



Impact of Curiosity and Exploration Feelings of Eastern Express Tourists on Travel Behavior

Doğu Ekspresi Turistlerinin Merak ve Keşif Duygularının Seyahat Davranışlarına Etkisi

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to evaluate how the feelings of curiosity and discovery among tourists who participated in the Touristic Eastern Express affect their intention to revisit, with tourist satisfaction serving as a mediating variable. A survey was used to collect data for the study. The research population consists of tourists who took part in the outbound and return trips between Ankara and Kars. The study's data was obtained from 185 participants who participated in both trips and who voluntarily supported the data collection process, with the researchers themselves also participating in the trips. The study findings revealed that the excitement and curiosity of tourists who participated in the Touristic Eastern Express affected their satisfaction during the trip. It was also concluded that the experiences and satisfaction of tourists during travel, affect their intention to the trip after the travelling. The study will fill an important gap in the literature with the empirical evidence it provides.

Keywords: Tourism, Touristic Eastern Express, Curiosity and Discovery, Tourist Satisfaction, Intention to Recommend

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Turistik Doğu Ekspresi'ne katılan turistlerde merak ve keşfetme duygularının, tekrar ziyaret etme niyetlerini nasıl etkilediğini değerlendirmek ve turist memnuniyetini aracı değişken olarak kullanmaktır. Çalışmada veri toplamak için anket kullanılmıştır. Araştırmanın evrenini Ankara-Kars arasındaki gidiş ve dönüş seferlerine katılan turistler oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmanın verileri, her iki sefere de katılan ve veri toplama sürecine gönüllü olarak destek veren 185 katılımcıdan, araştırmacıların da gezilere katılımıyla elde edilmiştir. Çalışma bulguları, Turistik Doğu Ekspresi'ne katılan turistlerin heyecan ve merak duygularının gezi sırasındaki memnuniyetlerini etkilediğini ortaya koymuştur. Ayrıca turistlerin seyahat sırasında yaşadıkları deneyimlerin ve memnuniyetlerinin, seyahatten sonra tavsiye etme niyetlerini etkilediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Çalışma, sağladığı ampirik kanıtlarla literatürde önemli bir boşluğu dolduracaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Turizm, Turistik Doğu Ekspresi, Merak ve Keşif, Turist Memnuniyeti, Tavsiye Etme Niyeti

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INTRODUCTION

Türkiye, which plays a major role in the growing global tourism market, has emerged as one of the top destinations worldwide for both tourist arrivals and tourism receipts. The statistics in the report of the Turkish Hoteliers' Association (2004) confirm this situation. In 2023, nearly 57 million tourists participated in tourism activities in Türkiye, and the country's tourism receipts exceeded 54 billion dollars. Türkiye, which is among the top 5 destinations in the world in terms of tourist numbers, is also working to enter the top 10 in terms of tourism receipts. Çevrimkaya et al. (2024) state that Turkish tourism will gain momentum in the post-pandemic period and that the country's share in the international tourism market will gradually increase

Türkiye's infrastructure and superstructure opportunities have an important role in gaining a good share of the world tourism market. It is possible that the country, which has many different attractive elements, also has values that can create a tourist resource in terms of transport. At this point, railway tourism has started to attract attention thanks to touristic train services in the country, and the Eastern Express has attracted the most attention (Alkan, 2018). The Eastern Express, which first started operating in 1949 for passenger transport on the Istanbul–Kars route (Doğan & Pekiner, 2018), has gained a touristic dimension over time, and in 2019, it started its services on the Ankara–Kars and Kars–Ankara routes as the Touristic Eastern Express (TCDD, 2022). The reasons why the Eastern Express has a nostalgic character (Güney & Kızıllırmak, 2021), offers a different experience (Bayraktar, 2020), and attracts great interest from young people and social media users (Korkusuz & Özdemir, 2020) are among the reasons why the Eastern Express serves as a tourist attraction. The touristic Eastern Express, which has served a large number of tourists since it started operating, has become one of the most important tourist attractions in Türkiye.

Due to its natural beauty, the Touristic Eastern Express, which is in great demand by travelers and photographers, offers passengers an interesting experience and the opportunity to see historical and cultural values. As there are about 500 tourist attractions registered on the Cultural Heritage Map of Türkiye on this route, it can be said that the Eastern Express is also a cultural heritage journey. The Touristic Eastern Express, which has been the focus of attention of travel enthusiasts in recent years, attracts great attention from hiking groups, photographers and young people (Akyol, 2021). The Touristic Eastern Express, which has recently been frequently featured in national and international media with an emphasis on slow "Slow Tourism", is also in demand by foreign tourists (Buluk & Eşitti, 2019).

Touristic Eastern Express trips, which contribute significantly to the sustainable development of the local economy, have become an important niche market for the tourism industry in Türkiye. The interest in the Touristic Eastern Express increases significantly with the content shared by travelers on social media (Eryılmaz & Yüçetürk, 2018), and these shares can arouse people's curiosity and influence their travel decisions (Doğan et al., 2018). On the other hand, as a result of mouth-of-mouth communication and repeated travel behaviors of tourists, the Touristic Eastern Express has become increasingly preferred. Individuals who have the opportunity to see historical and cultural values with the Touristic Eastern Express have an interesting touristic experience. Tourists who want to satisfy their curiosity and have a new and different experience prefer these tours. Based on this information, the study aims to determine the effects of the curiosity and discovery feelings of tourists participating in the Touristic Eastern Express on tourist satisfaction and repeat travel behavior. It is believed that the study, which concerns a niche market, will fill an important gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence.

1. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

1.1 Curiosity and Exploration

Without curiosity, it is difficult to understand the scientific and technological developments in our world. People have developed a sense of curiosity about various events or phenomena throughout their lives (Wagstaff et al., 2021). Curiosity is an emotion characterized by the desire to acquire new information, gain new experiences, and explore the unknown (Litman & Spielberger, 2003; Kang et al., 2009). Curiosity is a source of motivation that is aroused by new, complex or ambiguous stimuli (Litman & Jimerson, 2004), directs individuals to seek new information and experiences (Litman, 2005), and aims to close the knowledge gap (Loewenstein, 1994). According to behavioral science, curiosity is expressed as an internal drive that triggers novelty seeking, excitement seeking, and exploratory behavior (Berlyne, 1960), while according to psychological literature, curiosity is defined as the desire to fill the knowledge gap (Litman & Silvia, 2006).

Curiosity is the excitement and anxiety (affective curiosity) towards exploratory behavior and the pleasure of identifying knowledge gaps and accessing information (cognitive curiosity). It has a multidimensional structure that triggers the desire to learn and can control cognitive activities (Yazıcı & Kartal, 2020). Curiosity contributes to people's the social, psychological and behavioral development in many ways. Curiosity is believed to play an important role in the development of intelligence, wisdom, happiness, life satisfaction, distress tolerance and social relationships (Kashdan et al., 2009). Curiosity enhances people's creativity and ability to learn by encouraging the acquisition of knowledge. Curiosity, which is highly related to human emotions such as pleasure, satisfaction, uncertainty, deprivation and disappointment, enables people to know themselves and strengthens their social relationships (Sun et al., 2022). Curiosity has a significant impact on happiness and personal development (Reio & Sanders-Reio, 2020). Research shows that individuals with high levels of curiosity exhibit more growth-oriented behaviors, derive more meaning from life, and have higher levels of overall life satisfaction (Le Cunf, 2024). Researchers have also suggested that high levels of curiosity promote a range of psychological benefits, including happiness, problem-solving skills, self-confidence, open-mindedness thinking, and empathy (Silvia & Kashdan, 2009). In addition, curious people experience less depression, anxiety, and burnout. In this context, curiosity is an important indicator of psychological well-being (Whitecross & Smithson, 2023).

Curiosity triggers the desire to experience things firsthand. The desire to have real experiences increases the urge to travel. Throughout history, curiosity has driven people to discover new continents, islands, and cultures. In the modern world, people who want to escape the monotony of daily life seek out new places and experiences with this urge (Rojek, 1993). Travel has become a way for extroverted individuals to express and satisfy their curiosity (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). In other words, curiosity and a sense of discovery are important among the basic motivations for tourism.

As tourism has become an increasingly sophisticated consumer industry, understanding travelers' expectations and needs has become increasingly valuable, and understanding tourists' motivations has become an important goal of all tourism research (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). The process of creating tourism demand begins with motivation (Sharpley, 2008). There is a strong relationship between curiosity and motivation (Silvia, 2012). Curiosity and a sense of discovery motivate people to travel and influence travel decisions (Chen & Hsu, 2021; Douglas et al., 2024). Berlyne (1960) states that individuals with high curiosity have stronger exploration motivations than individuals with low curiosity. Tourism motivations, which are psychological, sociological and cultural phenomena, emerge and are shaped as a result of the interaction between people's psychology and culture. In terms of tourism, learning new things (epistemic curiosity) and discovering new places (perceptual curiosity) are important motivational factors (Mehmetoğlu, 2012). This strong link between curiosity

and discovery and tourism also promotes the expansion and development of the tourism industry. Actually, the number of people traveling with the urge of curiosity increases every year, and tourism managers and entrepreneurs strive to provide new and attractive experiences to satisfy these feelings of travelers. Based on this information, the H1 and H2 hypotheses tested in the research are given below:

H₁: Tourists' feelings of curiosity and exploration affect their satisfaction.

H₂: Tourists' feelings of curiosity and exploration affect their intention to recommend.

1.2 Tourist Satisfaction

Tourists' sense of curiosity and discovery are important factors that enrich their travel experiences and increase their satisfaction levels. Satisfaction results from the relationship between expectation and experience. According to Oliver's (1980) theory of disconfirmed expectations, satisfaction is a psychological state that results from comparing customers' pre-purchase expectations with their post-purchase perceptions. Kotler (1997) defines satisfaction as "a person's feeling of pleasure or disappointment when comparing the perceived performance (or outcome) of a product with his or her own expectations." When expectations are met, satisfaction occurs, and when they are not met, dissatisfaction occurs. In the service quality literature, expectations are viewed as consumers' desires or wishes, that is, what they think a service provider should offer, not what it offers (Parasuraman et.al. 1988). In this case, it can be said that lower expectations lead to higher satisfaction and vice versa (Su & Wall, 2009).

Tourist satisfaction, which is an important determinant of success in the tourism industry, emerges as a result of the subjective evaluation of the expectations and perceptions regarding a destination (Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Whether or not the expectations of the tourists are met (Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1988; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012), service quality (Liu & Yen, 2010; Shyju et al., 2021), emotional and experiential memories of the tourists (Otto & Ritchie, 1996) affect tourist satisfaction. Tourist satisfaction, which serves as a reliable criterion for evaluating overall performance, is becoming increasingly important for destination management organizations (Arslan & Şimşek 2022). Tourist satisfaction is accepted as an important indicator of the performance and competitiveness of a destination (Kozak, 2002; Korzay & Alvarez 2005) and influences tourists' destination choice and future behavior (Kozak & Rimmington, 2000; Bigné et al., 2001; Yoon & Uysal, 2005; Chen & Tsai, 2007). Based on this information, the H3 hypothesis tested in the research is given below:

H₃: Tourists' satisfaction affects their intention to recommend.

1.3 Intention to Recommend

Tourists' behavioral intentions refer to the actions they plan to take after travelling and the reasons for these actions (Zeithaml et al., 1996). Tourists' recommendations for a destination are one of the most effective non-commercial sources of information in the travel decision-making process (Pektaş et al., 2019). Recommendation behavior is the tendency to share a purchased product or service with others after experiencing it. This is usually directly related to the level of satisfaction experienced by tourists (Baker & Crompton, 2000; Bigné et al; 2005).

One of the important behavioral indicators that directly affects the success and sustainability of tourism is the recommendation of a destination by tourists. Anderson (1998) states that positive experiences increase the likelihood of recommendation, while negative experiences trigger the tendency to complain. Satisfying tourists' curiosity and sense of discovery increases their satisfaction. Satisfied consumers/tourists have higher loyalty and desire to share their experiences with others

(Cina, 1989). Recommendation intention is an important marketing element for the tourism industry and plays an important role in the promotion of destinations through word-of-mouth marketing and social media interactions (Litvin, et al., 2008). This situation supports the positive promotion of the destination and the long-term success of the destination. Based on this information, the H4 hypothesis tested in the research is given below:

H4: Satisfaction has a mediating role in the effect of tourists' curiosity and exploration feelings on their intention to recommend.

2. Metadology

2.1 Research Design, Model and Questionnaire

The aim of this study is to measure the effect of the curiosity and discovery feelings of tourists participating in the touristic Eastern Express on their visit intentions using tourist satisfaction as a mediator variable. In line with the study's objective, quantitative research methods were used, with a survey serving as the primary data collection tool. The survey consists of comprises four sections: one section collects demographic information about the participants, while the remaining three sections include scales that represent the variables examined in the study. For curiosity and discovery, the scale used by Kashdan et al. (2009) was used, which was adapted to the Turkish language and tested for validity and reliability (Akin, 2012; Acun et al., 2013). For tourist satisfaction and recommendation intention, Silik (2018) was used. Since domestic and foreign tourists participated in the trip at the same time, the survey was prepared in Turkish and English and physically printed. The statements in the scales were designed to obtain the opinions of the participants with the 5-point Likert method. The research model, which includes the variables whose relationships with the used scales were tested, is given in Figure 1.

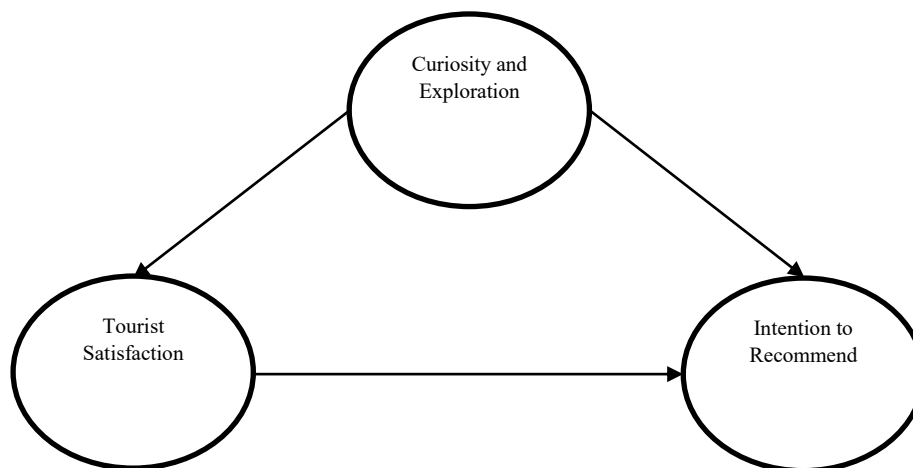


Figure 1: Model of the Research

2.2 Data Collection, Sampling and Analysis

The general population of the study consists of tourists who have travelled on the Touristic Eastern Express. However, since the travel to be collected data is a special product and the travel costs of train services are high, the research population of the study is 240 tourists who participated in two trips, one outbound and one return trip between Ankara–Kars and Kars–Ankara. The researchers participated in two (round-trip) train trips. Thus, both the surveys were collected face to face and the quantitative data were supported by the researcher's observations. The population from which data would be collected during the trips was determined by the convenience sampling method. All of the 240 tourists on the Ankara–Kars and Kars–Ankara routes who volunteered to participate in the study were included in the sample. Based on the recommendation to achieve a sample size of 10

times the scale expressions in the Smart PLS program software (Doğan, 2019), it was planned to obtain data from at least 160 of the 240 tourists on both trips by taking a total of 16 expressions in the scales as reference. As a result of the field study, 185 participants voluntarily supported the data collection process of the study and the analysis of the study was conducted out on the surveys obtained from 185 tourists. The data were collected on two train journeys, Ankara–Kars on January 8, 2024, and Kars–Ankara on January 10, 2024. This study was supported by the Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Sakarya University of Applied Sciences under project number 121-2023.

3. Results and Findings

In order to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants, frequency analysis was first used in the analysis process. The SPSS software was used to analyze the descriptive data of those who volunteered for the study. The frequency analysis revealed that approximately 60% of the participants were female. In developing countries, including Türkiye, there are negative perceptions regarding women's participation in social life. Based on the findings of this study, the increased participation of women in the Touristic Eastern Express, in other words, the active involvement of women in tourism-related activities, which are now considered a means of self-fulfillment, is thought to be significant in reflecting the country's changing socio-demographic characteristics. It was found that the majority of the participants were over 45 years old (55%), and almost half of them belonged to the highest income group indicated in the survey (45 thousand TL and above/5 thousand USD and above). Finally, it was found that the majority of the participants joined this tour as a result of a friend's recommendation and that the majority were those who organized individual tours.

3.1 Measurement Model

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) conducted for the measurement model confirmed a three-dimensional structure. All items related to tourist satisfaction and intention to recommend were included in the analysis, while six items from the curiosity and discovery scale were excluded. Although a situation that could be considered negative for a scale adapted to Turkish and whose validity and reliability analyses were conducted was encountered, the analyses were continued due to the high validity and reliability values (Table 2). The factor loadings for all expressions used in the analyses were determined to be above 0.60 (Table 1). This value can be expressed as appropriate values for social sciences (Coşkun et al., 2019). Table 1 also presents the Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), along with the arithmetic mean and standard deviation values for each item within the three-dimensional structure of the research.

Table 1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Dimensions (Structures)	Mean	S.D.	VIF	F. Load.
Curiosity and exploration				
I adopt different people, events or places.	3.430	1.343	1,466	0,763
I enjoy the uncertainties that may arise in daily life.	2.577	1.248	1,459	0,868
I enjoy discovering new things.	3.365	1.386	1,398	0,685
I enjoy doing things that have unpredictable outcomes.	2.723	1.230	1,448	0,811
Tourist satisfaction				
Overall, I was very satisfied with this trip.	3.991	0.987	3,715	0,974
Considering all the factors, I am happy with my decision to travel.	4.016	0.991	2,706	0,97
When I think about the experiences in this trip, it was wise to choose the touristic eastern express.	4.008	1.044	2,140	0,967
Intention to recommend				
I will say positive things about the touristic eastern express to the people around me.	4.308	0.869	3,053	0,972
I will recommend the touristic eastern express to the people who ask for my travel advice.	4.252	0.919	6,552	0,984
I will encourage my friends or relatives to travel on the touristic eastern express.	4.276	0.908	8,048	0,985

As a result of the factor analysis conducted in the research, it was found that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) coefficient for each dimension exceeded the reference value of 0.50 established for the social sciences (Hair et al., 2010). The square roots of the AVE values were examined to ensure convergent validity, and these values were found to be greater than the correlation values for each dimension. This confirms that the research achieves convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

In the Fornell-Larcker Criterion evaluation, it is expected that all values in the rows and columns are lower than the values in bold. For the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) evaluation, values should be between 0 and 1, with the expectation that they remain below 0.90 (Hair et al., 2017). The adherence to these expected scenarios for both Fornell-Larcker and HTMT criteria indicates that the study provides discriminant validity.

Table 2. Reliability and Validity

Variables	Fornell-Larcker Criterion			Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Curiosity and Exploration (1)	0,701					
Tourist Satisfaction (2)	0,379	0,970		0,410		
Intention to Recommend (3)	0,244	0,852	0,980	0,237	0,775	-
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>	0.718	0.939	0.979			
<i>Reliability Coefficient (Rho_A)</i>	0.816	0.969	0.971			
<i>Composite Reliability</i>	0.785	0.980	0.986			
<i>AVE</i>	0.521	0.942	0.960			

Cronbach's Alpha, Reliability Coefficient (Rho_A) and Composite Reliability tests were used to determine the reliability of the three measurement tools used in the research. For these three different reliability tests, the expressions obtained reliability values ranging from 0.986 to 0.718 (Table 2). It can be said that this value range for all three tests in the literature is suitable for data reliability in the field of social sciences (Şengel et al., 2023). In this direction, it can be said that the values in the research have a high reliability rate.

3.2 Structural Model

The suitability of the structural model and the acceptance status of the hypothesis tests are presented in Table 3. In the studies, the SRMR (RMSEA) value is expected to be below 0.08 and the NFI value is expected to be above 0.80 (Karagöz, 2017). The primary expectation for the Normed Fit Index (NFI) is to be above 0.90. In analyses conducted with SmartPLS, it is also considered acceptable for the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) value to be below 0.10 (Domínguez-Quintero et al., 2020). When the model fit values of the study are taken into consideration, the SRMR value is 0.071 and the NFI value is 0.882. According to these values, it can be said that the model fit index in the study is at an acceptable level.

Table 3. Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis	Path Coefficients	t-value	p-value	supported	SRMR	NFI
Direct Effects						
H ₁ : CE ->-> TS	0.379	5.574	0.000**	Yes	0.071	0.882
H ₂ : CE ->-> IRC	-0.093	1.307	0.191	No		
H ₃ : TS ->-> IRC	0.887	21.849	0.000**	Yes		
Mediating Effect						
H ₄ : CE ->-> TS ->-> IRC	0.336	5.198	0.000**	Yes		

** Significant at $p < 0.01$ level

$t > 1.96$

CE: Curiosity and Exploration, TS: Tourist Satisfaction, IRC: Intention to Recommend

Table 3 shows that three of the four hypotheses tested for relationships between variables are supported. Tourists' feelings of curiosity and discovery affect their satisfaction (β : 0.379, t : 5.574, p : 0.000). Similarly, tourists' satisfaction affects their intention to recommend (β : 0.887, t : 21.849, p : 0.000). In this case, H1 and H3 are supported. Another hypothesis related to the direct effect is that tourists' feelings of curiosity and discovery affect their intention to recommend. According to the results hypothesis H2 is not supported (β : -0.093, t : 1.307, p : 0.191). There is also an indirect hypothesis in the study that reveals the relationships between the variables. It was found that the feelings of curiosity and discovery affect the intention to recommend, and that tourist satisfaction resulting from experience mediates this effect. In this case, the study supported hypothesis H4 (β : 0.336, t : 5.198, p : 0.000).

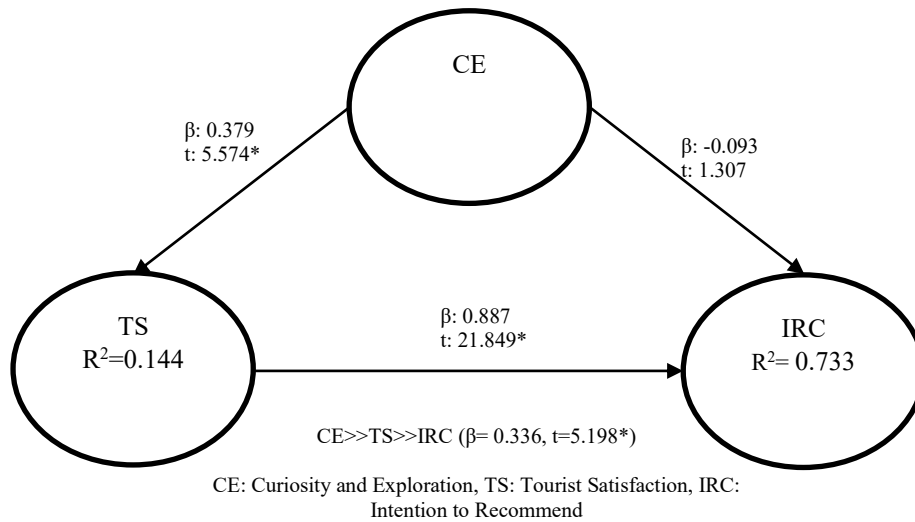


Figure 2. PLS Results

The PLS results of the model showing the relationships between the study variables are shown in Figure 2. The model incorporates the extent to which the independent variables explain the variance in the dependent variables. The R^2 value for the tourists' recommendation intention is 0.733. 73.3% of the intention to recommend of the tourists who participated in the touristic Eastern Express are explained by the independent variables in the model. It is known that the explanatory power of the models with an explanatory power of 50% and around this is moderate level (Chin, 1998). Similarly, in the study conducted by Nikbin and Hyun (2017), the explanatory power information between the dependent and independent variables is considered at levels close to this. This information shows that the final (result) dependent variable in the study, the recommendation intention, is explained by the independent variables of curiosity and discovery and tourist satisfaction in the model, which can be considered high (73.3%).

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The study concluded that the feelings of curiosity and discovery of tourists who prefer a special product with specific characteristics (Touristic Eastern Express), influence their satisfaction during trip. Similar relationships have been found in the tourism literature (Ciasullo et al., 2019; Totsune et al., 2021; Goo et al., 2022). Thus, there are also studies showing that Eastern Express tourists have a high level of satisfaction with these experiences (Bingöl & Akoğlu Kozak, 2020; Korkusuz & Özdemir, 2020; Orhan & Hacıoğlu, 2024). It was also concluded that the satisfaction of Eastern Express tourists during the trip affects their post-travel experiences and their intention to recommend in this context. Excitement and curiosity do not directly affect the intention to recommend. There are also studies conducted on the Eastern Express that have found parallel results to this result (Demiral & Gelibolu,

2019; Derinalp Çanakçı et al., 2019; Arslan & Şimşek, 2022). The existence of studies in the literature that reveal linear relationships between tourist satisfaction and behavioral intention tested in different areas related to tourism and with different participant groups is also noteworthy (Huang et al., 2015; Ardani et al., 2019; Mohammadi et al., 2023).

As outlined in the research design, while curiosity and discovery are pre-experience emotions, whereas the intention to recommend is a behavior that arises as a result of the experience. This distinction may have influenced the conclusions of the study. Conlin and Bird (2014) found similar results in their research, highlighting the significance of the experiential aspect in shaping tourist behavior post-travel. Indeed, tourists' feelings of curiosity and discovery affect their intention to recommend through the mediating role of tourist satisfaction. The literature includes studies demonstrating the mediating role of tourist satisfaction when behavioral intentions are influenced by different factors (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Solis-Radilla et al., 2021). Thus, experience can be seen as the central element that guides the relationships between the variables examined in this study.

4.1 Theoretical Implications

In studies on tourists, variables such as travel intention, revisit intention and recommendation intention, which are frequently preferred, usually reveal tourists' purchasing tendencies. In this context, relevant studies either support or develop the planned behavior theory (Oldmeadow et al., 2013). As a result, some attitudes encourage or prevent behavior (Kovačić et al., 2019). In this study, it was concluded that curiosity and discovery trigger tourist behavior. It is stated in the literature that emotions such as curiosity or discovery stand out as a dynamic that activates tourist behavior (Teichmann & Zins, 2009; Wang et al., 2022). It can be said that the results of this study support the planned behavior theory.

The results of this study also produce results that support the Rational Choice Theory. Indeed, this theory has focused on the tendency for people or consumers to exhibit behaviors that attract their attention and maximize their interests (Hechter, M., & Kanazawa, 1997; Bouffard & Wolf, 2007). This theory states that individuals act independently in a full information environment, exhibit a selfish attitude, and develop behaviors by thinking about the points where their own benefits are maximum at this point (Scott, 2000; Wittek, 2013). This study reveals that feelings of curiosity and discovery attract tourists' attention to the Eastern Express. A link can be established between the maximum benefit expectation in the theory and tourist satisfaction. Based on this, it is thought that a behavioral action that can encourage repeat purchases can be encouraged with the intention of recommending tourists (Abell, 2000; Han & Hyun, 2017; Han et al., 2020). Thus, this study supports the Rational Choice Theory in the context of the interaction between interest, benefit, and behavioral action.

Another important theoretical contribution of this study is the Disconfirmed Expectations Theory. Experience has been identified as an important element in shaping the variables in this study. Because satisfaction emerges as a result of the relationship between expectation and experience. According to Oliver (1980)'s Disconfirmed Expectations Theory, satisfaction is a psychological state that emerges as a result of comparing customers' pre-purchase expectations with their post-consumption perceptions. The elements that shape expectation in the study are curiosity and feelings of discovery. The experiences that occur as a result of these states reveal satisfaction. The relationships between the two elements affect the behavioral tendencies after the experience.

4.2 Practical Implications

As a special touristic product, the Touristic Eastern Express continues to offer special experiences for tourists, especially in the winter season. The Touristic Eastern Express allows tourists to have unique experiences in six different destinations consisting of provinces and districts. Tourists have the opportunity to experience many resources, especially culture, which can be rural or authentic. Korkusuz and Özdemir (2020) emphasized the decisive role of experience in this study. Tourists who share their experiences, especially through social media platforms, make this trip an important element of curiosity for potential tourists. Soylu (2019) addresses the leading role of social media in this regard in his study. Thus, tourists begin to have a desire to travel with the Touristic Eastern Express to discover this experience. It is recommended that the relevant public authorities use mass promotion tools that will highlight emotional states such as experience and discovery.

In the study, the attitudes of tourists such as curiosity and discovery, satisfaction and recommendation intention were presented as empirical results. Tourists who participated in the Touristic Eastern Express constitute a high profile with feelings of curiosity and discovery. Letherby and Reynolds (2005) included evaluations supporting this determination in their study. Although they had various concerns especially about service quality during the trip, it was concluded that these tourists generally had high levels of satisfaction and a tendency to recommend this product. Van Hagen et al. (2007) found in their study that tourists who preferred train travel exhibited high levels of satisfaction and a tendency toward repeat consumption behavior. Despite these results, some minor negative experiences related to some services on the train during the trip were noticeable. In this respect, the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure/Türkiye, to which the Touristic Eastern Express is affiliated, and the relevant units affiliated to the ministry need to solve the problems that cause negative experiences, especially the toilets and cafeterias.

The results of the study highlight the tourist experience as an indirect factor. In addition to the train experiences of tourists during their travel, the Touristic Eastern Express also experiences three hours of destinations at different destinations where the train stops in both directions. Some of these destinations are small destinations and are difficult to reach by road. The Touristic Eastern Express acts as a locomotive in the development of these destinations (Kaygın et al., 2021; Güçlü and Kıran, 2023). Tourists care about experiencing different destinations other than the train during their travel. However, it has been observed that there are also negativities regarding the transportation provided to the destinations at the train station and the food and beverage quality at the destinations. It is important for stakeholders in the relevant destinations, especially local governments, to make investments on the subject. Because even though it is short-term and does not accommodate, Touristic Eastern Express tourists provide significant social and economic gains to these destinations. Su and Wall (2009) conducted a study on tourists who traveled to Tibet by train and found that tourist satisfaction was high and train travel was one of the most important motivations for participants to visit relevant destinations. In this respect, destinations on the train route gain social and economic gains. In addition, due to the reverse operation of the distribution system in tourism, tourists go to these local destinations. The service quality and hospitality that will be created paves the way for overland tours with accommodation. As a result, images of this journey on the train are generally included on social media platforms and traditional media channels. Orhan and Hocaoglu (2024) supported these results by pointing out social media posts as a motivation for tourists to join the Eastern Express. It is important that the destinations where the trains stop are also processed in traditional and social media by relevant stakeholders as part of this trip.

4.3 Limitations and Future Studies

This study reveals significant results regarding the curiosity and discovery feelings of tourists who participated in the touristic Eastern Express, their satisfaction and intention to recommend. However, the collection of data face to face and through dialogue caused the participants to give more cautious answers. In order to clearly reveal the results of this touristic experience, qualitative methods and especially studies using the participant observation technique as a data collection tool can be conducted. It is important for researchers to travel as a tourist who directly experiences the trip, so that it is not obvious that they are conducting research.

This study was conducted within the scope of a specific project, and the data collection process was carried out on the dates specified in accordance with the project schedule. This situation has resulted in a concentration of the participant profile within a particular pattern. Therefore, the replication of this study by different researchers at different time periods will facilitate data collection from participants with diverse profiles and contribute significantly to the literature.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest: *The authors declare that they do not have a conflict of interest with themselves and/or other third parties and institutions, or if so, how this conflict of interest arose and will be resolved, and author contribution declaration forms are added to the article process files with wet signatures.*

Ethical Approval Statement: *This study was ethically approved in accordance with Decision No. 19 taken at the 40th meeting of the Sakarya University of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee, held on January 11, 2024.*

Funding: *This study was supported by the Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Sakarya University of Applied Sciences under project number 121-2023.*

Acknowledgements: *The authors would like to thank the Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Sakarya University of Applied Sciences for supporting this study.*

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