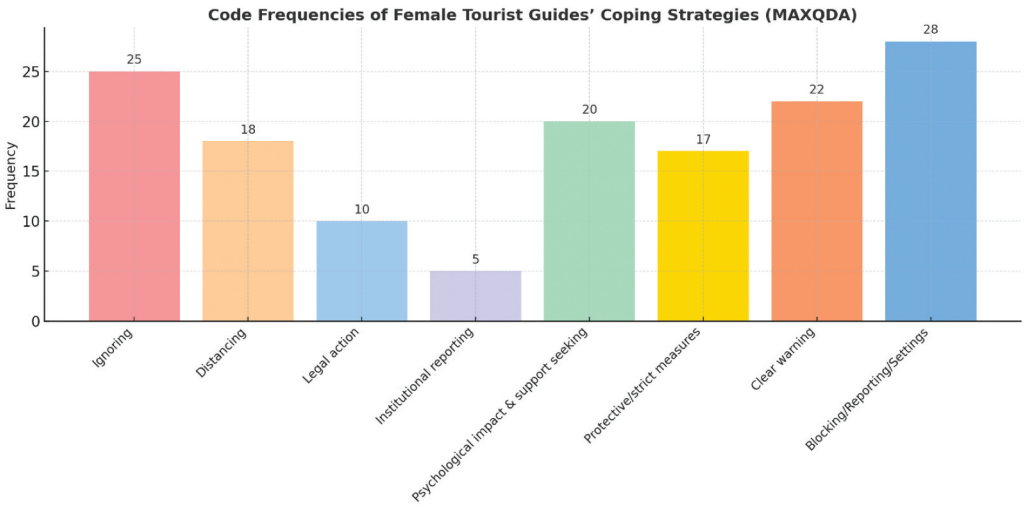


Figure 1. Themes created by MAXQDA 24.

(f:25) and "Clear Warning" (f:22), suggesting that participants also tend to avoid confrontation while attempting to set firm boundaries when necessary.

The relatively high frequency of "Psychological Impact & Support Seeking" (f:20) highlights that digital harassment leads to not only behavioral responses but also serious emotional consequences. This demonstrates a considerable need for psychological and social support among participants. Other strategies such as "Protective/Strict Measures" (f:17) and "Distancing" (f:18) reflect participants' attempts to create both emotional and physical boundaries to protect themselves.

On the other hand, "Legal Action" (f:10) and particularly "Institutional Reporting" (f:5) appeared with the lowest frequencies. This trend suggests a general mistrust in institutional mechanisms and a reluctance to pursue formal channels. One of the study's key findings is the significant reliance on individual coping mechanisms over institutional ones, indicating a gap in organizational support systems for female guides facing online harassment.

Overall, this distribution of code frequencies reveals that female tourist guides primarily adopt individual and digital strategies to combat online harassment. Institutional structures, by contrast, appear insufficient in offering trustworthy reporting channels and effective protective mechanisms.

As a result of the coding process, three main themes were identified: avoidance, professionalism, and strong – explicit reaction. The avoidance theme encompasses the subthemes of ignoring and distancing, representing passive strategies aimed at avoiding engagement. The professionalism theme includes legal action, institutional reporting, and psychological support seeking, reflecting more formal or internalized responses. Lastly, the strong – explicit reaction theme includes protective measures, issuing clear warnings, and blocking/reporting actions, which indicate more direct and assertive strategies.

Analysis of the relationships between codes revealed several important patterns. Female guides who reported issuing clear warnings often also engaged in blocking, reporting, and adjusting privacy settings. Furthermore, many of those who took a clear and assertive stance also reported seeking psychological support. This correlation suggests that while these women outwardly demonstrate control and assertiveness, they may simultaneously experience significant emotional distress. Therefore, their coping behaviors are not merely defensive reactions, but also efforts to restore internal emotional well-being.

A particularly strong association was found between the subthemes blocking, reporting, and modifying social media settings and psychological impact & support seeking. These strategies

represent active, digital forms of defense that allow women to regain some sense of control over their online environment. However, the emotional aftermath persists. Despite these actions, many participants still reported feelings of stress, anxiety, and isolation – prompting them to seek professional or social support.

In contrast, strategies such as legal action, ignoring, and distancing reflect different psychological dynamics. Resorting to legal procedures often indicates a need for justice or formal closure, while ignoring and distancing may be rooted in emotional fatigue, fear, or institutional distrust. These behaviors represent avoidance not only of the harasser but also of the formal systems that might address the issue. As such, they may delay or suppress direct engagement with emotional consequences, explaining their moderate relationship with psychological support-seeking behaviors.

The analysis also revealed that institutional reporting was significantly underutilized by participants. This can be attributed to a range of individual, organizational, and structural factors. A major contributor to this silence is the widespread lack of trust in formal reporting systems. Many participants expressed skepticism that their complaints would be taken seriously, result in any meaningful consequences, or be handled without social stigma or professional backlash.

Additionally, the informal and seasonal nature of the tourism industry further undermines women's connections to institutional structures. This instability discourages reporting, as women fear losing income or job opportunities due to retaliation or exclusion. The absence of transparent, accessible, and supportive complaint mechanisms only exacerbates this reluctance, reinforcing the preference for informal, self-directed strategies such as blocking, ignoring, or adjusting privacy settings.

Ultimately, the findings underscore that female tourist guides are not only vulnerable at the individual level but also operate within structurally insecure environments, where institutional protections are either inadequate or entirely absent. This highlights an urgent need for the development of inclusive, reliable, and well-functioning institutional mechanisms to address online harassment effectively and support victims in safe, accessible ways.

Participants who adopted the protective – strict measures theme predominantly viewed actions such as blocking, reporting, and changing social media settings as both protective and effective coping mechanisms. These strategies reflect efforts to quickly and decisively respond to online harassment and secure personal boundaries. They also serve to reduce psychological impact by cutting off contact with the perpetrator, functioning both as defensive tactics and tools for maintaining emotional well-being.

Based on the descriptive analysis of the data collected from 131 female professional tourist guides, the following findings were obtained in response to the research questions:

RQ1: Do professional tourist guides experience sexual harassment from tour participants via social media?

All 131 participants responded to this question, and 86 of them (65.6%) stated that they had been exposed to sexually suggestive messages or approaches from tour participants via social media platforms. This finding indicates that digital harassment is a widespread and noteworthy issue within the guiding profession. The use of social media in tourist-guide interactions has introduced new areas of vulnerability, where professional boundaries are often blurred with personal ones. The results highlight how gender-based power imbalances are reproduced in digital communication and suggest an urgent need for institutional awareness and regulation alongside personal coping strategies.

RQ2: What types of sexual harassment do professional tourist guides experience during tours?

Participants reported being subjected to various forms of sexual harassment during the tour process. These included verbal innuendos, unsolicited sexual messages through digital channels, and attempted physical contact. Such experiences demonstrate that harassment is not limited to physical settings but

extends into the digital and interpersonal dimensions of guiding, undermining the professional integrity and emotional safety of the guides.

RQ3: How do tourist guides cope with problematic situations such as sexual harassment?

The participants reported employing a combination of individual and institutional strategies. Common individual responses included ignoring the harasser, maintaining physical distance, using humor to deflect the situation, and giving verbal warnings. In addition, more structured actions were taken, such as blocking harassers on social media, reporting inappropriate content to platform administrators, and lodging formal complaints through official channels. However, most guides indicated that they refrain from taking formal action due to ineffective reporting mechanisms and concerns over professional reputation.

A thematic analysis of the open-ended responses revealed the following representative expressions:

E5: "I usually don't respond. I just report and block the message. I protect myself by doing this every time."

K1, K8, K11, K36, K43, K66: "I generally ignore it, but in some cases I respond harshly to set a boundary."

K7, K27, K54: "I report the situation to my employer or the guiding association."

K5, K41, K73: "In such situations, the first step is to keep a distance, react, and warn the person. I also inform the agency."

Overall, it was observed that tourist guides often choose to remain silent or passive in order not to disrupt the group atmosphere or the flow of the tour. Nevertheless, some participants emphasized the importance of digital safety practices such as blocking and reporting, as well as the need for more effective institutional support.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is broadly defined as any unwanted sexual behavior. It encompasses various forms, including leering, unsolicited physical contact, sexually suggestive remarks, and repeated unwanted flirtatious advances (Yıldırım and Özbek 2019).

Although sexual harassment can occur in any sector regardless of gender, the tourism industry stands out as one of the sectors where such incidents are most prevalent. One of the main reasons for this is that tourism is considered a part of the service industry, where customer satisfaction is a primary concern. The frequent close interaction between customers and employees further intensifies this issue. Additionally, the tourism industry is characterized by irregular working hours and challenging work conditions compared to other sectors, which significantly increases the risk of sexual harassment. It is well documented that women working in tourism are more likely to experience harassment than their male counterparts.

Tourist guides who play a vital role in the sector by conveying a country's cultural values to visitors are also exposed to this issue. Such harassment is not limited to physical interactions but also takes place in digital environments through online platforms. This study aimed to identify the extent to which female tourist guides are subjected to online sexual harassment. The study's population consisted of active female tourist guides registered with the Istanbul Tourist Guides Chamber (İRO), selected because İRO hosts the largest number of female guides, according to sectoral statistics. The research focused on identifying the guides' experiences of online harassment and the coping strategies they employ.

Nearly half of the female guides who participated in the study were between the ages of 24 and 29. Approximately 75% of the participants had received associate or bachelor-level education in tourist guiding, and 30.5% had been working in the profession for less than one year. According to the analysis results, no statistically significant differences were found in harassment exposure based on age or education level. This finding aligns with the results of a similar study by Yıldırım and Özbek (2019),

indicating that age and education level do not eliminate the risk of sexual harassment in professional life.

On the other hand, the findings indicate that exposure to online sexual harassment differs by years of professional experience. Specifically, female guides who had recently entered the profession reported higher levels of harassment. This may be attributed to a lack of professional experience. Women who have worked in the profession for many years likely possess better interpersonal skills and are more capable of recognizing and addressing problematic situations at an early stage. Therefore, more experienced guides may face a relatively lower risk of harassment.

This study examined the online sexual harassment experiences of female tourist guides and identified their coping strategies using a qualitative approach. Open-ended responses from 130 female guides registered with İRO were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. The analysis yielded three main themes and eight subthemes. The findings revealed that women employed a variety of individual and institutional strategies to deal with online harassment. However, individual responses – such as blocking, ignoring, and direct confrontation – were more frequently used, whereas institutional approaches, including legal action, seeking support, and formal reporting, were less commonly adopted.

This pattern suggests that female tourist guides are often left to cope with harassment alone, without sufficient support from the professional structures around them. Accordingly, it is critical to incorporate training on how to respond to online harassment into professional development programs for women in the tourism sector. Furthermore, professional organizations and relevant institutions must institutionalize mechanisms that provide legal and psychological support in cases of harassment. Special attention should be given to new entrants in the profession, who require both information and psychosocial empowerment to effectively confront these challenges.

Ultimately, enhancing social awareness, strengthening professional solidarity, and encouraging active institutional engagement are essential to ensure that female tourist guides can work in a safer and more supportive environment.

Limitations and practical implications

The topic of sexual harassment is inherently sensitive and private. Consequently, participants may feel compelled to justify their responses and may be reluctant to fully disclose their experiences. As a result, non-response bias may occur, necessitating careful interpretation of the findings.

This study included only tour guides registered with the IRO. Future research focusing on different guide associations, while utilizing the characteristics presented in this study, may yield valuable insights. Additionally, only female tour guides were selected as the sample in this study; however, male tour guides can also be victims of sexual harassment. Therefore, future studies incorporating male participants could produce diverse and more comprehensive findings.

Author contributions

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