



# ASSOCIATION FOR CONSUMER RESEARCH

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## **Dynamics of Consumption Experience – the Case of Eastern Express in Turkey**

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This study shows that consumption experiences constitute embodied phenomena and unfold in different patterns across time. Results suggest that sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions strongly differ in their potential for prospection and retrospection. The findings provide ample opportunities for (re)connecting with consumers via a plethora of currently unused touchpoints.

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# Dynamics of Consumption Experience – The Case of Eastern Express in Turkey

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Delivering seamless consumption experiences has been a key priority for marketing scholars and practitioners over the past years (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef 2016). In fact, companies are increasingly seeking to expand their on-site experience towards early pre- and later post-consumption stages in the context of digital transformation. However, the question remains how to create consistent, memorable and seamless experiences. And even more important: How do consumption experiences unfold over time? This study targets to answer these questions and provides empirical evidence on the dynamic nature of experiential consumption.

Consumption experiences (CX) are subjective and embodied occurrences based on the interaction of the consumer and the environment (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). They involve a great degree of sensory stimulation and can vary considerably in their intensity, valence and time-frame. Although extant research has accumulated a large body of knowledge addressing the nature of the concept, its dimensions, measurement, and consumers' responses (e.g., Brakus et al., 2009), it is striking that scholars have yet begun to conceptualize experiences from a dynamic perspective (e.g., Voorhees et al. 2017). This development is important because a considerable amount of the experience occurs during pre-consumption (i.e., need-recognition, information search, initial contact and booking) and post-consumption stages (i.e., memory retrieval, formation of attitudes and future behavior). Building on this dynamic perspective, the present research follows the call from Lemon and Verhoef (2016) towards a more journey-oriented, consumer-centric approach in the study of CX. We therefore conceptualize CX as embodied phenomenon (Barsalou, 2008), with consumers starting to form sensory perceptions, feelings and thoughts from early pre-consumption stage on towards the core encounter, storing them in memory and retrieving them as mental simulations throughout later post-consumption stages (Reitsamer et al. 2020). Since much of these projections and retrievals tend to be more positive than consumers' actual moment-by-moment evaluation (Wirtz et al., 2003), our study further builds on the rosy prospecting and retrospection principle from cognitive science (Mitchell et al. 1997).

Our longitudinal research design follows a qualitative case study approach to explore CX over a period of four weeks. The context revolves around the Eastern Express (Doğu Ekspresi), an overnight passenger train departing from the Turkish capital Ankara to the city of Kars. Given the popularity and significance of the train ride, its long history and the high degree of sensory stimulation, the journey represents a suitable research setting to study the dynamics of CX. An ethnographic field study consisting out of three waves was conducted in February 2019. A total of 30 semi-structured interviews (each participant was interviewed before, during and after the train journey) and corresponding observational field notes were collected.

Results show that sensory, emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions of CX strongly differ in both their importance and their potential for prospecting and retrospection. Among sensory cues, visual and motor impressions constitute the most important drivers for retrospection. Absorbing scenic impressions and sensing the continuous movement of the train resulted in rich cognitive schemata, which became stronger and more positive throughout post-consumption. This is consistent with previous consumer research confirming the

dominant role of visual and motor input (Hecht and Reiner 2009). Auditory and haptic properties, however, played a subordinate role for both pro- and retrospection, even though previous research found that audition and touch become equally important to vision throughout post-stages (Fenko et al. 2010). The smoothing potential of the rosy view was particularly salient for olfactory impressions, as negative perceptions faded completely during later stages. Conversely, negative gustatory impressions persisted throughout post-consumption, unsusceptible of any rosy momentum. Similar to sensory input, emotions act as strong driver for cognitive processing. Particularly joy, comfort and happiness expressed during early stages of the experience gave rise to even more positive retrospective moments. As with sensory input, certain emotions were found to fade quickly (disgust), whereas others (dissatisfaction) continued to persist at later stages. Likewise, cognitive moments of nostalgia and learning simplified prospecting and retrospection, as they enabled participants to relate the experience directly with their personal lives. Among behaviors, talking about the journey and sharing the experience with others constituted the two most prevalent themes. The conversational element was crucial during the journey and further expanded to post-stages by means of digital, customer-induced touchpoints (WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook, Instagram).

Practical implications of this study are manifold. From a corporate perspective, it is surprising how many (digital) touchpoints for interaction, bonding and persuasion remain unexploited during all three stages. Although consumers are taking the initiative for interaction with each other, show a clear desire to stay in touch and want to repeat similar experiences, the service provider in this study almost exclusively focused on the core-encounter and only showed marginal efforts to interact with consumers during pre- or post-core stages. Drawing on the study's results, firms are well advised to focus their CX strategies on visual and motor content and transfer them to pre- and post-encounters via company-induced, digital touchpoints. Since participants showed a strong tendency to share their experiences, firms need to ease the sharing process on digital channels, for example, by using memorable hashtags, creating social media sites of interest for their target audience or a dedicated mobile app to connect with co-travelers. Further, firms could stimulate cognitive learning experiences by providing a digital tour guide.

The present study is not without limitations as it focused on a specific peak-experience with a high level of visual and motor input people tend to remember well. Further, the valence of each experiential dimension might vary considerably in other servicescapes, different cultural areas or for alternative configurations along the product-service continuum. Lastly, since the sample consisted of a predominantly young group of international travelers, it would be interesting to study how touchpoints and retrospection differ for other target segments, such as elderly travelers.

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