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Perceived Importance of Professional Roles Among Tour Guides

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Abstract

This exploratory study examines tour guides' perceptions of the relative importance of 19 professional roles. An online survey yielded 98 participant records after exclusion of one test submission. Seventy-six respondents assigned each integer from 1 (least important) to 19 (most important) exactly once and formed the primary sample. Twenty-one responses containing repeated ranks entered a separate sensitivity analysis; one out-of-range response was excluded. Co-creator of Experience had the highest mean rank (16.64), followed by Heritage Interpreter (15.00), while Middleman had the lowest (5.39). The Friedman test indicated systematic differences across roles, with $\chi^2(18) = 561.70$ and $p < 0.001$; Kendall's W = 0.411 indicated partial shared ordering. The same leading and lowest mean positions occurred in the 97-record sensitivity sample, although inference about the two leading roles depended on the pairwise procedure. One exploratory experience-related contrast for Information-giver survived multiplicity adjustment. The contribution is a sample-specific account of relative role importance with substantial heterogeneity. Nonprobability recruitment, an uneven sample, limited instrument-development documentation and 22.4% noncompliance with the ranking requirement constrain interpretation and generalization.

Keywords: tour guide roles; heritage interpretation; perceived importance; experience co-creation; ranking data

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1. Introduction

In museums, archaeological sites and other heritage settings, tour guides connect visitors with cultural resources. Previous research has examined the relationship between guiding and tourist satisfaction [1–3]. These studies position guides as important participants in the visitor experience. Guides therefore need knowledge of heritage resources together with an understanding of their audiences. Audience characteristics matter because heritage interpretation involves adapting messages and communication to visitors' interests, needs and backgrounds. Historical events and heritage values may be understood differently by different visitor groups. Guides select which events and perspectives to emphasize when interpreting particular sites [4]. Their narratives should be grounded in reliable sources and should invite engagement with the meanings of heritage. Guides and visitors can also contribute jointly to the tourist experience [5–7]. The concept of

heritage interpretation is strongly influenced by Freeman Tilden [8], who described interpretation as an educational activity that reveals meanings and relationships beyond the presentation of information. His principles emphasize relating interpretation to visitors' experiences and provoking thought. Within this context, tour guides act as mediators between heritage resources and visitors, communicating historical, cultural and natural values through accessible narratives.

Interpretation can support understanding, appreciation and conservation of heritage, as well as visitor experience [9,10]. These out comes provide context for the study of guiding roles but do not define a single criterion by which all professional responsibilities should be judged. Relative role importance, actual professional practice and visitor outcomes are distinct objects of inquiry.

Regional and workplace contexts can affect what guides are expected to do. A site-based interpreter, an itinerant tour guide and a volunteer docent may encounter different audiences and responsibilities. The present South-East European sample is concentrated in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia; it does not provide a comparison of national guide populations or identify respondents' specific heritage sites. Against this background, the study examines participating guides' perceptions of the relative importance of professional roles.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framing

2.1. Tour Guiding and Heritage Interpretation

Tour guiding research has examined professional roles, communication, heritage interpretation, visitor experience, service quality and competencies [11–17]. In cultural tourism, guides provide an interface between visitors and destinations [18]. Role descriptions concern functions performed in this interface; competencies concern the knowledge and abilities needed to perform them.

Heritage interpretation has become one of the central concepts within tour guiding [8] defined interpretation as an educational activity that reveals meanings and relationships rather than merely presenting information. This definition provides a foundation for the interpretation literature discussed here. According to Beck and Cable [19] effective interpretation combines scientific accuracy with artistic presentation, requiring guides to balance factual knowledge with engaging communication. Consequently, interpretation is increasingly understood as both a science and an art, demanding not only expertise but also creativity and performance skills [20].

2.2. Roles of Tour Guides

The literature demonstrates that tour guides perform numerous professional roles. Previous studies have described guides as interpreters, educators, mediators, culture brokers, organizers, leaders, ambassadors, actors, sustainability ambassadors, and co-creators of visitor experiences [5,11,12,21,22]. These diverse functions illustrate the complexity of professional guiding.

Heritage interpretation intersects with several of these roles. As culture brokers, teachers or interpreters, guides facilitate communication between heritage resources and visitors by helping them understand cultural meanings [20,23]. These functions can overlap within the same guided encounter, and factual information can provide a basis for interpretation.

Contemporary approaches emphasize visitor participation and experience co-creation alongside established leadership and mediation functions [6,7]. These perspectives suggest that different functions can be complementary within one encounter. Their

prominence in theory does not establish how guides or visitors prioritize them in a particular setting.

More recent role classifications also differ from the historical labels. Wong et al. [24] examining Chinese package tourists' expectations, identify management, information, consultation, change-fostering and technology-related functions. Such classifications show that the scope of guiding is contingent on the theoretical approach and respondent perspective; they do not make existing role lists directly comparable.

2.3. Professional Competencies and Personal Dispositions

Professional competence involves the knowledge, skills and judgment required to undertake guiding work. Relevant areas include knowledge of heritage resources and source evaluation, interpretive planning, clear communication, group management and reflective practice ([13,14,25]. These areas combine subject expertise with practical decisions about how to present material accurately and respond to an audience. Research with heritage guides in Macao identifies formal and informal processes of competence development, influenced by motivations and constraints [26].

Communication skills include structuring an explanation, listening, inviting questions and adapting language and pace to visitors' knowledge and interests. Audience engagement and dramatic skills can support these tasks when a tour uses role-play or first-person interpretation [20,27]. Performance requires appropriate content selection and responsiveness to visitors, rather than theatrical delivery alone. These are professional practices that can be developed and assessed in context.

Empathy and emotional intelligence concern psychological capacities relevant to interpersonal judgment and the recognition or regulation of emotions [28–30]. They should be distinguished from observable communication skills. Enthusiasm and passion concern dispositions or motivations that may shape engagement with guiding work [1,31]. A favorable disposition, a professional role and competence in performing that role are related concepts, but none can be inferred directly from another.

2.4. Interpretive Techniques and Audience Participation

Storytelling organizes information about events, people and places into a narrative, but it is one of several interpretive approaches. Thematic explanation connects details to a central idea, while questions and dialogue invite visitors to relate heritage to their own experiences. Objects, images and features of the site can anchor explanations in observable evidence. The choice of technique depends on the interpretive purpose, available resources and audience [20,32].

Heritage sites may support multiple interpretations. Narrative selection should attend to reliable evidence and contested perspectives. Interpretation can also contribute to visitors' sense of place and place identity [33]. A participatory approach to interpretive planning considers heritage values and the involvement of social actors in conservation and management [10]. This broader purpose cautions against judging interpretation only by its immediate entertainment or satisfaction value.

Dialogue and visitor participation can contribute to the co-production of a guided encounter: questions, memories and personal experiences may affect how meanings develop [5–7]. Such interaction is a feature of interpretation practice rather than evidence that every tour provides equivalent opportunities for participation.

First-person interpretation, living history and museum theater provide further ways to present heritage through characters or dramatized situations [27,34,35]. These techniques require decisions about historical accuracy, the distinction between evidence and dramatization, and the appropriateness of performance for the site and audience.

Storytelling, thematic explanation, dialogue and performance can be combined; none is a universal substitute for the others.

2.5. Heritage Interpretation and Tourist Satisfaction

Previous studies have examined visitor assessments of guide performance and their relationship to tourist satisfaction [3,18]. Such visitor-centered studies provide relevant context, but they address different outcomes from guides' own rankings of professional roles.

Service-dominant logic describes value as arising through the integration and use of resources in context, while tourism research highlights the contribution of tourists' own resources and participation to experience value [6,7]. In a qualitative study, Aşçı and Yetgin Akgün [36] examined guides' accounts of their roles in sustainable tourism practices. These studies illustrate different aspects of guiding and co-creation; they do not establish effects of the role priorities measured here on tourist satisfaction.

Visitor-based evaluations and guides' importance judgments offer different perspectives. A ranking expresses a relative evaluation within the supplied role set. It does not establish how often a role is performed, how well it is performed, or its effect on visitors. The present study therefore concerns perceived role importance rather than satisfaction or performance.

2.6. Conceptual Framework and Research Questions

Cohen [12] distinguishes instrumental, social, interactionary and communicative components of guiding. Weiler and Walker [23] extend the discussion of communication through the guide's role in brokering access, encounters, understanding and empathy. Larsen and Meged [5] examine guided tours as encounters co-produced through interaction between guides and tourists. Together, these perspectives support examining how guides prioritize complementary professional functions without assuming that one role has replaced another.

These perspectives frame an exploratory comparison of perceived role importance. The 19 items are potentially overlapping labels, rather than independent competencies or validated latent dimensions. A high rank for Co-creator of Experience expresses a judgment about that label; it does not directly measure participation or value co-creation. These rankings concern perceived importance, not role performance or visitor outcomes. The framework guides interpretation and is not a theory tested by the survey.

Three research questions guide the study. RQ1: Which of the 19 professional roles do participating guides perceive as relatively more or less important? RQ2: To what extent do respondents share an ordering, and how stable is the ordering across the specified analytical approaches? RQ3: Are these perceptions associated with reported demographic and professional characteristics? These questions are exploratory. They concern the participating sample and do not posit a universal hierarchy or causal relationships.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Design Setting and Sampling

The study used a cross-sectional online questionnaire concerning tour guide roles in heritage interpretation. According to the investigators' retrospective account, the intended participants were professional tour guides, and the questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms. Participant submission dates ranged from 7 July to 3 August 2026. Country entries included Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania; country was missing for one respondent. This coverage

includes the six former Yugoslav republics and Albania but does not constitute a representative study of the Western Balkans or of national guide populations.

The investigators describe recruitment through professional contacts who circulated the online survey to guides. This is a nonprobability, network-based sample. The sampling frame, invitation denominator, individual eligibility verification and measures to ensure geographical or professional diversity were not documented. The available records do not establish the extent of onward forwarding or a country-specific recruitment protocol. A population response rate cannot be calculated. Country entries describe the realized sample, rather than a balanced comparative sampling design.

3.2. Questionnaire and Role Terminology

The questionnaire records gender, country, age category, education and years of experience, together with 19 role items. The English questionnaire asks participants to assign each role a unique score according to its perceived importance, using 1 for the least important and 19 for the most important role, with each score used only once. The instruction does not specify a visitor outcome; the analysis therefore concerns relative importance within the role set. The role list draws substantially on the overview in Zhang and Chow [21], supplemented by Co-creator of Experience, Heritage Interpreter and Sustainability Ambassador. The sources in Table 1 contextualize these additions; they do not document a systematic item-selection or validation procedure. Zhang and Chow's visitor-based assessment of 20 service-quality attributes is a different instrument and does not validate this ranking task.

The questionnaire was administered in English, and participants could contact the investigators for clarification, according to the authors' account. Supplementary Questionnaire S1 reproduces the English copy supplied by the authors; it is not an archived capture of the Google Form. The copy contains no standardized role definitions or consent screen and omits an email field present in the export. No translated version or clarification log is available. A formal item-generation protocol, expert assessment, pilot test, cognitive interview or comprehension assessment is not documented. English administration alone therefore does not establish equivalent understanding.

Table 1 identifies the source lineage of the role labels. Historical attributions are secondary citations through Zhang and Chow [21], not claims that every original work was independently consulted. The original rationale for retaining all 19 labels and excluding alternatives cannot be reconstructed. More recent classifications are considered here as retrospective conceptual context, not as procedures used to construct the questionnaire.

Table 1. Professional role labels and literature context.

Role Label	Literature Attribution
Actor	Holloway (1981)
Ambassador	Holloway (1981)
Buffer	Schmidt (1979); Pearce (1982)
Caretaker	Fine and Speer (1985)
Catalyst	Holloway (1981)
Co-creator of experience	Larsen and Meged (2013)
Culture Broker	Holloway (1981); Katz (1985)
Heritage Interpreter	Ham (2013); Weiler and Walker (2014)
Information-giver	Holloway (1981); Hughes (1991)
Intermediary	Schmidt (1979); Ryan and Dewar (1995)
Interpreter/Translator	Almagor (1985); Holloway (1981); Katz (1985); Ryan and Dewar (1995)
Leader	Cohen (1985); Geva and Goldman (1991)
Mediator	Schmidt (1979); Holloway (1981); Cohen (1985); Katz (1985)
Middleman	Van den Berghe (1980)
Organizer	Hughes (1991); Pearce (1982); Schuchat (1983)

Salesperson	Fine and Speer (1985); Grönroos (1978)
Sustainability Ambassador	Weiler and Kim (2011)
Shaman	Schmidt (1979)
Teacher	Holloway (1981); Pearce (1982); Fine and Speer (1985); Mancini (2001)

Note. Historical sources are cited secondarily through Zhang and Chow [21]. Direct sources contextualize the three added role labels. Attributions do not establish that respondents received source-based definitions or understood the labels consistently.

For readers, Heritage Interpreter concerns communication of heritage meanings, whereas Interpreter/Translator may suggest linguistic interpretation. Culture Broker, Mediator, Intermediary and Middleman can all suggest bridging people, cultural perspectives or services, with no validated boundaries between them in this instrument. Buffer may suggest a shielding function, but this is a possible reading rather than a questionnaire definition. These contextual explanations were not included in the supplied questionnaire and are not presented as standardized explanations received by respondents.

Shaman is retained because it is the historical label present in the data, attributed to Schmidt [37] through Zhang and Chow's [21] overview. Its operational meaning for this questionnaire is undocumented. It is not used here to designate respondents as religious, supernatural or healing practitioners, or to endorse a pejorative description of any cultural tradition. Assigning a specific spiritual or interpretive meaning retrospectively would not establish what respondents understood. This culturally loaded label therefore requires particular caution.

3.3. Record Screening and Analytical Samples

The export contained 99 records with entries for all 19 roles. One initial record was confirmed to be a test submission and removed, leaving 98 participant records. A valid complete ranking was a permutation of all integers 1–19. Seventy-six records met that requirement; 21 repeated one or more in-range values; one assigned Caretaker a value of 0 and omitted rank 13. No correction was imputed. The primary sample therefore comprised 76 complete rankings, and the sensitivity sample comprised 97 in-range responses, including the 21 with ties. Both excluded the test and out-of-range records. Table 2 summarizes screening and makes clear that the samples overlap.

Table 2. Screening of exported records and use of participant responses.

Stage or Response Type	n	Analytical Treatment
Exported records	99	Starting export with all role fields
Confirmed test submission	1	Excluded from every reported sample
Participant records	98	Basis for participant profile
Valid complete rankings	76	Primary role analysis
Repeated in-range ranks	21	Sensitivity analysis only
Out-of-range response	1	Caretaker = 0; excluded from role analyses
In-range sensitivity sample	97	76 complete rankings plus 21 tied responses

Note. The primary sample is contained within the sensitivity sample. The 22 noncompliant participant responses comprise 21 with repeated ranks and one out-of-range response (22/98 = 22.4%). Stages and response types are not additive across all rows.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

The revision-stage reanalysis used Python with NumPy 2.3.5 and SciPy 1.17.0. Screening rules and the analysis plan were refined during revision and were not preregistered. For RQ1, the primary sample summaries report mean rank, median, first and third quartiles using inclusive linear interpolation, and sample standard deviation. Higher

ranks mean greater relative importance within this role set; they are not absolute importance scores. For RQ2, the Friedman test assesses systematic differences in within-person ranks across roles, and Kendall's $W = \chi^2/[n(19 - 1)]$ describes shared ordering. A complete ranking forces distinctions within each respondent but does not by itself produce a common group ordering. In the sensitivity sample, values were converted to within-person midranks and the Friedman statistic was corrected for ties.

To distinguish descriptive positions from supported pairwise differences, all 171 possible role pairs (19 × 18/2) in the primary sample were compared using two-sided Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with tie-adjusted asymptotic *p*-values, no continuity correction, and Holm adjustment across the 171-pair family. Because this test uses the magnitudes of paired rank differences and assumes symmetry under its null, two-sided exact sign tests provided an order-only sensitivity check. Their 171 *p*-values were Holm-adjusted as a separate family. The procedures address different null hypotheses; agreement is distinguished from procedure-sensitive inference. Exhaustive comparisons are available in Supplementary Table S1 rather than interpreted as 171 separate substantive hypotheses. The significance threshold was 0.05. Inter-item correlations were not used to infer independent professional orientations.

For RQ3, exploratory group comparisons used tie-corrected Kruskal–Wallis H statistics calibrated by 999,999 permutations of group labels, preserving group sizes. Permutation *p*-values were (b + 1)/(B + 1), where B is the permutation count and b counts statistics at least as large as observed. Holm adjustment covered one family of 76 omnibus tests: four characteristics (gender, age category, education and experience) × 19 roles. Missing values were excluded only for the relevant characteristic; the single Prefer not to say response was excluded from the female–male comparison. The significant experience result was followed by six two-sided permutation rank-sum contrasts, Holm-adjusted as a separate six-comparison family. Seeds were 20261011–20261014 for the four characteristics and 20261100–20261105 for the six contrasts. Original age and experience labels were retained because exact values were unavailable. Country was descriptive only. These analyses neither control for confounding nor establish group equivalence when nonsignificant. Supplementary Tables S2 and S3 contain all omnibus and follow-up results.

3.5. Consent Data Protection and Ethical Oversight

Participation was voluntary according to the investigators' account. The authors report that participants provided electronic consent for use of their responses in this research and the resulting publication. The original participant-information and consent screen is unavailable in the study documentation. The export contained names and email addresses and was identifiable at collection. Direct identifiers, timestamps and free-text fields were removed from the analytical extract, and only aggregate results are supplied. Rare demographic combinations can still create disclosure risk. No institutional ethics approval, formal exemption or authoritative determination that ethical review was unnecessary is documented.

4. Results

4.1. Participant Profile

The participant sample (n = 98) included 56 female respondents (57.1%), 40 male respondents (40.8%), one "Prefer not to say" response (1.0%) and one missing gender response (1.0%). Corresponding counts in the primary sample (n = 76) were 44 (57.9%), 30 (39.5%), one (1.3%) and one (1.3%). Table 3 reports demographic and professional characteristics separately for both denominators. All figures exclude the confirmed test submission.

Table 3. Demographic and professional characteristics of participant records and the primary sample.

Variable	Category	n (98)	% (98)	n (76)	% (76)
Country	Bosnia and Herzegovina	23	23.5	17	22.4
	Serbia	31	31.6	26	34.2
	Croatia	22	22.4	15	19.7
	Slovenia	17	17.3	13	17.1
	North Macedonia	1	1.0	1	1.3
	Montenegro	1	1.0	1	1.3
	Albania	2	2.0	2	2.6
	Missing	1	1.0	1	1.3
Age	18–30	5	5.1	5	6.6
	30–40	17	17.3	12	15.8
	40–50	44	44.9	37	48.7
	50+	30	30.6	20	26.3
	Missing	2	2.0	2	2.6
Level of education	High school	9	9.2	7	9.2
	Bachelor's degree	18	18.4	12	15.8
	Master's degree	42	42.9	36	47.4
	PhD	27	27.6	19	25.0
	Missing	2	2.0	2	2.6
Years of experience	<2	4	4.1	4	5.3
	2–5	7	7.1	6	7.9
	5–10	15	15.3	14	18.4
	>10	71	72.4	51	67.1
	Missing	1	1.0	1	1.3
Gender	Female	56	57.1	44	57.9
	Male	40	40.8	30	39.5
	Prefer not to say	1	1.0	1	1.3
	Missing	1	1.0	1	1.3

Note. n = number of respondents. Percentages use the corresponding full denominator (98 or 76), including missing demographic values, and may not sum to 100.0 because of rounding. All records exclude the test submission. The primary sample is a subset of the participant sample. Original age and experience labels were retained; overlapping category boundaries were not reclassified without exact underlying values.

Of the primary sample, 71/76 (93.4%) came from Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia. Fifty-one (67.1%) reported more than ten years of experience, 57 (75.0%) selected the 40–50 or 50+ age categories, and 55 (72.4%) reported a master's degree or PhD. These describe the participating sample and are not estimates of the wider guide workforce.

4.2. Perceived Role Importance and Shared Ordering for RQ1 and RQ2

For RQ1, Co-creator of Experience had the highest mean rank (16.64), followed by Heritage Interpreter (15.00), Ambassador (14.20), Leader (13.34), Shaman (13.16) and Culture Broker (13.05). Middleman had the lowest mean (5.39). Table 4 and Figure 1 show location and dispersion. Co-creator of Experience had a relatively narrow interquartile range of 16–18. By comparison, Shaman had a median of 16, an interquartile range of 9–19 and SD = 6.52, showing that a relatively high central position can coexist with considerable heterogeneity.

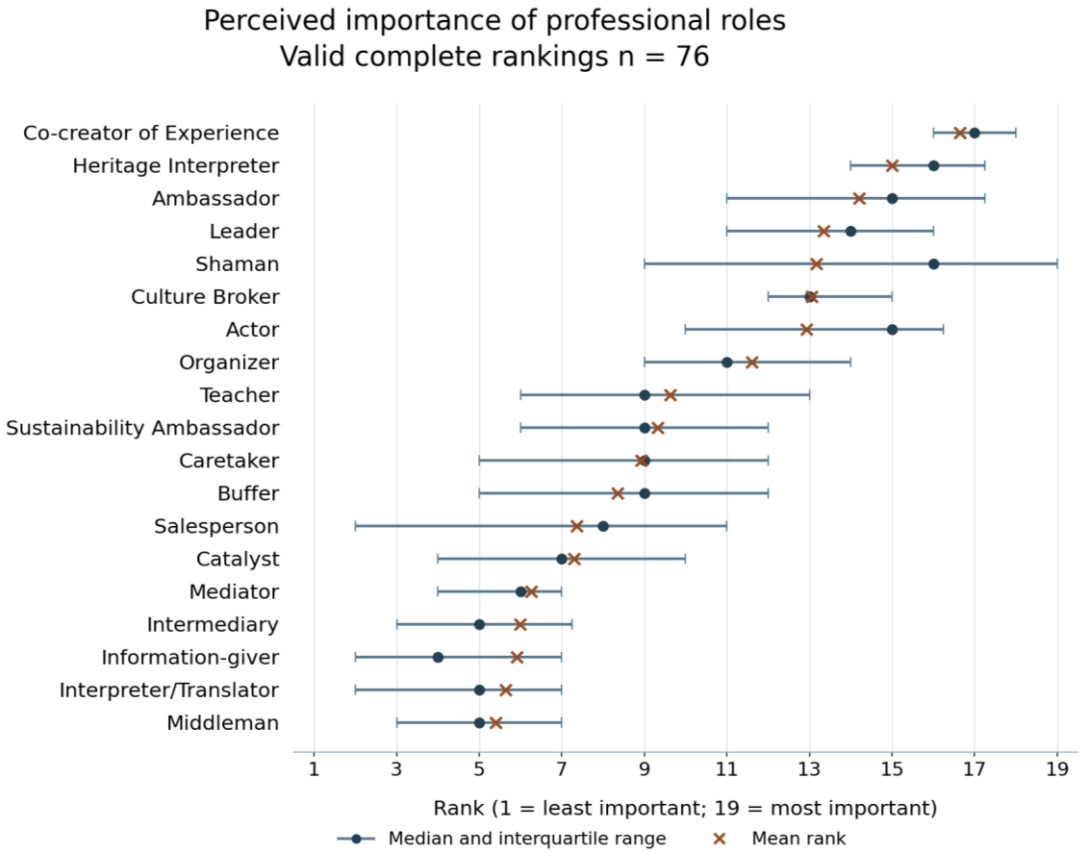


Figure 1. Perceived relative importance of professional roles among 76 respondents with valid complete rankings. Circles and horizontal intervals show medians and interquartile ranges; crosses show mean ranks. The ordering is descriptive and does not imply significant differences between adjacent roles.

Table 4. Perceived relative importance in the primary sample (n = 76), with sensitivity mean ranks (n = 97).

Role	Mean (n = 76)	Median	Q1–Q3	SD	Mean (n = 97)
Co-creator of experience	16.64	17	16–18	2.18	16.38
Heritage Interpreter	15.00	16	14–17.25	3.24	15.19
Ambassador	14.20	15	11–17.25	3.64	13.59
Leader	13.34	14	11–16	4.04	13.21
Shaman	13.16	16	9–19	6.52	12.37
Culture Broker	13.05	13	12–15	3.18	12.93
Actor	12.92	15	10–16.25	4.75	12.24
Organizer	11.61	11	9–14	3.66	11.98
Teacher	9.62	9	6–13	5.20	9.46
Sustainability Ambassador	9.33	9	6–12	3.98	9.38
Caretaker	8.92	9	5–12	4.55	8.84
Buffer	8.34	9	5–12	4.41	8.31
Salesperson	7.37	8	2–11	4.60	7.15
Catalyst	7.30	7	4–10	4.42	7.13
Mediator	6.26	6	4–7	3.83	7.07
Intermediary	5.99	5	3–7.25	3.56	6.20
Information-giver	5.91	4	2–7	5.10	6.70
Interpreter/Translator	5.64	5	2–7	4.31	6.31
Middleman	5.39	5	3–7	3.38	5.57

Note. Higher ranks indicate greater perceived relative importance. Q1 and Q3 are quartiles using inclusive linear interpolation; SD is sample standard deviation. The first four numerical columns

use n = 76. The final column uses within-person midranks for n = 97, including 21 responses with ties. Roles are ordered descriptively by the primary mean; adjacent positions are not necessarily significantly different. Both samples exclude the test and out-of-range records.

For RQ2, the Friedman result, $\chi^2(18) = 561.70$, $p < 0.001$, indicates systematic differences in the sample's ranking of the roles. Kendall's W = 0.411 shows partial shared ordering rather than unanimity. Forced ranking requires each respondent to distinguish roles but would allow group mean ranks to coincide if respondents ordered them inconsistently. The substantive result is therefore a partly shared pattern with variability, rather than the existence of differentiation alone. Table 5 presents primary and sensitivity results.

Table 5. Friedman tests and concordance in the primary and sensitivity samples.

Analytical Sample	N	χ^2	df	*p*	Kendall W
Complete rankings (primary)	76	561.70	18	<0.001	0.411
In-range values, ties permitted (sensitivity)	97	619.82	18	<0.001	0.355

Note. n = number of respondents; χ^2 = Friedman statistic; df = degrees of freedom; W = Kendall's coefficient of concordance. The n = 97 sensitivity sample includes 21 responses with tied values, with tie correction applied. The primary sample is contained within the sensitivity sample. Both exclude the confirmed test submission and the out-of-range record.

For Co-creator of Experience versus Heritage Interpreter, the Wilcoxon comparison gave T = 765.0, $p = 0.000281$ and Holm-adjusted $p = 0.0174$ across all 171 pairs. However, although 49 of 76 respondents ranked Co-creator higher, the order-only exact sign test did not survive Holm adjustment (unadjusted $p = 0.0154$; adjusted $p = 0.8647$). Inference for this pair is therefore method-sensitive. Heritage Interpreter versus Ambassador was not significant (Wilcoxon $p = 0.1404$; exact sign-test $p = 0.2067$; both Holm-adjusted $p = 1.000$). The ordering of means should not be presented as a sequence of separately established differences.

4.3. Sensitivity to Response Format for RQ1 and RQ2

The sensitivity sample comprised 97 respondents whose values were all within 1–19: the 76 valid complete rankings and 21 responses containing ties. The confirmed test submission and the out-of-range response remained excluded. To respect within-person ordering, tied assigned values were replaced by their midranks rather than treated as independent importance scores. Co-creator of Experience and Heritage Interpreter again had the highest mean ranks (16.38 and 15.19), while Middleman had the lowest (5.57). The final column of Table 4 reports these sensitivity means.

The tie-corrected Friedman result in the sensitivity sample was $\chi^2(18) = 619.82$, $p < 0.001$, with Kendall's W = 0.355 (n = 97). The leading two positions and the lowest position were unchanged from the primary sample, although the ordering of some other roles differed.

The same leading two and lowest mean positions occurred under both response treatments. This is evidence of descriptive stability under the specified treatment of ties, not validation of the instrument or proof that noncompliant responses are equivalent to complete rankings. The decrease from W = 0.411 to 0.355 is descriptive because the samples overlap. Sensitivity analysis cannot remove bias arising from nonprobability recruitment, ambiguous labels or differential compliance. The primary interpretation continues to use the 76 valid complete rankings.

4.4. Exploratory Demographic and Professional Comparisons for RQ3

Information-giver differed across experience categories in the strict-ranking set with reported experience (n = 75), H(3) = 15.35, permutation $p = 0.000475$, Holm-adjusted $p = 0.0361$ across all 76 demographic tests. Group sizes were 4 (<2 years), 6 (2–5 years), 14 (5–10 years) and 51 (>10 years). The 5–10-year group assigned a lower mean rank (2.14; median = 2) than the >10-year group (6.88; median = 5). The two-sided permutation rank-sum comparison gave U = 109.5 and Holm-adjusted $p = 0.000186$ across the six experience contrasts. No other demographic omnibus comparison remained significant after Holm adjustment; this does not establish equivalence between groups.

Country subsamples were too small and uneven for inferential comparison. The test submission had no demographic values and does not affect the group tests. For RQ3, the supported result is one specific experience–group contrast in perceived importance of Information-giver. It does not demonstrate a monotonic career progression, a causal effect of experience, or absence of other demographic differences in the population.

Across the research questions, the main findings are a recurring descriptive emphasis on Co-creator of Experience and Heritage Interpreter, partial shared ordering with substantial role-specific dispersion, and one exploratory experience–group contrast. The mean ordering is clearer than claims about every adjacent pair, while stability to tied responses does not establish measurement validity.

5. Discussion

5.1. Role Importance and Shared Ordering for RQ1 and RQ2

RQ1 identifies Co-creator of Experience and Heritage Interpreter as the leading mean positions and Middleman as the lowest in this sample's judgments of relative importance. These are evaluations within the 19-label task, not a complete hierarchy of professional responsibilities. RQ2 shows that the main descriptive positions persist when tied responses are included, while W = 0.411 in the primary sample indicates partial shared ordering. The difference between the two leading roles is procedure-sensitive. The evidence supports a recurring pattern accompanied by heterogeneity, rather than a uniform hierarchy or demonstrated effects on satisfaction.

The pattern is consistent with accounts of guiding as a combination of leadership, mediation, communication and experience brokering [11,12,23]. Interpretation should not be presented as a newly discovered replacement for an exclusively informational role. Practical coordination, factual communication and heritage interpretation can all contribute to the same encounter. The ranking task requires respondents to distinguish between role labels that may overlap in practice.

The prominence of Co-creator of Experience is compatible with guided tours as collaboratively produced encounters [5]. Service-dominant logic and tourism co-creation research discuss interaction and participants' resources in experience value [6,7]. The present contribution is narrower: it documents guides' attribution of importance to a co-creation-related label within the supplied role set. It does not identify a new role, observe co-creation, or establish that this function is more effective than others.

The high mean rank for Heritage Interpreter is consistent with interpretation literature emphasizing meanings and relationships [8,20,32]. Information-giver had a lower mean, but accurate information can be necessary for interpretation even when another label is ranked more highly. The forced-ranking format cannot tell whether respondents considered either role unimportant in absolute terms.

Culture Broker also received a relatively high mean rank, alongside considerably lower means for Mediator and Intermediary. These results should not be read as validated distinctions between otherwise overlapping functions: respondents may have attached

different meanings or connotations to the labels. Shaman makes this problem particularly visible. Its broad distribution could reflect diverse perceptions of importance, differing understandings of the term, or both. Because comprehension was not documented, the study cannot separate substantive heterogeneity from measurement ambiguity.

5.2. Professional and Geographical Context for RQ3

For RQ3, the contrast for Information-giver survived the stated permutation procedures and multiplicity adjustments: respondents with 5–10 years of experience assigned lower relative importance than those with more than 10 years. This comparison does not establish that factual knowledge becomes more valued with experience. The groups were small and unequal, and age, education, training, workplace and audience may be associated with both experience and the meaning attached to the label. These influences were not jointly controlled.

The predominance of respondents aged in the two older categories, with postgraduate education and long experience may shape the range of perspectives represented. The female majority is also a sample characteristic, not evidence of a gender-specific orientation. No other omnibus test survived the multiplicity adjustment, but limited power and unequal groups prevent conclusions that age, education or gender are irrelevant. The full participant counts sometimes used to describe the survey must be distinguished from the primary analysis: 74 versus 57 in the older age categories, 69 versus 55 postgraduate respondents, and 71 versus 51 with more than ten years of experience (n = 98 versus n = 76).

International studies offer context rather than a regional test. In Shanghai and Hong Kong, visitor-based studies examine guide performance and satisfaction [2,3], while Wong et al. [24] investigate Chinese tourists' expected roles. Differences in respondents, measures and tour settings prevent direct comparison with the present guide rankings. No corresponding samples from East Asia, South America or North America were collected, so neither regional similarity nor regional difference can be inferred.

The dataset does not identify UNESCO status, local or national significance, heritage period, site type, visitor composition, or whether guides were site-based or itinerant. The investigators describe participants as professional guides, but the questionnaire does not distinguish paid from voluntary work or measure licensing and qualifications beyond education. Professional status and licensing were not independently checked in the recorded survey fields. Reported education cannot establish legal entry requirements. These unmeasured settings could matter to role perceptions, but cannot explain the observed rankings on the present evidence. A future comparison should record them alongside professional experience.

5.3. Implications for Training

The perceived importance assigned to interpretation and experience co-creation can inform discussion with guide educators about how professional functions are combined. Literature on communication and competence development provides relevant context [13,20,25,26]. These rankings do not establish competency gaps, training needs or the relative effectiveness of particular techniques.

Training providers could use these findings to discuss how destination knowledge, interpretation, cultural mediation and visitor participation are combined in practice. The rankings do not establish which teaching methods are most effective. Any proposed use of storytelling exercises, first-person interpretation or museum theater should be assessed through training evaluation that includes observed guiding practices and visitor-reported outcomes.

The practical implication is therefore to consider professional roles together when discussing guide development. Lower-ranked practical or informational functions may

still be necessary for an effective guided encounter. Decisions about training should combine guides' perceptions with evidence from visitors, educators and observation of actual practice.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

The sample is concentrated in four countries, with very small numbers from the other three and one missing country value. Recruitment through professional contacts limits access to guides outside those networks. The retrospective recruitment account is not a contemporaneous sampling protocol; eligibility checks and diversity procedures are not documented. Without a sampling frame or invitation denominator, representativeness and population response rate cannot be assessed. Experienced, older and highly educated respondents predominate, limiting transfer to early-career guides and other professional settings. Of 98 participant records, 22 (22.4%) failed the complete-ranking requirement. Assigning 19 unique ranks may have been burdensome, unclear or difficult to complete in the interface, although the export cannot establish the cause. Exclusion may bias results if compliance is associated with participants' characteristics or interpretation of the task. The n = 97 sensitivity analysis cannot resolve those selection and usability concerns.

Measurement validity is a further limitation. The classification relies heavily on an earlier literature overview, with no documented contemporary validation process. Several labels overlap or carry different cultural connotations, and the questionnaire has no standardized definitions. English administration and the opportunity to ask questions do not establish comparable understanding; piloting and comprehension checks are undocumented. The broad importance instruction may also allow respondents to apply different personal criteria. Reader explanations added here cannot establish how labels were understood during collection. Forced ranking measures relative rather than absolute importance and does not assess observed practices, competencies or visitor outcomes. Age and experience categories have overlapping boundary labels and cannot be reclassified without exact values. Demographic analyses are exploratory, involve small unequal groups and do not control for confounding. The unavailable original consent screen and undocumented ethical oversight are additional reporting limitations; de-identification during reanalysis does not establish the adequacy of original consent or oversight procedures.

Future studies should begin with an explicit role-selection rationale, expert and practitioner review, cognitive interviews and pilot testing across the intended languages. Alternative classifications should be considered before data collection, and culturally ambiguous terminology should be replaced or clearly operationalized. Researchers could pilot a smaller set, rating tasks or best–worst approaches before selecting a feasible format; these alternatives measure different aspects and should not be assumed interchangeable. Recruitment should define the target population and deliberately cover career stages, countries and guiding settings. Repeated surveys and longitudinal designs could examine stability over time, while coordinated studies across world regions would require a shared, linguistically tested instrument. Site designation, historical period, visitor composition, tour format, qualifications and employment arrangements should be recorded. Observed guiding and independent visitor measures would be needed to investigate links with practice and satisfaction.

6. Conclusions

This exploratory study describes how 76 respondents with valid complete rankings perceived the relative importance of 19 professional roles. Co-creator of Experience and Heritage Interpreter had the highest mean ranks, while Middleman had the lowest. These positions persisted in a 97-record sensitivity analysis, but partial concordance and a

procedure-sensitive contrast between the two leading roles qualify claims of a shared hierarchy. One exploratory experience–group contrast for Information-giver survived multiplicity adjustment.

The contribution is a sample-specific account of guides' perceived importance judgments that brings together a recurring ordering, substantial variation and limits of the inherited role terminology. These judgments are distinct from observed professional priorities, competence, actual guiding behavior and visitor-reported satisfaction. The study does not establish a new role taxonomy, professional change or causal effects.

The findings can support discussion of interpretation, mediation and visitor participation in guide education, while evaluation of training or guiding outcomes requires additional evidence. Their interpretation must remain bounded by the uneven sample, limited recruitment and instrument documentation, and noncompliance with the ranking task.

Further research should use clearly defined and linguistically tested role labels, documented sampling and ethical procedures, and a response format tested for feasibility. Comparisons across professional settings, countries and career stages should be designed prospectively and combined with independent measures of practice and visitor experience.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/heritage9120500/s1, Table 1: Paired comparisons among professional role labels, Table 2: Exploratory demographic and professional omnibus tests, Table 3: Information-giver comparisons across experience groups, Table 4: Perceived relative importance in the primary sample (n = 76), with sensitivity mean ranks (n = 97), Table 5: Friedman tests and concordance in the primary and sensitivity samples., Figure 1: Perceived relative importance of professional roles among 76 respondents with valid complete rankings.

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Informed Consent Statement: The authors report voluntary participation and electronic consent for use of responses in this research and the resulting publication. The original participant-information and consent screen is unavailable in the study documentation. No directly identifying participant information is included in the manuscript or supplementary files.

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