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DOI: 10.1002/fcsr.70073

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The anatomy of dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants: Insights from online narratives

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the components of customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants by analyzing low-rated (1- to 3-star) online customer reviews. A total of 664 low-rated reviews collected from four small-scale restaurants were analyzed using content analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's six-step procedure, open coding was conducted to identify recurring meaning units, which were subsequently grouped into higher-order categories and conceptualized into broader themes. The findings reveal that customer dissatisfaction clusters around five main themes: service delivery and staff behavior, food quality and product performance, pricing practices and perceived value incongruity, operational processes—waiting experience, physical environment and experiential atmosphere.

KEYWORDS

customer dissatisfaction, negative experience, online narratives, small-scale restaurants

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable competitive advantage in tourism destinations increasingly depends on the strategic role of local gastronomic experiences (Eren, 2019; Zhu et al., 2024). Tourists' interaction with local culinary culture extends beyond the mere fulfillment of physiological needs; rather, it generates experiential, symbolic, and cultural meanings (Choe & Kim, 2018). Such interactions contribute to the formation of a destination image, foster emotional attachment, and influence future travel intentions (Lei et al., 2023). Recent research further demonstrates that the multidimensional value perceptions attributed to gastronomic experiences significantly affect destination image and revisit intentions (Sthapit, 2017; Zhu et al., 2024).

In this context, local restaurants provide important settings through which tourists experience destination culture and local gastronomy (Choe & Kim, 2018; Kivela & Crotts, 2006).

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However, in today's increasingly digitalized environment, the evaluation and communication of these experiences to potential visitors largely occur through online review platforms. User-generated content on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Yelp, and Google Maps has evolved into a powerful source of information that shapes and influences consumer decision-making processes (Filieri et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, the objectivity and reliability of online reviews have become a prominent topic of scholarly debate in recent years (Mens et al., 2018). Prior research indicates that negative and low-rated online reviews often contain detailed accounts of complaints, service breakdowns, and recovery experiences, making them valuable sources for identifying recurring weaknesses in hospitality services (Dalgiç et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2013; Sparks & Bradley, 2017). In restaurant settings specifically, service failures have been shown to influence customer satisfaction and subsequent patronage, while customer evaluations also differ between local and chain restaurant contexts (Norvell et al., 2018; Yalcinkaya & Just, 2023). Mens et al. (2018) showed that endogenous rating dynamics can generate systematic bias in online evaluations. This underscores the necessity of examining low-rated reviews more comprehensively (Hanić et al., 2024).

Customer evaluations differ across local and chain restaurant contexts (Yalcinkaya & Just, 2023). Small-scale restaurants provide a particularly relevant context for examining dissatisfaction because service experiences are often shaped by personalized interactions, limited operational resources, and less standardized processes. Compared with chain establishments, these characteristics may make service disruptions more visible to customers and more likely to influence broader evaluations of the restaurant experience.

Existing academic literature has largely concentrated on the optimistic picture generated by high-rated reviews and on general satisfaction factors. Although dissatisfaction, service failure, and negative electronic word of mouth (eWOM) have been widely discussed in hospitality and tourism research, their manifestation in low-rated online narratives of small-scale restaurants has received more limited conceptual attention. In particular, existing studies have paid insufficient attention to how such reviews signal structural breakdowns in service delivery, reveal gaps in expectation management, and create emotional disruption in tourists' experiential perceptions (Dalgiç et al., 2016). Yet, how dissatisfaction narratives reflect the operational vulnerabilities of small-scale restaurants—where service delivery often depends on limited resources, informal routines, and less standardized procedures—remains conceptually underdeveloped. Accordingly, the present study links expectation–performance discrepancy to the narrative construction of dissatisfaction by examining how low-rated reviews associate unmet expectations with specific service domains and perceived organizational weaknesses in small-scale restaurants.

This study aims to examine low-rated (1-, 2-, and 3-star) customer reviews of small-scale restaurants. The primary objective is to identify systematic error patterns emerging in these reviews and to model these patterns within the framework of service quality dimensions (Uslu & Eren, 2020) and customer dissatisfaction theories (Oliver, 1980). To achieve this aim, the study employs thematic content analysis to identify recurring complaint themes, meaning patterns, and service-related dissatisfaction dimensions in low-rated reviews (Dalgiç et al., 2016).

The main contribution of the study lies in its focus on dissatisfaction and systematic failures, in contrast to the existing literature, which predominantly emphasizes high-rated reviews and satisfaction factors. By uncovering the sources of dissatisfaction and recurring service failures, the study seeks to provide actionable insights for restaurant managers and destination marketers to improve service quality and better manage customer expectations. Furthermore, the findings offer an empirical contribution—within the context of small-scale restaurants—to ongoing theoretical discussions concerning the reliability of online review platforms and the nature of bias within these platforms (Mens et al., 2018; Shen et al., 2021).

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Local food and restaurants

Local foods, which have become central to the destination experience, have emerged as one of the most important elements shaping tourists' overall experiences (Kovalenko et al., 2023). Within the scope of gastronomy tourism, local cuisines influence tourists' travel motivations and enhance the attractiveness of destinations (Zhong et al., 2024). Reis (2020), through a systematic review of studies published between 2003 and 2019 in the Scopus database on "local food" and "tourist experience," emphasized that local cuisines serve as a sustainable source of income that provides tourists with memorable experiences while representing local culture. Similarly, Zhu et al. (2024), in their study focusing on Nanjing cuisine, demonstrated that tourists' perceptions of functional, social, emotional, cultural, and health values associated with local food experiences have positive effects on destination image.

The factors influencing tourists' restaurant preferences are highly diverse. In their comprehensive review study, Zanetta et al. (2024) identified 117 different factors affecting consumers' restaurant choices. These factors were grouped under main dimensions such as food quality, service quality, atmosphere, and price–value perception. Although the authors emphasized that the "food" category constitutes the most important factor, they also noted that service quality and atmosphere have significant effects on customer satisfaction and loyalty. Zhong et al. (2024), in their analysis of 2887 dining reviews posted on TripAdvisor by international tourists visiting Beijing, employed content analysis and statistical methods. Their findings indicated that tourists' countries of origin significantly influence their overall perceptions of food and dining experiences in China's capital.

The consumption of local food represents not only the fulfillment of a physiological need for tourists, but also a means of experiencing the culture of a destination, establishing authentic connections, and creating memorable experiences (Nie et al., 2025; Sthapit, 2017). In their study focusing on Guilin rice noodles, Nie et al. (2025) analyzed the effects of tourists' perceived food consumption value on destination image and purchase intention using structural equation modeling. The findings revealed that functional, social, emotional, cultural, and health values have significant positive effects on tourists' perceptions of destination image and their repurchase intention. It was also determined that perceived destination image plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between food consumption value and revisit intention. Therefore, even a minor operational error or deviation from authenticity in small-scale restaurants signifies not only the failure to satisfy a physical need, but also the disruption of the emotional bridge that tourists attempt to establish with the destination.

Service quality and customer (dis)satisfaction in restaurants

The measurement of service quality in restaurants has long been a central topic in the hospitality and tourism literature. In a critical review published in *DETUROPE*, Uslu and Eren (2020) comparatively examined several widely used service quality measurement scales, including SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, DINESERV, GRSERV, and CFFRSERV. The authors emphasized that SERVQUAL is one of the most widely adopted instruments in tourism research and that scales such as SERVPERF and DINESERV were developed based on this framework. However, existing service quality scales have been criticized for their inability to fully capture service dimensions specific to different types of restaurants, such as fast-food restaurants, fine-dining establishments, and environmentally friendly restaurants (Chen et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2009). Although the literature presents differing views regarding the causal relationship between

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service quality and customer satisfaction, there is broad consensus that both are fundamental determinants of customer loyalty (Han & Hyun, 2018; Oliver, 1999).

Despite the widespread use of SERVQUAL, SERVPERF, and DINESERV, these scales primarily focus on customer satisfaction. Customer dissatisfaction, however, is not merely the absence of satisfaction but a distinct construct involving both cognitive and affective dimensions (Oliver, 1980). According to Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980), dissatisfaction arises when perceived performance falls below customer expectations, resulting in negative disconfirmation. Although the present study takes established service quality dimensions as its point of departure, its primary objective is to examine the service domains in which such negative disconfirmation is concentrated in small-scale restaurants and to identify the patterns through which these service failures emerge.

Dalgiç et al. (2016) examined restaurant complaints using a two-dimensional analytical approach. Through a content analysis of customer complaints regarding restaurants in Mersin and Hatay, the authors found that complaints were primarily clustered around four major categories: food quality, service quality, price perception, and restaurant atmosphere. Negative reviews, particularly those associated with low ratings, frequently emphasized unmet expectations, inattentive staff, and deficiencies in food presentation. These findings provide an important foundation for understanding the systematic patterns of service failures reflected in low-rated customer reviews.

The role of online reviews and the problem of bias

Online review platforms have become one of the most influential sources shaping consumers' restaurant choices (Li et al., 2023). However, the reliability and objectivity of these reviews have become major topics of academic debate in recent years. In a study published in *Psychological Science*, Mens et al. (2018) demonstrated that endogenous crowd formation in online rating systems creates a systematic negative bias in average ratings. Analyzing 78 million Amazon product ratings and 2.2 million Yelp business ratings, the authors found that products and businesses with higher average ratings were more likely to attract additional positive ratings than those with lower average ratings. This dynamic generates a systematic disadvantage for businesses with relatively few reviews, resulting in a pronounced negative bias.

Shen et al. (2021) examined online review bias from a broader perspective by proposing a multilayered framework that incorporates user-, platform-, and culture-related factors. Using data from Dianping.com, one of the China's largest online review platforms, they found that the distribution of online reviews posted by Chinese users differed substantially from that of Western users. In particular, the lower tendency of Chinese consumers to engage in "complaining behavior" suggests that sociocultural norms, in addition to individual self-selection bias, play an important role in shaping online review behavior.

Li et al. (2023), in their study of restaurants in New York City, further demonstrated that as a restaurant's popularity increases, so does the likelihood of being targeted by competitors, leading to a higher incidence of fraudulent negative reviews. These findings illustrate, from the perspective of signaling theory, how interfirm competition is reflected in online reputation management. Such attacks pose a particularly serious threat to independent restaurants, which generally lack the institutional protection available to chain restaurants. The authors also reported that a restaurant's own reputation and the popularity of its competitors mitigate this effect, and that the phenomenon is considerably weaker among chain restaurants than among independent establishments.

Low-rated reviews (1–3 stars) represent a strategic source of data for understanding service failures. Such reviews directly reveal the circumstances under which customers experience dissatisfaction, how they frame these experiences, and which aspects of service they perceive as

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unacceptable (Dalgiç et al., 2016; Mens et al., 2018). Whereas highly rated reviews often consist of general expressions of satisfaction, low-rated reviews typically contain concrete descriptions of service failures (e.g., "We waited 20 minutes for the bill" or "The waiter forgot our order"), providing rich qualitative evidence for identifying recurring patterns of service failures.

The research gap and contribution of the study

Previous studies have provided a comprehensive understanding of the influence of local food on destination image and tourist behavior (Choe & Kim, 2018; Eren, 2019), the relationship between restaurant service quality and customer satisfaction, and the role of online reviews in consumer decision-making (Lei et al., 2023). In addition, natural language processing and sentiment analysis have increasingly been employed to analyze restaurant reviews (Hanić et al., 2024).

Despite these advances, the existing literature exhibits three important limitations. First, most studies on online reviews analyze the full distribution of ratings rather than examining low-rated reviews as a distinct category (Lei et al., 2023). However, 1- to 3-star reviews provide particularly rich evidence of recurring service failures within restaurant operations. Although several studies have examined negative online reviews, customer complaints, and service failures in hospitality contexts (Dalgiç et al., 2016; Levy et al., 2013; Norvell et al., 2018; Sparks & Bradley, 2017), comparatively less attention has been given to the thematic structure of low-rated narratives specifically within small-scale independent restaurants.

Second, the service quality literature has primarily focused on scale development and the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, while giving limited attention to modeling user-generated, real-time digital feedback as evidence of systematic service failure patterns. In particular, the cumulative and cascading nature of customer dissatisfaction has received relatively little attention in the context of small-scale restaurants.

Third, considering the distinctive characteristics of small-scale restaurants, including limited resources, lower levels of institutionalization, and the absence of standardized operating procedures, the patterns of service failures observed in these businesses are likely to differ from those found in large restaurant chains. Nevertheless, studies that systematically investigate the context-specific dimensions of customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants remain scarce (Dalgiç et al., 2016).

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze low-rated online reviews through thematic content analysis in order to identify recurring categories of service failures and to examine how these patterns emerge within the context of small-scale restaurants. Beyond merely describing customer dissatisfaction, the study seeks to contribute to the literature by conceptualizing how dissatisfaction arises from underlying structural vulnerabilities within small-scale restaurant operations.

METHODOLOGY

The primary aim of this study is to identify the structural components of customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants and to model these dimensions conceptually through low-star online customer reviews. Rather than focusing on overall satisfaction levels commonly addressed in the customer satisfaction literature, the study seeks to determine the specific areas in which perceived service performance fails to meet customer expectations.

In this context, the research is grounded in Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) and the service quality framework (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988). Dissatisfaction is conceptualized as the cognitive and emotional outcome of the

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negative discrepancy between customers' prior expectations and their experienced service performance. By focusing on low-rated narratives, the study examines how this discrepancy is translated into concrete accounts of service breakdown, violated expectations, and perceived organizational incapacity within the specific context of small-scale restaurants. The study aims to identify the service dimensions in which these negative evaluations concentrate and how they cluster within this context.

The research is designed within the qualitative research paradigm. The qualitative approach enables the systematic examination of meaning patterns, recurring complaint categories, and contextual evaluations embedded in user-generated digital texts. Accordingly, the research design is based on document analysis and content analysis.

Research population and sample

The population of the study consists of small-scale independent restaurants operating in the Marmara Region of Türkiye that do not possess a chain structure, function at a local level, and have limited operational capacity. Within this scope, the sample comprises four restaurants characterized by relatively low average ratings and the availability of a sufficient number of low-rated textual reviews. These restaurants were selected through purposive sampling because they provided information-rich cases for examining dissatisfaction narratives: each met the criteria of being independently operated, small-scale in capacity, nonchain in structure, and having a sufficient number of recent low-rated textual reviews.

Only low-star rating (1- to 3-star) evaluations were included in the analysis. Additionally, the dataset was limited to user reviews containing textual content and written in either English or Turkish. Low-star reviews were deliberately selected because they tend to provide more detailed accounts of negative service evaluations and more explicitly reflect perceived performance deficiencies. Accordingly, the analysis focused on specific areas of dissatisfaction rather than general expressions of satisfaction.

Data analysis

The qualitative data obtained in this study were analyzed through content analysis of low-star (1- to 3-star) customer reviews related to small-scale restaurants. The analytical process was conducted using both a theory-driven and data-driven approach. In this regard, Derek Layder's (1998) Adaptive Theory framework was adopted, allowing the analysis to draw upon existing service quality literature while simultaneously enabling the development of emergent dissatisfaction dimensions grounded in the data.

The theoretical foundation of the analysis was based on Expectation–Disconfirmation Theory (Oliver, 1980) and established service quality dimensions (Cronin & Taylor, 1992; Parasuraman et al., 1988). However, the coding process was not restricted solely to these predefined dimensions. Recurring meaning clusters identified in the data that did not have a direct counterpart within the theoretical framework were also treated as independent categories.

Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. Initially, all review texts were imported into the system, and a data cleaning process was performed prior to analysis. During data preparation, usernames and any potentially identifying details were removed from the review excerpts to ensure anonymity. Subsequently, the six-phase analysis procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed. In the first phase, all reviews were read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. In the second phase, open coding was conducted, and meaning units expressing customer dissatisfaction were identified line by line. During this stage, codes were generated as closely as possible to the data, and the

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original language of the reviews was preserved. In the third phase, codes with similar content were grouped to form subcategories. In the fourth phase, these subcategories were comparatively reviewed, and the conceptual relationships among them were examined. In the fifth phase, the categories were organized under higher-order themes, and the core components of customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants were identified. Consistent with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) understanding of qualitative trustworthiness, the analysis was strengthened through repeated engagement with the review texts, independent coding of a subset of the data, discussion of coding differences, and systematic comparison of codes and themes with the original excerpts.

The systematic procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), together with Layder's (1998) Adaptive Theory framework, provided a structured basis for coding, category development, and theme refinement. To strengthen analytical reliability, the coding process was conducted iteratively: codes, subcategories, and themes were repeatedly compared with the original review excerpts, and overlapping or ambiguous codes were refined throughout the analysis. A coding trail was maintained in MAXQDA, including coded segments, code definitions, category revisions, and analytic notes, in order to increase transparency and allow the analytical decisions to be traced. To assess coding reliability, a subset of the reviews was independently coded by two researchers. Cohen's kappa coefficient was calculated to evaluate intercoder agreement, and the result indicated substantial agreement between the coders ($\kappa = 0.84$). Disagreements were discussed and resolved through consensus before finalizing the coding scheme.

In the final phase, the identified themes were supported with direct customer excerpts, and the scope of each theme was clearly defined. The final thematic structure was reviewed in terms of internal coherence, empirical grounding, and distinctiveness among themes. Thus, the analysis aimed to present not merely a descriptive classification but a conceptual structure that reveals the service domains in which dissatisfaction is concentrated. Through this approach, customer dissatisfaction was systematically modeled as recurring service performance deficiencies rather than as fragmented individual complaints.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the distribution of the 664 low-rated (1, 2, and 3 stars) online customer reviews analyzed in the study according to star rating, gender, location, and year of review. The table presents both the frequency and percentage distributions by rating category and the demographic and temporal characteristics of the sample in a comprehensive manner.

When examining the distribution by star rating, it is seen that 47.9% of the reviews are in the 1-star category, 20.3% are in the 2-star category, and 31.8% are in the 3-star category. This distribution indicates that the data set predominantly contains the lowest ratings. Male users account for the highest share of total reviews (37.5%), and it is noteworthy that the proportion of anonymous users (35.8%) is quite close to this. Female users account for 26.7% of the reviews.

As a result of the content analysis, it was determined that low-star customer reviews of small-scale restaurants clustered under five main themes. The coding process began with open coding; recurring meaning units were grouped according to similarities in content and subsequently consolidated under higher-order conceptual categories. The analysis revealed that customer dissatisfaction concentrated around the following five core dimensions (see Figure 1): service delivery and staff behavior, food quality and product performance, pricing practices and perceived value incongruity, operational processes and waiting experience, and physical environment and experiential atmosphere.

An examination of these themes indicates that customer dissatisfaction does not stem from a single service element; rather, it emerges from multidimensional performance evaluations

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the review sample.

Visitor characteristics	*N*	%
Gender		
Male	249	37.5
Female	177	26.7
Unspecified	238	35.8
The reviewer's residence		
Local (Turkey)	172	25.9
Foreign	251	37.8
Unspecified	241	36.3
Comment year		
2008–2014 (Early period)	104	15.7
2015–2019 (Intensive period)	419	63.1
2020–2024 (Pandemic/post-pandemic)	116	17.5
2025–2026 (Current period)	25	3.8
Evaluation level		
1 star	318	47.9
2 stars	135	20.3
3 stars	211	31.8
Total values	**664**	**100**

embedded within the holistic restaurant experience. The most intensive clustering was observed in relation to service delivery and staff behavior, followed by negative evaluations concerning food quality.

Service delivery and staff behavior

Within the scope of the analyzed data, service delivery and staff behavior emerged as the most prominent dimension of customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants. The analyzed low-star reviews indicate that customers evaluate the restaurant experience not only based on the product offered but also through their interactions with employees. Disruptions in the service process, lack of attentiveness, lack of professionalism, and communication problems directly influence customers' overall perception of the experience. In this context, the theme is structured around the sub-dimensions of lack of attentiveness and courtesy, communication problems, errors in order coordination and service, and perceived lack of professionalism.

An examination of the reviews reveals that the relationship established between staff and customers is not limited to technical service provision; it also includes expectations of respect, clarity, and solution-oriented behavior. When service performance is perceived as weak, customers tend to define the experience through a generalized label of a "bad restaurant." This finding demonstrates that service behavior plays a decisive role in shaping the overall image of the establishment. Some customer statements supporting this theme are presented below:

> C2: Service is the worst I have ever experienced; 1-requested Turkish Tea – not served, 2-charged for water and bread-was not asked if we would like still or sparkling water, 3-refused to cancel order for 1 dish however had to inquire at least

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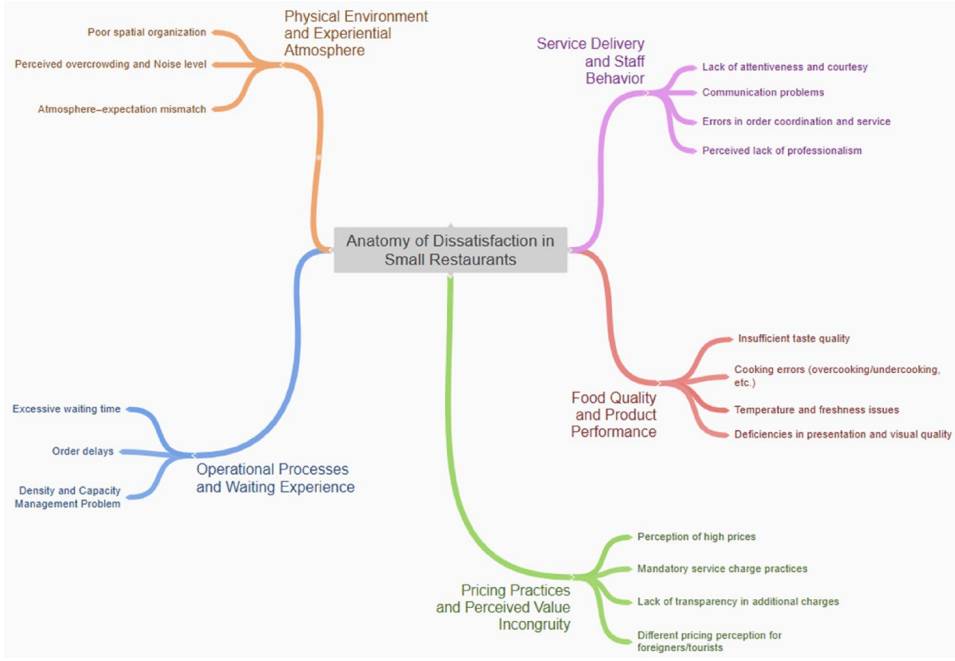


FIGURE 1 Dimensions of customer dissatisfaction.

> 3 times for status of simple pasta dish, ladies drinks not served until we asked 2 times for status, etc…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

> C6: …An incompetent manager who is trying to cover up their faulup trying to treat like an idiot…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

> C15: Terrible service. Terrible waiters and tasteless food. Even when you ask for the bill, it takes 20-minutes to arrive, they have the nerve to answer back to customers…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

The findings are consistent with the responsiveness and assurance dimensions of the DINESERV model (Kim et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 1995). However, the narratives analyzed in this study indicate that service failures in small-scale restaurants typically arise not from a single service lapse but from the simultaneous breakdown of multiple service dimensions. This pattern is consistent with what has been described in the literature as cascading service failure. Such a pattern has been documented less frequently in studies focusing on more institutionalized restaurant operations (Koussaifi et al., 2020).

Food quality and product performance

Food quality and product performance emerged as another prominent dimension within the analyzed data. As the core element of the restaurant experience, food plays a central role in customers' overall evaluations. An examination of low-star reviews indicates that when the

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product fails to meet expectations, the narratives indicate that dissatisfaction is directly generalized to the entire establishment. The sub-dimensions of this main theme were identified as insufficient taste quality, cooking errors (overcooking/undercooking, etc.), temperature and freshness issues, and deficiencies in presentation and visual quality.

> C14: That was the worst food I ever ate…
>
> (Female-Country not specified).

> C145: It was a huge mistake eating there, the food was bad and delayed…
>
> (Gender not specified–from Turkey).

> C170: The food we had here was really bad…I ordered a pizza and it was very cold when it got to me. My friend ordered manti and it was not up to par…do not come here to eat.
>
> (Anonymous user).

The finding aligns with the food quality dimension of the DINESERV model (Kim et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 1995) and is consistent with the broader literature identifying food as one of the most fundamental determinants of restaurant satisfaction (Zanetta et al., 2024). However, the results suggest that tolerance for quality deviations is particularly low in small-scale restaurants. In this sample, even relatively minor quality shortcomings could be interpreted by customers as indicators of broader service failure.

Pricing practices and perceived value incongruity

Another prominent dimension identified in the analysis is the incongruity between pricing practices and perceived value. An examination of the reviews indicates that customers perceive a disproportion between the price paid and the quality of the service and products received. This finding highlights the critical importance of price fairness and transparency, particularly in small-scale restaurants. This main theme is structured around the sub-dimensions of perception of high prices, mandatory service charge practices, lack of transparency in additional charges, and different pricing perception for foreigners/tourists. Customers evaluate not only the level of the price itself, but also whether the price is consistent with the quality delivered. When perceived value is low, the experience is generally categorized as "expensive and not worth it." Consequently, within this sample, customer dissatisfaction appears to be strongly influenced not only by product or service performance, but also by perceptual evaluations of the price–value balance. The following customer statements represent examples that contributed to the formation of this theme:

> C1: …Five of us came for dinner. A dish was served without a price listed on the menu. Later, we noticed it was on the menu with a price. They added it to the total bill. This wasn't mentioned beforehand. No extra charge or tip…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

> C51: It has some nice aspects, but the prices are too high for a small business, the pillows are disgustingly dirty, I've never seen such surly staff—it's not worth the money.
>
> (Female-Country not specified).

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> C107: …The problem is we did got stuck in this place as we waited and trusted them. They aren't worth your time and energy with the bad atmosphere you see at first and the high rating they get…
>
> (Male-Kuwait).

Although the original DINESERV model does not explicitly include a price–value dimension (Stevens et al., 1995), subsequent studies have demonstrated that this factor plays a critical role in customer satisfaction (Zanetta et al., 2024). The present study shows that perceived value incongruence in small-scale restaurants is not driven solely by price levels but is also shaped by factors such as perceptions of transparency and fairness. In this way, the study offers a novel contribution to the existing literature within the context of small-scale restaurant operations.

Operational processes and waiting experience

The analysis identified operational processes and the waiting experience as another significant dimension within the reviewed narratives. Restaurant service is not limited to product quality and staff behavior; it also requires the integrated functioning of order taking, kitchen coordination, table management, and overall service flow. The analyzed low-star reviews indicate that issues particularly related to crowd management, order delays, and disruptions in service organization are directly associated by customers with the overall quality of the experience. This theme is structured around the sub-dimensions of excessive waiting time, order delays, and density and capacity management problems. Customer statements supporting this theme are presented below:

> C97: The worst experience ever, I waited for 2 hours, the service is the worst I can't believe how rude they are. After 2 hours of waiting and no table, the least thing I deserve is an apology…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

> C103: The person in charge of assigning people to their tables was unbelievably rude. When we first arrived, we were informed that there was only 2 groups ahead of us and that we had to wait. She took down our name and just rudely pointed to the waiting area, without any eye contact, she pointed with a flick of the finger. After waiting and hearing more than 5 group names being called before us, we finally went up to her and asked her if she missed our name. She told us that there were still another 3 groups ahead us. We informed her that she had told us that there were only 2 people previously. Once more, she just rudely told us to just sit down and wait our turn, and pointed again to the waiting area. And we went back and sat down once more.
>
> (Anonymous user).

> C109: Local are allowed table based on their relationships were tourists are asked to wait 10min then 5min then etc. till you see your self waiting for 1:30min till you get a table. After you have to shout for a menue and wait longer for the food to be served…
>
> (Male-Country not specified).

In the service management literature, responsiveness and service process smoothness are identified as key determinants of customer satisfaction (Hwang & Lambert, 2006). Studies

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conducted in the restaurant context have also shown that long waiting times negatively affect perceived service quality (Noone et al., 2007). The findings of the present study are consistent with this literature; however, they indicate that dissatisfaction arising from waiting times in small-scale restaurants rarely occurs in isolation. Rather, it tends to become more detrimental when combined with inattentive staff behavior or nontransparent queue management practices.

Physical environment and experiential atmosphere

The analysis revealed that another dimension of customer dissatisfaction relates to evaluations of the physical environment and experiential atmosphere. The restaurant experience is not solely about product and service performance; the physical layout, ambiance, and environmental conditions of the venue also directly influence customer perception. The analyzed comments show that table layout, crowd density, noise level, and overall spatial comfort play a significant role in the overall evaluation of the experience. This theme is structured around the sub-dimensions of poor spatial organization, perceived overcrowding and noise level, and atmosphere–expectation mismatch. Customer quotes supporting this theme are presented below:

> C33: …The atmosphere and the food was very drab and they failed to mention that they charge for the bread they bring to your table whereas elsewhere this is usually complimentary when you order mezze…
>
> (Anonymous user).

> C73: … What a mistake! It looked busy because of 2 very large tables which were clearly tour group. They left soon after we arrived leaving us and a couple in a huge restaurant which without diners was without atmosphere… We were disappointed…
>
> (Gender not specified–from United Arab Emirates).

> C91: …The atmosphere felt artificial…
>
> (Gender not specified–from Sweden).

The servicescape literature demonstrates that the physical environment has a determining effect on customers' emotions and behaviors. Similarly, studies conducted in the restaurant context indicate that perceptions of spatial comfort and atmosphere are positively associated with customer satisfaction and revisit intention (Ryu & Jang, 2008). The findings of the present study support this body of literature from a different perspective. In particular, negative evaluations related to crowding and noise suggest that even when a venue appears esthetically appealing, deficiencies in operational organization and comfort dimensions can lead to dissatisfaction. This highlights that the management of the physical environment in restaurants is not merely a matter of visual design, but a strategic factor influencing overall experience quality.

The physical environment literature demonstrates that spatial design has a significant influence on customer emotions and behaviors (Bitner, 1992). Research in the restaurant context further shows that perceptions of spatial comfort and atmospheric quality are positively associated with customer satisfaction and revisit intention (Ryu & Jang, 2008). This finding is consistent with the tangibles dimension of the DINESERV model (Kim

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et al., 2009; Stevens et al., 1995). However, in small-scale restaurants, the physical environment appears to be evaluated not only in esthetic terms but also in relation to functional criteria.

CONCLUSION

Findings related to service delivery show that customers frequently evaluate small-scale restaurant experiences through their interactions with staff. In the analyzed narratives, inattentive, rude, or inconsistent staff behavior does not remain a minor interpersonal issue; rather, it becomes a key reference point through which customers judge the overall service experience. These accounts suggest that the absence of predictable service behavior may lead customers to perceive the establishment as poorly organized, even though the internal causes of such inconsistency cannot be directly observed from review data. These findings indicate that service consistency in small-scale restaurants may require more than individual goodwill (Mahasuweerachai et al., 2024) and may benefit from clearer process design.

Dissatisfaction regarding food quality in small-scale restaurants appears to be shaped by the failure to meet customers' fundamental expectations. An examination of the reviews indicates that the issue is not the inability to meet high gastronomic expectations, but rather encountering a performance perceived as "below average." Particularly in touristic settings, location, ambiance, and price level may raise expectations regarding basic product quality; when the food is perceived as tasteless, cold, poorly cooked, or inconsistent with these cues, dissatisfaction becomes more pronounced. In this sense, the analyzed narratives suggest that food-related failure is often framed less as a matter of culinary sophistication and more as a perceived gap between expected and delivered baseline quality.

Pricing-related dissatisfaction is expressed not only through complaints about high prices, but also through perceptions of unfairness, ambiguity, and insufficient transparency. More importantly, the analyzed narratives show that customers evaluate price in relation to the total value of the experience, including food quality, service behavior, waiting time, atmosphere, and additional charges. In this sense, perceived value incongruity emerges when the amount paid is seen as disproportionate to the quality, comfort, and overall experience received. Such evaluations intensify dissatisfaction when customers perceive that the price paid is not matched by the expected level of product, service, or experiential value.

Findings related to operational processes indicate that customers evaluate the service experience through the perceived continuity and predictability of the service flow. In the analyzed narratives, long waiting times, unclear queue management, delayed orders, and difficulties in receiving service or the bill are described as signs of a fragmented experience. These accounts do not allow direct observation of internal operational processes; however, they show how customers interpret visible disruptions in waiting, ordering, table allocation, and service timing as indicators of weak coordination. Therefore, the findings point to the importance of making service routines more predictable and communicable to customers in order to reduce operationally driven dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants.

The physical environment and experiential atmosphere also appear as part of the broader dissatisfaction structure. In the analyzed narratives, atmosphere is not evaluated merely as a visual or esthetic feature; rather, it becomes meaningful when associated with perceived discomfort, crowding, noise, or a mismatch between expectation and experience. This suggests that spatial and atmospheric cues contribute to dissatisfaction insofar as they shape customers' sense of comfort, coherence, and overall experiential fit.

Although the findings correspond to dimensions frequently discussed in the service quality literature, the analyzed narratives also show that dissatisfaction is not always confined to a single service element. In some reviews, customers link one negative incident to other aspects

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of the experience, such as staff behavior, waiting time, food performance, price fairness, or atmosphere. For example, a delay may be interpreted more negatively when accompanied by inattentive communication, whereas average product quality may become a stronger source of dissatisfaction when evaluated together with perceived overpricing or unclear additional charges. These examples suggest that, in some low-rated reviews, separate service problems become connected in customers' accounts and together contribute to a broader negative evaluation of the restaurant experience.

Another noteworthy point is that customers sometimes interpret recurring service problems as signs of insufficient professionalism or weak service organization. In the reviews, issues such as table management, order flow, price communication, and staff responsiveness are not evaluated only as separate service attributes; they are also used by customers to make sense of the establishment's overall reliability. However, these interpretations should be understood as customer perceptions rather than direct evidence of internal managerial structures. In this respect, the study contributes to the literature by showing how dissatisfaction narratives connect visible service disruptions with broader judgments about service organization in small-scale restaurants.

Finally, another dimension that emerged in some reviews, yet could not be directly placed under the main themes, is the feeling of being treated as a "burden" rather than a "guest." Such experiences are associated less with technical service performance and more with the cultural and managerial reflexes of the establishment. Accordingly, part of the failure in small-scale restaurants appears to stem not from technical deficiencies, but from a weak institutionalized understanding of hospitality.

Theoretical and practical implications

The classical service quality literature has generally progressed through a focus on satisfaction and the production of positive experiences. In the restaurant context, dimensions such as food, service, and atmosphere are frequently tested. However, studies examining how dissatisfaction emerges in small-scale restaurants—particularly those grounded in user narratives—remain relatively limited. By conceptualizing the components of dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants through low-rated evaluations, this study makes more visible the "logic of negative experience production," which is often overlooked in satisfaction-centered frameworks.

Focusing on negative cases does not simply reveal the conditions under which ratings decline; rather, it provides insight into how customers categorize an experience as "failed," which evaluative cues they use as justification, and how they attribute responsibility to staff behavior, service flow, product quality, pricing practices, or the overall atmosphere. This approach aligns with content analysis studies that map user-generated content (UGC) to identify evaluative patterns (Ogretmenoglu et al., 2023) and offers a useful lens for understanding how dissatisfaction is narratively constructed in small-scale restaurant experiences.

Low-rated narratives may have reputational implications for small-scale restaurants because such evaluations are publicly accessible and may be encountered by potential customers during online decision-making. However, the present study does not directly measure reputational outcomes, digital visibility, or differences between small-scale and chain restaurants. Therefore, these implications should be interpreted as context-sensitive indications of potential reputational vulnerability rather than as comparative evidence of higher reputational risk.

One of the most important practical implications of this research is that many dissatisfaction triggers in small-scale restaurants may be addressed through customer-visible standardization rather than through large-scale investment. In this context, standardization should not be understood only as an internal managerial procedure. What matters for customers is often the visible side of standardization: whether they know how the queue works,

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when they will be seated, why an order is delayed, what they will pay, and whom they should contact when a problem occurs. Therefore, small-scale restaurants can develop simple and visible mini-protocols, such as clear menu information, basic waiting rules, staff role clarity at the service encounter, and consistent explanations during disruptions. Even a one-page task or workflow chart may help customers interpret the service process as more controlled, predictable, and fair.

Conversely, pricing communication should be treated as a core component of service management rather than as a purely financial issue. The findings suggest that dissatisfaction may intensify when customers perceive hidden charges, unclear service fees, or inconsistencies between the price paid and the value received. Small-scale restaurants should therefore communicate menu prices, service charges, and any additional costs clearly before ordering. Such transparency may reduce expectation mismatches and help preserve customers' sense of fairness and trust, particularly in tourist-oriented settings where price ambiguity can easily be interpreted as opportunistic behavior.

Businesses should treat low-rated online reviews not with a defensive reflex, but as an operational diagnostic tool. When negative reviews are regularly categorized and analyzed on a monthly basis, recurring weak points can be identified at an early stage. In this context, implementing a "review monitoring and feedback meeting" practice may be beneficial for small restaurants. Discussing only low-rated evaluations within the team once a month has the potential to transform the abstract concept of satisfaction into concrete behavioral improvements.

Beyond individual restaurants, the findings have implications for destination-level management. In tourism areas, small-scale restaurants collectively shape visitors' perceptions of the local dining experience. Destination managers, local tourism authorities, or professional associations can therefore support small restaurants by offering short training modules on review management, transparent pricing, waiting-time communication, and basic service recovery. Such collective support may be especially useful for small businesses that lack formal human resource departments or professional customer-experience systems. In this sense, reducing dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants is not only an individual business issue but also a component of destination experience management.

Limitations and future research

Although this study provides important insights into customer dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants, it is subject to several limitations. First, the analysis is based solely on voluntarily posted online customer reviews. This creates a potential self-selection bias, as individuals who leave reviews may systematically differ from those who do not. For instance, users who have had particularly negative or intense experiences, or who are more inclined to share their opinions publicly, may be more likely to post reviews. Therefore, the findings may not fully represent the entire spectrum of customer experiences.

Second, the analysis focuses exclusively on low-rated (1- to 3-star) reviews. Although this methodological choice allows for an in-depth examination of dissatisfaction drivers, it does not permit a comparative analysis with positive reviews from the same restaurants. As a result, the study identifies factors contributing to dissatisfaction but cannot simultaneously contrast them with satisfaction-inducing elements. Future research could provide more comprehensive insights by comparing high- and low-rated reviews within the same restaurant context.

Third, the study is limited to four small-scale restaurants operating in the Marmara Region of Türkiye and to online reviews posted within a specific time frame. This limits the extent to which the findings can be generalized beyond the specific empirical context of the study. Data from different countries, cultural contexts, platform environments, or restaurant segments may reveal different patterns of customer dissatisfaction.

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Fourth, the analysis is based on text-driven thematic content analysis. The dataset does not include sufficient information on visit purpose, group size, time of day, restaurant occupancy, prior expectations, previous familiarity with the establishment, or the immediate circumstances of the service encounter. Therefore, the situational conditions under which dissatisfaction narratives were produced could not be systematically examined.

Fifth, the study does not include a comparison group consisting of higher-rated small-scale restaurants or large-scale/chain restaurants. This limitation makes it difficult to determine whether the observed patterns are specific to low-rated small-scale establishments or reflect broader restaurant experiences. Future studies comparing restaurants across different rating levels and organizational scales could better distinguish context-specific dissatisfaction drivers from more general patterns.

Finally, this study adopts a qualitative and exploratory design. Although qualitative data allow for an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon, it does not, on its own, enable the establishment of causal relationships. Accordingly, future research employing mixed-method approaches or larger-scale quantitative designs is recommended to validate and extend the present findings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Kartal Doğukan Çıkı planned the study, wrote the methodology section, conducted the data analysis, and contributed to revising the manuscript for publication. Erhan Nuh Öztürk wrote the literature review, collected the data, and contributed to revising the manuscript for publication. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

CONSENT

Informed consent was not required.

DECLARATION OF LARGE LANGUAGE MODEL

The authors used large language model (LLM) tools to improve the grammar, clarity, and translation quality of the manuscript. All content generated by these tools was thoroughly reviewed and edited by the authors to ensure accuracy and integrity.

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How to cite this article: Çiki, K. D., & Öztürk, E. N. (2026). The anatomy of dissatisfaction in small-scale restaurants: Insights from online narratives. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *55*, e70073. https://doi.org/10.1002/fcsr.70073

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