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Is Everything Really Ethical in The Hospitality Industry? A Study into Ethical Dilemmas in Tourism

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Abstract: In tourism, where cultural and geographical differences occur, the importance of ethical problems and dilemmas has increased. These dilemmas make it difficult for hospitality employees to make ethically sound decisions and act ethically. The present study explores ethical dilemmas within the hospitality industry, with a focus on challenges in ethical decision-making. Methodology was qualitative, analyzing real-life cases from various hospitality sectors, including hotels, travel agencies, and restaurants. Through thematic analysis, the research identifies key ethical dilemmas and challenges related to professional ethics, employee rights, and situational factors. The findings reveal that commercial and competitive pressures are the primary drivers of ethical conflicts, often placing employees in morally complex situations where ethical principles and organizational expectations clash. The study applies multiple ethical theories, including teleology, deontology, virtue ethics, and relativism, to assess and resolve these dilemmas. Specifically, teleological approaches are predominantly associated with profit-oriented dilemmas, while deontological and virtue ethics are more relevant to issues concerning employee rights and professional conduct; relativism is mainly applied to context-dependent and culturally sensitive situations. The findings highlight the prevalence of ethical issues driven by commercial pressures, as well as the moral complexities that hospitality workers face. It is hoped our findings will contribute to understanding how ethical theories can guide more consistent and reflective ethical decision-making in the hospitality industry.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemmas, Teleology, Deontology, Virtue Ethics, Qualitative Study, Hospitality Industry

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Öz: Kültürel ve coğrafi farklılıkların deneyimlendiği turizm sektöründe, etik sorunların ve ikilemlerin önemi her geçen gün artmaktadır. Bu ikilemler, ağırlama sektörü çalışanlarının etik açıdan doğru kararlar almasını ve etik davranmasını zorlaştırmaktadır. Çalışma, ağırlama endüstrisindeki etik ikilemleri incelemeyi amaçlamakta ve etik karar verme sürecindeki zorluklara odaklanmaktadır. Nitel bir yaklaşımın benimsendiği araştırmada; oteller, seyahat acenteleri ve restoranlar dahil olmak üzere ağırlama sektörünün çeşitli kollarından gerçek yaşam vakaları analiz edilmiştir. Tematik analiz yöntemiyle gerçekleştirilen inceleme sonucunda; kurumsal kâr ile etik standartlar arasındaki çatışma, mesleki etik, çalışan hakları ve durumsal faktörlerle ilgili temel etik ikilemler tespit edilmiştir.

Bulgular, ticari ve rekabetçi baskıların etik çatışmaların ana kaynağı olduğunu ve bu durumun çalışanları genellikle etik ilkeler ile kurumsal beklentilerin çatıştığı ahlaki açıdan karmaşık durumlarla karşı karşıya bıraktığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışmada, bu ikilemlerin değerlendirilmesi ve çözümlenmesi için teleoloji, deontoloji, erdem etiği ve rölativizm gibi çeşitli etik teoriler uygulanmıştır. Özellikle teleolojik yaklaşımların ağırlıklı olarak kâr odaklı ikilemlerle ilişkilendirildiği; deontoloji ve erdem etiğinin çalışan hakları ve mesleki davranış konularında daha belirgin olduğu, rölativizmin ise temel olarak bağlam odaklı ve kültürel hassasiyet gerektiren durumlarda uygulandığı görülmüştür. Sonuçlar, ticari baskıların tetiklediği etik sorunların yaygınlığını ve ağırlama çalışanlarının karşılaştığı ahlaki karmaşıklıkları vurgulamaktadır. Bu çalışma, etik teorilerin ağırlama bağlamında nasıl daha tutarlı ve sağduyulu bir etik karar verme sürecine rehberlik edebileceğinin anlaşılmasına katkı sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Etik İkilemler, Sonuç Odaklı Etik, Ödev Etiği, Erdem Etiği, Nitel Araştırma, Ağırlama Sektörü

Introduction

The hospitality industry is a people-intensive and dynamic sector. Wong & Li (2015) stated that, when ethics become an issue, this industry has more opportunities to mobilize than many others. Furthermore, people have differing ethical values and levels of moral maturity, as well as the need to meet the varied expectations and interests of customers, shareholders, employees, society, and the environment. Yan et al. (2021) reported that employees may behave unethically for the benefit of their organizations.

People may face a multitude of ethical dilemmas. Various factors influence individuals in ethical decision-making (Theriou et al., 2024). Trevino (1986) observed that, in addition to their ethical values, individuals make moral judgments regarding their options in accordance with ethical norms and the standards of those around them. Jingwei et al. (2024) stated that "ethical behavior is in line with social-ethical norms under the control of ethical cognition". Schwartz (2017) argued that individuals are influenced by people who share in the common benefits and interests derived from a decision. Sebhatu et al. proposed that "the role of ethics in decision making should expand, as ethical decisions impact the benefits and suffering of individuals and/or groups" (2024: 768).

An ethical dilemma arises when individuals wish to act ethically, but while there may be no apparent ethical problem or uncertainty, other factors may influence their choices. In organizations, ethical dilemmas may manifest differently during the decision-making process (Nicolini, 2012). Although organizational ethical decision-making has been studied since the late 1970s, there remains a lack of clarity

on how to best approach ethical decisions within decision-making processes (Craft, 2013; Ford & Richardson, 1994; Lehnert et al., 2015; Loe et al., 2000; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005). Decision-makers place emphasis on interpreting context, evaluating alternatives, and seeking advice from relevant parties to foster ethical behavior (Franklin & Guerber, 2020).

Several studies have focused on cognitive development in ethical decision-making (Bommer et al., 1987; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Lampe et al., 1992; Ponemon, 1990, 1992; Trevino, 1986). Moreover, Fraedrich et al. (1994) stressed that cognitive moral development is a key element in these models within the business sphere. In ethical decision-making, ethical principles or rights do not always align with market expectations, causing conflict for decision-makers (Figar & Dordevic, 2016).

Ethical dilemmas frequently emerge in the workplace. The literature suggests that ethical dilemmas are commonly encountered by diverse professional groups, such as teachers (Uzun & Elma, 2012), nurses (Oftedal et al., 2020), and accountants (Claypoll et al., 1990; Guiral et al., 2010; Kutlu, 2008). Hospitality sector employees also face ethical dilemmas deriving from industry-specific factors. A review of the limited number of studies addressing ethical dilemmas and decision-making within ethical theory frameworks (Fennell & Malloy, 1999; Litschka et al., 2011; Marnburg, 2001; Menguc, 1998; Pande & Jain, 2016) indicates that most adopt a quantitative approach using a multi-dimensional ethical scale. In response to these research gaps, the main objectives of our research are to identify the ethical dilemmas in the hospitality sector, to explore the causes of these dilemmas and to propose solutions using ethical theories and approaches.

Despite the growing but still limited body of research on ethical decision-making in the hospitality sector, such quantitative and scale-based approaches often treat ethical situations uniformly and fail to fully capture the contextual complexity and situational ambiguity inherent in hospitality sector encounters (Tsiotsou et al., 2024). In particular, they provide limited insight into how ethical dilemmas are experienced, interpreted, and resolved by individuals in real organizational settings. Responding to this gap, the present study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in ethical theories to explore ethical dilemmas in the hospitality industry, to identify their underlying causes, and to examine how employees make sense of and resolve these dilemmas in practice.

Literature Review

The literature on ethical behavior and decision-making in the hospitality and tourism industry highlights the complexity of navigating moral challenges in a people-intensive, service-oriented sector. Various ethical theories, from teleology to deontology, provide frameworks for understanding how professionals approach ethical dilemmas. This section reviews key theories and concepts relevant to the ethical challenges faced by individuals and organizations in the tourism and hospitality industry.

Ethical Behavior and Ethical Dilemma

Ethical behavior, as defined by Hunt & Vitell (1986), encompasses the decision-making process in situations where moral principles are at stake. In the tourism industry, which thrives on intense human interaction and hedonistic pursuits, ethical challenges are particularly pronounced (Fennell, 2009). Therefore, managers in hospitality organizations will need to possess a broad understanding of ethics and be sensitive to unethical behavior of their employees (Yan et al., 2021). Managers are frequently confronted with dilemmas that require complex ethical decision-making, as they must navigate situations in which multiple courses of action are both rational and acceptable, yet mutually exclusive (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). This underscores the importance of conscious adherence to moral rules, which, while voluntary, demand decisiveness, maturity, and responsibility (Brandt & Rose, 2004). Leadership plays an important role in fostering ethical conduct, as executives' approaches to ethical issues significantly influence organizational culture and decision-making processes (Dimitriou, 2017). Wong & Li (2015) reinforce this by noting that established moral standards are essential for differentiating ethical from unethical behavior.

Recent studies on ethical issues in Turkish tourism (Karayılan et al., 2017; Somuncu, 2004; Türker & Uçar, 2013) unveil a variety of ethical problems, despite the existence of guidelines set by the World Tourism Organization. These studies highlight dilemmas faced by vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, and ethnic minorities, reflecting broader concerns about equity and justice within the sector. Moreover, while tourism generates significant economic benefits, it also exacerbates environmental degradation and undermines sociocultural values (Aslan & Kozak, 2006). Thus, the industry's ethical challenges are multifaceted, encompassing both economic and environmental dimensions.

Ethical Theories

Various theoretical approaches provide a valuable framework for analyzing ethical dilemmas and the corresponding justifications for actions. As identified by Yeung et al. (2002), several prominent ethical theories offer distinct perspectives on moral decision-making. These include teleological theories, deontological theories, virtue ethics, and relativism.

Teleological theory emphasizes the consequences of actions, aiming to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number (Yeung et al., 2002). It posits that an action is deemed "right" if it produces a value comparable to or greater than any alternative action. However, a significant limitation of this theory lies in the difficulty of defining, evaluating, and comparing these "goodness" units (Fritzsche & Becker, 1984). Two main approaches have emerged within teleology: utilitarianism and egoism. Utilitarianism focuses on collective welfare, but actions that prioritize individual gain at society's expense are deemed unethical (Reidenbach & Robin, 1990). Individuals' moral decisions depend on maximizing subjective expected utility (Lu et al., 2024). In contrast, egoism asserts that individuals should act in their own long-term interests (Beekun et al., 2005), making morality contingent upon personal benefit rather than societal outcomes.

Deontological theory centers on the inherent morality of actions, judging them by their adherence to established rules rather than their outcomes (Bench-Capon, 2020). However, as Tsiotsou et al argued "while it sounds simple–"follow the rules"–it is easier said than done" (Tsiotsou, et al., (2024). This theory stresses duty to principles and moral obligations that must be followed, regardless of the consequences (Beauchamp & Bowie, 2004). Divided into rule and act deontology, the former adheres strictly to universal rules, while the latter relies on individual judgment (Fennell, 2006). "Truthtelling is linked to the basic moral principal of honesty" (Burns et al., 2023: 16). The rights approach, rooted in Kantian ethics, focuses on respecting individuals' rights, while the justice approach, championed by Rawls (1971), emphasizes fairness and equality (Dunfee et al., 1999). While deontology offers clear guidelines, its rigidity can sometimes lead to morally problematic outcomes, as it may fail to address the complexities of conflicting moral duties or the nuances of real-world scenarios (Kline, 2005). Despite these limitations, it remains a key ethical framework, particularly in legal and professional contexts.

Virtue ethics, as described by Aristotle, emphasizes the development of moral character through the pursuit of balance, avoiding excess or deficiency in actions

(Kerimoğlu, 2017). It focuses on "how" a person should act, prioritizing the cultivation of virtue over mere adherence to moral laws or duties (Fennell, 2000). Unlike deontological approaches, virtue ethics argues that moral actions stem from intrinsic qualities rather than external rules, promoting altruistic and exemplary behavior (Ocak, 2011). The cultivation of virtue is seen as a lifelong process of character formation, encouraging individuals to develop virtuous thoughts, feelings, and actions (Yaran, 2007).

Relativism asserts that no absolute moral values exist, as moral principles vary depending on societal, cultural, and temporal contexts (Akarsu, 1975). It posits that ethical decisions are inherently subjective, shaped by group dynamics and negotiation within specific cultural frameworks (Ferrell et al., 2005). According to Fennell (2006), this approach rejects universal moral codes, instead recognizing distinct practices across different societies. In contrast, teleological theories focus on achieving the best outcomes, while deontological approaches emphasize adherence to moral principles regardless of results. Deontology prioritises duty and goodwill, whereas teleology evaluates actions based on their consequences (Hindley & Font, 2017; Barnett et al., 2005).

Methodology

This study utilized data collected from various cases based on the experiences of employees in different hospitality establishments. A case study approach was adopted, as it allows for an empirical inquiry when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly delineated (Yin, 2009). This method involves collecting, organizing, and analyzing data obtained from a qualitative methodology (Patton, 2014). As Stake (2000) posits, a case study can be defined by any distinctive situation in an individual's life, which aligns with the focus of this research. Respondents were asked to reflect on their actions in situations involving ethical dilemmas within the hospitality sector, as previously suggested (Yin, 2017). The study further sought to analyze ethical dilemmas that employees privately encountered in their professional lives. Purposive sampling was employed, specifically maximum variation sampling, a method commonly used in qualitative research to ensure a diverse range of participants and experiences are represented (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2011). The study aimed to gather participants from various sectors, including accommodation and travel agencies, tourism education, food and beverage establishments, tour guiding, and the press. A list of cases was prepared, with an effort to ensure a balanced representation across the sectors. Following

Eisenhardt's (1989) guidelines, which suggest that analyzing between four and ten cases enhances empirical grounding and persuasiveness, twelve cases were selected for this study.

Participant characteristics, including gender, professional experience, position level (operational, supervisory, and managerial), and sectoral distribution, are systematically summarized in Table 1 to provide a clearer overview of the study group.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency
Gender	Female	4
	Male	8
Position Level	Operational	8
	Supervisory	2
	Managerial	2
Professional Experience	5-10 years	4
	11-20 years	3
	21-30 years	2
	More than 30 years	3
Sector	Agency	2
	Hotel	2
	Restaurant	2
	Media	2
	Academia	2
	Guiding	2

The general distribution of the cases used in the study is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

General Distribution of Case Studies

No.	Date of the case	Type of Tourism Establishment	Gender	Ethical Dilemma Case Evidence
C01	2019	Agency	Male	*Case*: Getting a penalty for organizing a tour without any guide. *Ethical Dilemma:* Having/not having licensed tour guides in order to avoid increased tour price.
C02	2018	Agency	Male	*Case*: Fake reservations, aggrandized reservations, and overbooking. *Ethical Dilemma:* Making/not making excess reservations for economic reasons.
C03	2012	Academy	Female	*Case:* A relative becomes a candidate for being a manager *Ethical Dilemma:* Declaring/not declaring an opinion for the sake of being right.
C04	2015	Academy	Female	*Case:* Late notification of a substitute jury member for a thesis examination. *Ethical Dilemma:* The pressure that the jury member felt regarding entering/not entering the exam.
C05	2019	Media	Male	*Case:* Favoritism that occurs during the managerial elections within the tourism institution itself. *Ethical Dilemma:* Being unable to make an unrestricted decision in the election.
C06	2021	Media	Male	*Case:* The demand from a publishing company to remove an author's name from scientific work. *Ethical Dilemma:* Removing the second author's name from the common work because the personal relationship was over.

C07	2010	Kitchen-Restaurant	Female	*Case:* Bullying due to success in an individually entered competition. *Ethical Dilemma:* Defending/being unable to defend her legitimacy against bullying due to her pregnancy
C08	2017	Kitchen-Restaurant	Female	*Case:* Restaurant manager charges the customers by not entering orders of staff alcoholic beverages into the system. *Ethical Dilemma:* Reporting/not reporting the manager's thievery to the administration.
C09	2013	Hotel	Male	*Case:* The perspective of a hotel manager who manages a conservative hotel is misconceived. *Ethical Dilemma:* Looking/not looking at the different lifestyle and world view with tolerance
C10	2005	Hotel	Male	*Case:* Unsecured employment of foreign personnel *Ethical Dilemma:* A hotel employee to protect/ not protect the hotel in case of a supervision.
C11	2017	Guide	Male	*Case:* Agency delay in the payment of a tour guide *Ethical Dilemma:* Paying/not paying the deserved fee on time
C12	2020	Guide	Male	*Case:* The souvenir company denigrates the guides who have lower group sales. *Ethical Dilemma:* The guide to do/not do the job due to his agreement with the agency

Note: C = Case

In the initial evaluation phase, Paliwal's (2006) strategies were employed to define the ethical questions, examine the situation of the affected individuals, determine whether illegal practices were involved, and explore the preferred solutions of those involved.

Validity and Reliability

Source, investigator, and theory triangulation methods were employed to ensure the validity of the research (Patton, 2014: 556). The cases were analyzed from various perspectives and critical discourses within these ethical theories. Reliability in qualitative research refers to the consistency of responses across multiple coders of data sets (Creswell, 2013: 253). To ensure inter-coder reliability and overall validity, three external experts, excluding the authors, independently reviewed and coded the data. Discrepancies between coders were discussed and resolved through consensus, resulting in a consistent set of codes and themes. No software, especially artificial intelligence (AI) programs, was utilised used during the analysis process.

The Analysis Process

Thematic analysis was employed to examine the data, a method used for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process, the 15-point thematic analysis checklist by Braun & Clarke (2006) was followed. Yin (2003: 21) suggested the importance of five key elements in case study analysis: the research question within the design; hypotheses (if applicable); examination of elements of analysis (identifying the main problem and involved parties); establishing logical connections between hypotheses and data; and findings. In the present study, data coding was the first phase of the analysis. Codes provide meaningful information about the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Ethical dilemmas are viewed as situations where an individual must choose an ethically right path from a set of alternatives, but cannot execute all available options. Given this focus, coding, as the most critical phase of qualitative analysis, was conducted using words. Each case was analyzed individually, with the participants' explanations maintained in their original form where possible. Initially, the first author explicitly coded the data by re-reading cases and systematically labelling them based on content, focusing on decision-making in ethical dilemmas in the hospitality sector, including contextual factors, such as individuals, shareholders, conditions, and situational factors like justice and honesty. The codes were reviewed twice, classified, and compiled into a coding table. The initial phase yielded 80 codes, which were refined down to 49 after removing overlapping entries.

The development of prior themes followed, with themes representing significant insights into the research question and forming patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Eighteen initial themes emerged, including disobedience to rules, inaccurate operations, lack of objectivity, mistrust, and commercial profit prioritization. Creswell (2017: 178) noted that theme labels help provide evidence of implicit aspects within a subject. In the present study, the theme labels included disobedience to rules, commercial profit prioritization, professional ethics, employees' perception of being right, and an inability to be objective.

Findings

Interpretation of Cases in Accordance with Ethical Dilemma

Ethical issues were analyzed primarily in terms of what ethical dilemmas are and why these dilemmas arise. Then, solution proposals were developed based on ethical theories. Through pre-themes, inferences were developed regarding the phenomenon examined. In this study, an attempt was made to organize data contents categorized under each theme in a meaningful and consistent way. Attention was paid not to generate any repetition in the presented data. A brief summary regarding these inferences is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

The Distribution of Cases According to Ethical Dilemmas and Main Themes

Case no.	Ethical theories	Critical discourse and behavior	Ethical dilemma
C01	Teleological Theory/ Utilitarianism Approach	Actions are the best for the largest number. A cost-utility-based analysis. Social happiness. Cultural environment. Industry and organizational environment. Personal qualifications (religion, value system, belief system, ethical character power, cognitive moral development, and ethical sensitivity) are effective.	Industry environment and perfect guest satisfaction

C02 C05 C10 C11 C12	Teleological Theory/ Egoism	A person's own interests. Caring about an organization's interests.	Individual/ organizational interests and commer-cial profit prioritization
C04 C06	Deontological Theory/Rights Approach	People's right to live and have security. Liberty of conscience. Freedom of speech. Protection of privacy. Making right decisions. Rejection of cheating and fraud. Avoidance of knowingly false advertisement. Providing product security.	Qualified working envi-ronment and professional ethics.
C03 C09	Virtue ethics	Respecting every individual's honor. Altruism • Sensitivity •Responsibility Honesty. Objectivity.	Honesty and being virtuous
C07 C08	Relativism	Conditions and situational conditions are important. Values can change according to socie-ties, people, cultural situations, and lifestyles.	Situational conditions and emotional choice.

Industry Environment and Perfect Guest Satisfaction

This group of dilemmas occurred in only one case (1/12). In this case, there was a dilemma between the sectoral environment and customer satisfaction. This dilemma arose because: (1) actions are the best for the largest number; (2) a cost-utility-based analysis; (3) social happiness; (4) cultural environment; (5) industry and organizational environment; and (6) personal qualifications (religion, value system, belief system, ethical character power, cognitive moral development, and

ethical sensitivity). In this case, the rule of having a guide, which is a legal requirement in the tours organized by the travel agency, was not followed for Turkish guest groups. However, this decision was unethical in terms of gaining an unfair advantage. Here, the agency is in a dilemma about paying fines and providing guide services at low prices. The reason why the agency is in this dilemma is that the prices will increase and as a result, the Turkish customer group will not be satisfied. The agency has solved this problem by not having a guide on the tour. However, subsequently the agency has to pay a penalty. However, this situation could have been solved by looking at the issue from the context of unfair competition and by doing the right thing and having a tour guide in all groups. The ethics of duty could be used as guiding principles in getting out of the dilemma, especially by acting as required by the rights approach. The participant described the situation as follows: "We are a small provincial agency; we do not have 'foreign tourists' as our guests. … If I were to resort to some illegal ways to cover the guide's fee (for example, selling a meal I bought for 10 at 15), wouldn't that be considered theft?" (C01).

Individual/ Organizational Interests and Commercial Profit Prioritization

This dilemma, experienced in a total of five case studies (5/12), constitutes the most intense dilemma group identified in this study. The dilemmas in the cases were experienced between organizational interests and commercial priorities. These dilemmas arose from practices such as concealing illegal behavior, inaction, delay in payment and smearing the guidebook. In this case, it was determined that the employees made decisions by giving importance to the interests of the organization. In other words, commercial gain was put before ethical values. The agency official stated this situation regarding their overbooking process: C02 "…this is not a pleasant thing; I feel sad sometimes. The customer comes to the hotel, but there is no hotel they have booked". Economic priorities in the tourism sector often create ethical dilemmas for tour operators and this is mostly justified by commercial concerns (although it is emphasized that it is not desired). Another case example supporting this view belongs to C05: "…intra-industry competition is brutal and ugly. Unfortunately, most company owners lack ethical values." In the dilemma that the employees experienced between commercial gain and ethical behavior, egoistic decisions were made by prioritizing the image and benefit of the enterprise. However, in overcoming these problems, these cases could have been solved more ethically with a utilitarian perspective that would protect the interests of the employees today and in the future, by thinking long-term, to the benefit of the employees and the sectoral environment and including the plurality as well as the enterprise. This

finding, that employees prioritize commercial gain over ethical values, aligns with Przeclawski (1996), who found that tour operators often act because of the profit motive. However, some studies (Jones, 1991; Lampe et al., 1992) have suggested that organizational interests are not always prioritized in all companies.

This discrepancy may be explained by the specific context of small and medium-sized hospitality businesses in the current study. This prioritization of commercial gain can be explained by the economic pressures and competitive environment of the hospitality sector, which create strong incentives for employees to protect organizational interests. From an ethical perspective, such behavior reflects egoism, where decisions are made based on self-interest or organizational benefit rather than universal ethical principles (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Trevino, 1986).

These findings suggest that hospitality managers and organizations should provide structured ethical training and mentorship programs to help employees navigate conflicts between organizational interests and ethical considerations. Clearly expressed ethical guidelines will support staff in making decisions that balance business objectives with ethical standards, reducing the likelihood of egoistic decision-making. Based on the finding that employees often prioritize commercial gain, it is recommended that organizations establish incentive systems that reward ethical behavior as well as business performance. This can help align organizational and individual ethical goals.

Qualified Working Environment and Professional Ethics

This ethical dilemma was observed in two cases (2/12) in total. In these cases, ethical problems arose because of a mismatch between the quality of the working environment and ethically sound decision making. These dilemmas arose because of restrictions to freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and poor compliance with standards of duty, protection of confidentiality, justice, and trust. C04 described this by saying, "...the duty of a full or substitute jury member is to contribute to the thesis and to decide whether the person who wrote the thesis will be sufficient for the title to be obtained". In the case that emerged in the academic field, it was determined that this dilemma was handled within the framework of the rules of professional ethics. This reveals that scientific rules and ethical values are prioritized in academic life. The situation experienced here is not to comply with the ethical rules that exist in the working environment. The issue can be resolved completely with deontological measures and legal practices to be brought specifically concerning rights and duty ethics.

Honesty and Being Virtuous

The dilemma of being honest and virtuous and not being virtuous was described in two cases (2/12). In these cases, respecting the dignity of the individual, equality, honesty, and impartiality were prioritized. As these criteria form the basis of virtue ethics, it is noteworthy that the participants made decisions which fit within the framework of virtue ethics when faced with their ethical dilemmas. C03, described this situation with the words "Did I cause many injustices while trying to do the right job", and underlined that the consequences of the dilemma experienced were reflected in different circles. C09, who started to operate a facility in a conservative structure and was evaluated as such, although he did not declare that he held the same conservative perspective as the customers, has expressed his dilemma with the following words: "Even though I did not express my opinion to the customer about this, they started to think that I also had a conservative view, which left me in a dilemma". Although he earns an economic income here, he chose to leave this job voluntarily in order to be righteous and virtuous. The virtuous behavior used in the solution of this dilemma can also be suggested as an ethically appropriate behavior.

The preference for virtuous behavior in these cases is consistent with Wijesinghe (2014), who reported the application of virtue ethics in the hospitality sector. This commonality reinforces the alignment between the current findings and previous literature. The decision to act virtuously, even at the cost of economic income, may be attributed to strong personal moral values and internalization of virtue ethics principles. This supports the view that individuals with high moral awareness prioritize ethical consistency and integrity over immediate personal gain (Wijesinghe, 2014; Jones, 1991).

The observation that employees sometimes prioritize virtue over economic gain indicates that organizations should foster a culture that values ethical integrity alongside performance. Encouraging ethical role models and recognition for virtuous behavior can reinforce these values in the workplace. Given that some employees act according to virtue ethics, even at personal cost, it is recommended that hospitality organizations create formal recognition programs for employees demonstrating ethical consistency, reinforcing moral behavior as a valued practice.

Situational Conditions and Emotional Choice

It was decided that the dilemmas described in two of the cases examined (2/12) were caused by a conflict between the current situational conditions and the emo-

tional choices made. These dilemmas arose due to situational conditions such as individuals' lifestyle, gender, family situation, culture, economy, and social structure. The participants in these cases made decisions by considering the conditions in which they experienced dilemmas. This behavior, which can be considered from the perspective of relativism ethics, is frequently used for modern individuals to justify their decisions. In these cases, it is also noteworthy that the women made a choice depending on the situational conditions. C07 stated that "I had no mistake, and I was right. However, being pregnant caused me to make such a decision". A similar situation was reported by C08, "I should have reported the situation to higher authorities, which was the right thing, but I knew that the F&B manager would have a new child. In this case, he would be unemployed through me and would not be able to raise his children in good conditions. My conscience did not allow these two situations." In both cases, female participants evaluated the event from the perspective of "motherhood" and "child" and decided about themselves on an ethical basis. Conditions are extremely important for a person to make a right, wrong, good or bad decision. However, it should not be forgotten that the normal rules of the workplace, legal rights and responsibilities, work standards or professional ethics laws are also important here.

The choices made under situational and emotional conditions appear to be influenced by relativistic ethical reasoning, where decisions are adapted to context-specific circumstances, such as family responsibilities, culture, or social expectations. This aligns with Hudson & Miller (2006), who found that women often consider social and emotional factors more heavily when resolving ethical dilemmas. These situational factors illustrate how context can strongly shape ethical decision-making in practice.

The influence of situational and emotional factors highlights the importance of context-sensitive support for employees, particularly in balancing personal responsibilities and professional duties. Managers should consider flexible policies that account for employees' individual circumstances without compromising ethical standards. Given that situational and emotional factors significantly influence decision-making, it is recommended that organizations implement flexible work policies and provide ethical guidance to help employees navigate personal-professional conflicts.

Conclusion and Implications

Discussion

In this study, it was determined what some of the ethical dilemmas faced by employees in the Turkish hospitality sector were, the reasons behind these ethical dilemmas and how the employee's made decisions when faced with an ethical conundrum. Ethical theories were used in the assessment of ethical dilemma decision making and suggestions for their ethically appropriate solution. Based on case analyses, this research indicated differences and similarities in the criteria that participants followed in their ethical dilemma-solving processes. This study examined the area in which an ethical dilemma was experienced, the situation that caused the ethical dilemma, the decision taken, and reasons for the decision. The use of ethical theories to assess the solution to these real-world dilemmas is a unique and original strength of the present study. In previous studies, ethical decision-making process was based on cognitive development (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Trevino, 1986; Bommer et al., 1987; Ponemon, 1990, 1992; Jones, 1991; Lampe et al., 1992), using the multidimensional decision-making scale (Fennell & Malloy, 1999; Marnburg, 2001; Pande & Jain, 2016; Litschka et al., 2011; Menguc, 1998). However, the intensity of one-to-one customer interaction in the hospitality sector and the difficulty of meeting the demands and expectations of different stakeholders have led to a disregard for ethical dilemmas in ethical decision making. The rationale for this study was to fill this gap in the literature. Ethics is a complicated and subjective area. Today, organizations make serious efforts to ensure ethical staff behavior (Trapp, 2011: 543). The hospitality sector is people heavy, both on the employee and customer sides which, it may be argued, means ethical positioning is more complicated in all instances. There is no one right choice to be selected in the case of a dilemma but equally, it is important not to employ unethical behavior when applying a solution. Where there is an ethical dilemma, the dilemma should be understood, the ethically acceptable options should be listed, each option should be reviewed in detail, and possible outcomes of each should be predicted. Then, from these options, the most suitable one should be preferred (Paliwal, 2006: 57).

Fennell (2000) stated that tourism sector stakeholders should be aware that there are different ethical theories in evaluating the ethical dilemmas they face, and that each theory has pros and cons. In this study, the basic principles of teleology, deontology, virtue ethics and relativism ethics were used in the decisions of employees about ethical dilemmas and suggestions developed afterwards. The study is

important in terms of revealing the areas in which the dilemmas are concentrated and the interdependence of ethical theories according to the types of dilemmas in their resolution. It was found that hospitality employees experience the most ethical dilemmas when prioritizing organizational interests and commercial gain. Research results supported Prezeclawski's (1996) finding that tour operators act with a profit motive. Although some practices (overbooking, fake reservations, employing insecure personnel, etc.) carried out by hospitality professionals with commercial concerns are seen as specific to the industry, the participants stated that they were not satisfied with these transactions. On the other hand, dilemmas mainly arise from freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, protection of confidentiality, making the right decision, respecting the dignity of each individual, obeying the law, honesty, and values that vary from person to person. The findings obtained from the research have much importance for researchers in tourism ethics. Findings emerging from this qualitative research should now be evaluated and tested through empirical research. Experiencing ethical dilemmas mostly about commercial gains has increased organizational concerns and has led employees to make decisions in the direction of business interests and with an egoistic approach. By examining this finding with a quantitative design in larger and different samples in the hospitality sector, this finding may be validated and supported or undermined. In this regard, the practices performed by travel agencies, tour guides, and hotel managers with commercial concerns create dilemmas. It was found that in any dilemma, they make decisions and act on behalf of individuals and/or organizations. However, Fox (2000) warned that the costs of a poor ethical environment are high.

Another finding of the research is that in one case, being righteous and virtuous was preferred over economic income. The virtuous behavior used in the solution of the dilemma was undeniably an example of ethical behavior that would be generally regarded as such. This finding also supported the empirical application of the claim about how virtuous behavior should be in the accommodation industry described earlier by Wijesinghe (2014). Another interesting finding of the present study was that women experienced a dilemma between current situational conditions and emotional choices made. These dilemmas arose due to situational conditions, such as individuals' lifestyle, gender, family situation, culture, economy and social structure. These dilemmas were resolved within the ethics of relativism. Hudson & Miller (2006) support the finding in their study that female students are more sensitive to ethical dilemmas than male students among students of tourism. However, Yaman & Gurel (2006) found that there was no significant difference between male and female managers in their study. A dilemma between the sec-

toral environment and customer satisfaction in tourism was resolved from a consequentialist perspective and using a utilitarian approach. This finding is similar to that reported by Pande & Jain (2016), that managers in India prefer the utilitarian approach in decision making. In addition, Beck et al. (2007) also suggested that hotel sales and marketing managers act according to teleological theory. "Managers should listen to employees to understand their work status and help them address work stress and conflicts between the interests of the organization and customers in a timely fashion" (Luu, 2023).

Conclusion

In this study, suggestions have been developed for resolving ethical dilemmas that hospitality professionals face in their business life, why these dilemmas arise, how decisions are made by the employee and the ethical solution to these dilemmas. In addition, ethical theories were used to analyze the solution to these real-world dilemmas. The present study was conducted using a qualitative research model with real-life cases, thereby providing the opportunity to examine the events in detail and conduct analysis without intervening in the events. Through the *multiple case study* method, aimed at revealing the uncertainty between the event and the context, a scientific basis was formed to analyze ethical dilemmas experienced in the hospitality sector.

It is hoped our study will contribute to the literature, in two different ways. The first contribution is that it examines ethical dilemmas that tourism professionals experience in real life using verbal data in a way that is not frequently reported in the hospitality literature. The thematic analysis chart that was used as a guide to in-depth analysis of the data obtained by participants' own expressions also negates some criticisms directed against qualitative studies. What was done in each phase of the analyses during the research process will be explained here in detail, and how the outcome was reached from the data will also be set out. During the study, ethical dilemmas were evaluated and analyzed in accordance with ethical theories that also contributed to the analysis. Notably, verbal data was analyzed against a theoretical foundation. From this perspective, this difficult issue of examining approaches to analyzing ethical dilemmas and dilemmas in the tourism sector provides a qualitative model proposal which contrasts with the research models described in the extant literature using a quantitative approach.

Another contribution to the literature was the finding that ethical dilemmas that are frequently experienced in the hospitality sectors are, for the most part,

influenced by economic factors, and that in the decision-making process during ethical dilemmas, the individual's situation is also a motivating factor. It was found that individual values, their perspective on customers, and the responsibilities and duties of the related parties, are also effective in addressing ethical dilemmas.

Practical Implications

For practical application, hospitality managers and organizations may implement structured training programs to help employees handle ethical dilemmas, particularly those arising from conflicts between organizational expectations and personal ethical principles. Establishing clear ethical guidelines and decision-making procedures, informed by ethical theories of deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics, can support employees in navigating morally complex situations. Providing mentorship schemes for less experienced staff may facilitate ethical sense-making through shared experience and reflection. Incentive systems that reward ethical behavior alongside business performance can encourage employees to act ethically without prioritizing profit over moral responsibility. In addition, tourism associations and enterprises can develop sector-wide codes of ethics to offer standardized guidance, while allowing flexibility to address context-specific ethical dilemmas common in hospitality settings. Ethical dilemmas in hospitality can be addressed more effectively through structured decision-making processes that evaluate consequences, consider legal requirements, and involve multiple actors, thereby supporting ethical conduct and value co-creation in service contexts (Tsiotsou et al., 2024).

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited to the specific real-life cases examined; therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalized. However, this limitation is inherent to the qualitative research design adopted in this study, which prioritizes in-depth understanding and contextual interpretation of ethical dilemmas rather than generalizability. The use of case-based qualitative data allowed for a rich exploration of ethical decision-making processes within their organizational and situational contexts.

Future studies may extend this research by examining a larger number of ethical dilemma cases across different hospitality settings or geographical regions. Comparative studies employing multiple qualitative methods or mixed-method designs could provide deeper insights into how ethical dilemmas vary across organizational contexts. Moreover, further research could explore the underlying reasons

for the emergence of different themes concerning ethical dilemmas identified in this study, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of ethical decision-making in the hospitality sector.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interest.

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