

Comparison of Opinions on Sakarya / Karasu and Balıkesir / Gömeç Beaches

Cevdet Avcıkurt • Mehmet Sarioğlu • Gözde Kumaş



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Preface

The sustainability of natural resources is crucial for economic and sociological success in tourism. The threat of natural resource depletion, exacerbated by negative factors such as global warming, which is becoming increasingly significant, plays a role in the success of the tourism industry. This study examines the beaches preferred by tourists and local visitors in the Marmara Region, specifically Sakarya, which borders the Black Sea, and Balıkesir, which borders both the Marmara and Aegean Seas. The research area consists of the Karasu beach in Sakarya and the Gömeç beach in Balıkesir. The aim of the study is to determine and compare the opinions of locals and tourists visiting the Sakarya/Karasu beach on the Black Sea beach and the Balıkesir/Gömeç beach on the Aegean Sea beach about the beaches. It is of great importance to create opportunities for hospitals in the region to meet international standards so that visitors can choose the Karasu and Gömeç regions and benefit from health tourism through the beaches, as well as to raise awareness about the preservation of the region's natural beauty.

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1.Introduction

Countries' valuable natural resources may be damaged and face the risk of extinction due to reasons such as population growth, global warming, and unconscious consumption. This is particularly important in industries such as tourism, where the human element is intense on both the consuming and producing sides and which involve mobility on a national and international scale. There are natural resources that need to be protected in many parts of Turkey. As Turkey is one of the important destinations preferred by international tourists, the importance of this issue increases even more. Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom rank among the top three countries of origin for visitors to Turkey (UNWTO, 2022), while the total number of visitors to Turkey in March 2024 increased by 19.6% compared to the same month last year, reaching 3,388,117 people (TÜROFED, 2024). These figures give a rough idea of the profiles and expectations of tourists coming to our country. Visitors from cold countries such as Russia and Germany mostly come to Turkey to enjoy the summer months. Therefore, the importance that should be given to Turkey's beachline becomes clear.

A study conducted on Lake Salda, one of Turkey's natural resources (Temurçina & Tozkoparan, 2020), revealed that visitors' evaluations of Lake Salda highlighted deficiencies in the infrastructure and superstructure around the lake. The study emphasized that with the sudden increase in demand for the destination, accommodation facilities around the lake were insufficient, and existing facilities were lacking in terms of cleanliness and hygiene. It has been suggested that social activities around the lake do not meet demand and that new projects in this regard should be carried out without harming the natural environment. Recommendations have also been made to strengthen the promotion and marketing efforts of the lake destination and the district in general. The need to prepare an effective website to promote the city and organize services in a more planned manner by identifying tourist profiles has been emphasized.

Turkey is a country surrounded by seas on three sides and rich in water resources such as seas, lakes, streams, rivers, and creeks. However, over the years, natural resources have been damaged due to factors such as population growth, increased consumption, and global warming. Recent studies on the causes of marine pollution between 2012 and 2022 show that since 2012, “domestic wastewater” has caused the most damage to the seas at a steady rate. This damage began to decrease after 2019. After 2019, the causes of pollution that showed the highest increase were, respectively, “rain/flood waters” and “sea/lake transportation” (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, 2023:42). In a study conducted on environmental issues across Turkey, the prominent factors were “waste” in Sakarya, where Karasu District is located, and “water pollution” in Balıkesir, where Gömeç District is located (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, 2023:9-10). The most significant factor in the pollution of the Aegean Sea, on whose beach Gömeç is located, was “rain and flood waters” at 99%, while the most significant factor in the pollution of the Black Sea, on whose beach Karasu is located, was “discharge of domestic waste into the sea/swimming water” at 63%. (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, 2023:41).

At this point, the importance of protecting natural resources and ensuring sustainability becomes apparent. This study, which examines the beachlines of the districts of Karasu, bordering the Black Sea, and Gömeç, bordering the Aegean Sea, both significant tourist destinations located in the provinces of Sakarya and Balıkesir in Turkey’s Marmara Region, aims to protect the beachlines through the seas and shores, informing the public about the characteristics of the shores, and enabling the public to benefit from the strengths of the shores. It is necessary to be aware of the benefits of natural resources for the health of living beings, the cultural richness of the region, and to carry out environmental protection activities as a whole. The research will highlight the characteristics of the shores that are relevant to health tourism and make recommendations regarding the protection of the natural structure and the long-term use of this potential benefit. The measures to be taken by the relevant parties will contribute socially and economically to the sustainability of tourism, the increased welfare of the local population, the satisfaction of the local and foreign human resources benefiting from natural resources, and the increased recognition of the region. It is expected that there will be an increase in visits to the regions by national and international tourists (Oğurlu et al., 2025; Buzlukçu, 2023; Özgürel & Buzlukçu, 2023; Buzlukçu & Curkan, 2022).

2. Destination Attractiveness

Destinations are important for the sustainability of tourism activities because they are attractive centers for tourists. The attractive features of destinations add value to the region economically, socially, and culturally. While the local population of the region gains economic benefits through tourist activities, they can also achieve global recognition by introducing their culture to local and foreign tourists. At the same time, this recognition process ensures the sustainability of values. The point to note is carrying capacity. By taking into account the criteria of social, physical, and economic carrying capacity, it will be possible to benefit from tourism in the region in a healthy way (Bostan Sarıoğlu & Deveci, 2021).

2.1. The Concept of Destination Attractiveness

The word “destination” is derived from the French word “destination” and means “the place to be reached” (TDK, 2025). The term “destination” has been defined in many ways in the literature. According to Leiper (1995:87), destinations are defined as “places where people travel and choose to stay for a period of time to experience certain features or characteristics, a kind of perceived attraction.” Buhalis (2000), on the other hand, argues that destinations can be interpreted subjectively by consumers, that psychographic and demographic characteristics can play a role in this definition, and that there may be a perceptual aspect depending on various factors such as the travel experience and the purpose of the visit. A destination consists of both the existing physical space and the natural and added appeal features of the destination, and these elements can be interpreted positively or negatively by local and foreign tourists (Ruiz Real et al., 2021:1). To consider the concept of destination more broadly, it is possible to say that all elements such as similar culture, climate, natural conditions, natural and cultural wealth, recreational activities provided to tourists, accommodation facilities, local and various gastronomic values, and ease of transportation

and communication create a tourist destination (Koç and Eren, 2017:59). The characteristics of destinations examined by Buhalis (2000:98) in six groups are listed below.

- **Attractions:** These represent the natural and cultural values possessed by destinations. Destinations are also divided into two categories: natural and artificial. These elements have specific purposes. Destinations encompass products, works, and special events that have been passed down from the past to the present as heritage (Kilinç et al., 2019:3).
- **Accessibility:** One of the characteristics that destinations with appeal capable of arousing curiosity, interest, and demand among tourists must possess is accessibility. Being able to reach destinations via fast, safe, comfortable, economical, and alternative transportation networks increases the desirability of that area. Furthermore, these conveniences add value to marketing efforts. Destinations that have unlimited appeal but lack sufficient accessibility and comfort cannot attract potential demand in the tourism market (Ünal, 2020:8).
- **Facilities:** Destinations with sufficient tourist attractions, resources, and accessibility must have accommodation, food and beverage, entertainment, and shopping facilities that meet the demand of tourists who choose them (Şengül et al., 2018:13).
- **Package Tours:** A product with combined features that meets all the needs of individuals participating in tourism activities from the beginning to the end of their trip and is sold at a single price is described as a package tour (Genç, 2016:1014).
- **Activities:** Destinations attract tourists not only with their physical, geographical, cultural, and historical features, but also with the variety of activities they offer. Tourists seeking different experiences are influenced by a wide range of activities (Şengül et al., 2018:19).
- **Complementary - Supporting Elements:** These refer to the availability, practicality, and usability of services that tourists may need during their destination experience, such as banks, currency exchange offices, telephones, internet, post offices, news agencies, and hospitals (Ünal, 2020:8).

Destinations are regions that offer visitors unique natural and cultural beauty and distinct attractions (Karaçar & Göker, 2016:74). Destinations are also considered to be well-defined geographical areas such as countries, islands, or cities. Destinations characterize a geographical area with all their

features (Aydoğdu and Duman, 2017:7). All of this shows that destinations are tourist attractions that can be strong or weak. Some of the destinations that form attraction centers are listed below (Yuksel and Arıkan, 2009:1114):

- Cities, villages, and small towns,
- Islands and resorts,
- Protected areas (especially rural areas and national parks),
- Geographical regions and countries.

Attractiveness refers to the state of being attractive, charm, appeal, or allure. A product or service that is an element of charm or a source of attractiveness can arouse interest by appealing to people's desires and tastes. Destination attractiveness, on the other hand, is evaluated as the ability of tourist destinations to meet the desires and needs of tourists. A destination is perceived as attractive to the extent that it can meet the needs of tourists, and its preference among tourists increases. However, it is also stated that destination attractiveness depends on the feelings, ideas, and beliefs that influence the tourist's perceived satisfaction with the destination (Akkuş and Dağıstan, 2020:135). Therefore, at this point, providing tourists with an unforgettable tourism experience at their destination will help shape their perceptions in a positive direction and encourage them to repeat their purchase behavior. This is because the attractiveness of a tourism destination is defined as the feelings, beliefs, and thoughts tourists have about its perceived ability to satisfy their specific vacation needs (Kutvan and Kutvan, 2013:181).

Attractiveness, as a factor drawing tourists to a particular place, is presented as a combination of many fundamental and complex elements. Destination attractiveness and the appealing factors within a destination are determinants that influence tourists' concrete choices and will also play a guiding role for other tourists. When tourists hesitate between various destinations during their selection process, if the accommodation conditions, prices, and accessibility of the destinations are the same, attraction factors help tourists make their final decisions (Blazeska et al., 2015:344). While some destinations are rich in natural, cultural, and historical resources, others may be lacking in natural resources and infrastructure. Events organized and artificial attractions created in a destination lacking natural, cultural, and historical resources can succeed in influencing tourism demand. The attractive factors at the destination and the references of other tourists who have previously visited the region positively or negatively affect people's motivation to travel (Gnoth, 1997:288; Yıldırım, 2017:6).

2.2. Destination Attraction Factors

Tourist attraction elements consist of various positive factors that enable tourists to have an enjoyable time at their destinations and encourage them to return to those destinations. Attraction elements are fundamental to the travel and tourism industry. Attraction centers represent a positive perception of a place, which forms the basis of competition between destinations (Özdemir, 2014:40-41).

Destinations possess elements of appeal such as shopping, dining, transportation, accommodation, infrastructure, natural and cultural environment, history, and architectural structures (Ünlüönen and Çimen, 2011:355). On the other hand, climate, scenery, beaches, mountains, and natural elements are decisive in tourists' destination preferences, while hotels and transportation facilities, package programs, and tours and facilities for sports and recreation that can be adapted to tourists' preferences are considered attractive elements (Ariya et al., 2017:4). According to Kozak (2006:127), attractions consist of the fundamental elements that determine the destination tourists wish to travel to. These are examined as natural (climate, natural beauty, plant species, etc.); socio-cultural (weddings, marriage, museums, places of worship, etc.); economic (purchasing power, infrastructure facilities, etc.); and psychological (traditions, customs, behaviors, etc.) elements.

Crouch (2007) classifies the attractions that influence destination selection for travelers into three categories: amenities, core attractions, and landscape features. Facilities encompass factors such as accommodation, weather, food, safety, roads, and hospitality; key attractions include the social environment, nightlife, sporting activities, and shopping opportunities; while landscape features cover factors related to the cultural and natural environment of the destination (Correia et al., 2007:77). In addition, authenticity has been included in destination attractions. Authenticity is defined as destination attractions that existed before the development of modern tourism and are entirely local, not mass-produced or produced for industrial purposes, such as architecture, cuisine, intangible heritage, and the natural environment (Yıldırım, 2017:7).

Destinations rich in attractions fail to effectively utilize their resources, leading to failure in the tourism sector compared to other destinations (Akyurt, 2008:15). The effective use of destination attractiveness elements helps destinations maintain their presence in the market and create awareness in the minds of tourists. By revealing the unique characteristics of different destination types and using different appeal elements to persuade tourists,

marketing efforts can also be successful (Şengül et al., 2018:24). Liu et al. (2017) approach destination attractiveness factors as a multidimensional concept, considering them as mystery, richness, charm, uniqueness, suitability, and warmth.

2.2.1. Mystery

Humans feel fear towards events they do not know, recognize, or understand, yet at the same time, they harbor a strong sense of curiosity towards this power. Since ancient times, humans have been afraid of wild animals, thunder, lightning, and fire-spewing volcanoes, as well as demons and ghosts originating from their own imaginations and reflected on cave walls by shadows. They have been trying to make sense of these events (Özkan, 2019:159).

The concept of mystery is used as a determinant of tourists' efforts to discover the stories of a destination and the extent to which destinations inspire tourists' motivation to explore (Kaplan, 1995). Within the framework of mystery, Berto and colleagues (2008) later stated that "storytelling" serves as an example of appeal. Turkey is a tourism country that opens its doors to tourist groups with different types of needs and desires in many areas. Behind every door that opens are legends and stories with thousands of years of history, which are mysterious elements that attract tourists (Polat and Batman, 2010:368). Tourists also find historical sources attractive for various reasons. The historical textures left behind by ancient civilizations and the legends, stories, and fairy tales told within these historical places can also influence tourists (Gülüm, 2015:93). This is because these lands, which have been home to multiple cultures from the past to the present, inevitably bear traces of other cultures as well.

Tourists' desire to immerse themselves more deeply in local culture is the fundamental motivation behind authenticity and mystical travel. Tourist destinations bearing mystical traces of the past provide them with unique characteristics and increase their appeal. The authentic texture of tourist destinations influences memorable experiences, meaning that the more mystical stories a destination has, the more memorable it becomes (Avcı, 2021:95). For example, in their research on destinations, Liu and colleagues (2017) addressed topics related to mystery in rural tourism, mountain tourism, and film tourism. In Scottish destinations, tales about ghosts have been created in mysterious Scottish historical sites. In southwestern China, the film adaptation of the novel "Lost Horizon" aimed to inspire admiration for the Shangri-La destinations.

2.2.2. Wealth

Richness is defined as the diversity of tourism resources in a destination. Richness ensures that tourists' interest is drawn to various interesting and meaningful tourism resources in a destination (Liu et al., 2017:257). High richness causes tourists' attention to be shaped around various interesting and meaningful tourism resources in a destination. Kaplan (1995) argues that the restorative environment must have sufficient destination breadth, meaning it must be sufficiently "rich" and "consistent" for tourists to engage in attractive experiences. From the tourist's perspective, the richness of tourism resources, including both natural and cultural resources, is essential for the competitiveness of the destination. Destination richness not only enhances the perception of restoration in the region but also increases tourists' intention to revisit the region (Dwyer and Kim, 2003).

All resources of a destination, such as its climate, terrain and topography, vegetation, natural monuments, hot springs, healing waters, animal species, beaches, natural beauty, geological formations, potable water sources, and environmental values, are considered natural tourism resources (Ayaş, 2007:64). The abundance of these resources in a destination increases the wealth of that region. For example, in their study, Wang and colleagues (2020:174) found that the historical, cultural, streets, temples, festivals, local life, food, safe environment, and warm-hearted residents contribute to the destination's richness, attracting visitors and encouraging them to return to this historic destination for further exploration. Furthermore, Aktaş and colleagues (2007) stated in their studies that tourists prefer to visit destinations with rich tourism resources.

2.2.3. Attraction

Destination appeal is defined as the degree to which a destination motivates tourists to spend time enjoying a pleasant experience. Destination appeal is actually a subject with a strong subjective aspect, determined by tourists' own aesthetic judgments (Kirillova et al., 2014). Therefore, destination appeal is particularly related to tourists' subjective preferences. For example, Moscardo (2004) states that tourists find large shopping centers attractive only when they offer the shopping activities they prefer.

The appeal of a travel destination reflects a tourist's feelings, beliefs, and opinions about the destination's perceived ability to satisfy their needs. The more a tourist believes that a tourism destination will meet their vacation needs, the more attractive that region will be to that tourist, and the higher the likelihood that tourist will choose it (Hu and Ritche, 1993:26).

Botti and colleagues (2008) divide the elements that create attraction in destinations into two groups: main elements and smaller attraction elements. A destination's main attraction can last longer and guide tourists in both exploration and escape. In contrast, a destination's smaller attraction element can only be preserved for a short period and can only guide visitors in their experience. In other words, while small attractions give tourists the opportunity to look at an environment, main attractions can help tourists completely disconnect from their daily work mode and fully enjoy restoration.

A destination may contain many attractions, but it can only highlight one or a few of these attractions. The attractions that differentiate one region from another include cultural and historical values, artistic activities, sporting activities, entertainment, shopping opportunities, and cuisine (Şengül and Türkay, 2016:65). In his research, Kızılırmak (2006) stated that local events organized in Turkey are seen as centers of attraction in terms of tourism, despite being narrow in scope and local or regional in nature, and that local events organized throughout the year and under different names in the provinces of Turkey increase tourism activity. Supporting this finding, Kyle and Chick (2007) explain that destination appeal develops tourists' loyalty to the destination by fostering deep connections with the tourism destination.

2.2.4. Uniqueness

Uniqueness represents the pursuit of relative differentiation achieved through the acquisition, use, and disposal of consumer goods for the purpose of developing an individual's personal and social identity (Tian et al., 2001:53). Unique experiences are generally preferred by creative tourists. An attractive destination with numerous resources motivates tourists to explore it and encourages them to enjoy different experiences that offer opportunities to forget the stress of daily life (Girish et al., 2021:2-3). Uniqueness in destination appeal is expressed as the difficulty of substituting one destination for another. When tourists determine the destination they will choose, it is determined according to the level of uniqueness of the destination (Letho, 2013:335).

According to Kaplan (1995), the uniqueness of a destination helps tourists increase the time they set aside for themselves by distancing themselves from their daily responsibilities and routines, thereby allowing them to relax mentally. Echtner and Ritchie (1993) state that uniqueness is a key measure of destination image, shaping the differences between destinations and enabling tourists to understand what is special about a destination.

The uniqueness of a destination increases its appeal by allowing tourists to experience something special that cannot be experienced in everyday life.

The competitive nature of today's tourism industry encourages many destinations to develop their own brands and foster loyalty by establishing emotional brand connections with tourists. Destinations tend to adopt strategies that not only highlight their unique qualities, such as beautiful scenery, beaches, cultural heritage, and friendly people, but also associate people's emotions and interests with an appealing brand (Huang et.al., 2017:1198).

Jerab et al. (2011) state that the uniqueness of tourism resources represents the inputs in the production process of a tourism business. The uniqueness of tourism resources is categorized in two ways: First, tangible resources; natural resources, infrastructure, facilities, human resources, employee skills, and second, intangible resources; heritage and culture, technology, innovation, special interest, knowledge, the capacity creation of new ideas, trust between managers and employees, corporate reputation, brand value, and brand commercial patent.

It is thought that tourists' perspectives on the uniqueness or ordinariness of a destination may influence their perception of that destination's competitiveness. A tourist who thinks the destination is unique may tend to see it as stronger than its competitors, or a tourist who thinks competing destinations offer similar products and services may consider all destinations to be equally competitive. This situation gives rise to the idea that the competitiveness of destinations, which is of vital importance, may differ due to the tourist's perspective and tendencies (Akkuş and Dağistan, 2020:134).

2.2.5. Suitability

Liu and colleagues (2017) define destination suitability as tourists' subjective perceptions of the alignment between their self-image and a destination. Suitability allows tourists to perceive that their experiences at a destination match their self-image, enabling them to freely be themselves at the destination. Kaplan (1995) emphasizes that adapting to a work environment can improve employees' overall well-being and reduce work stress.

Sirgy and Su (2000) state that tourists establish harmony with destination points by subjectively matching the destination with their real self, ideal self, and social self. Bosnjak and colleagues (2011) proposed a model to measure post-visit loyalty to destinations in their research; the model includes seven explanatory variables (functional, hedonic, leisure, economic, safety and

ethical fit, and self-fit). The results provide good support for the proposed model. Each of the seven alignment components has a significant effect on post-visit loyalty. However, their relative contributions differ significantly. Apart from self-alignment, functional, hedonic, leisure, and safety alignment have the greatest effect on post-visit loyalty decisions, whereas economic and ethical alignment have less effect on post-visit loyalty decisions. In their study, Liu and colleagues (2017) explained that tourists perceive their experiences at a destination as being in harmony with their self-image. In other words, the more individuals identify with the destinations they visit, the higher the level of connection they can establish with those destinations. Kim and colleagues (2020) measured tourist suitability based on the perceived similarity between local residents and tourists and the sincerity of local residents towards tourists. According to this study, the sincere feelings of local residents towards tourists were considered a prerequisite for forming deeper bonds with tourists.

2.2.6. Warmth

The tourism experience relates to the subjective mindset felt by tourists throughout the entire tourism process. During this process, tourists seek a special, authentic experience and want to gain an unforgettable memory of their journey. In particular, the role of emotions associated with the tourism experience, such as hospitality, warmth, and sincerity, is considered an important research topic (Chen and Huan, 2020:3).

It is well known that warmth and hospitality are essential for the competitiveness and sustainability of a destination. It is emphasized that a welcoming spirit from the locals can encourage visits and facilitate interactions between local residents and tourists. So much so that many destinations around the world attribute their success to being tourist-friendly environments (Lin et al., 2017; Tung et al., 2021:1).

Socialization between tourists and local residents revitalizes intergroup relations, and the courtesy of residents during socialization helps develop or strengthen new relationships with tourists (Nadeau et al., 2008). Residents who are willing to interact with tourists develop mutual understanding and establish positive relationships with each other (Chen et al., 2018; Tung et al., 2018).

3. The Tourist Appeal of the Sakarya / Karasu Beach

It is known that the history of Karasu, located on the Black Sea beach of Turkey, began with the Phrygians. Definitive information about the region was obtained after examining the cemeteries in the village of Küçük Karasu. After liberation from Greek occupation, the district became part of the Ottoman Empire in 1326 and became a district of Sakarya Province in 1954 (Karasu Municipality, 2024a). Karasu has a fine-grained, shiny beach resembling gold dust, which is rare in Turkey for its width and length of 20 kilometers (km) (Karasu Municipality, 2024b). Karasu's beach is known to be beneficial for rheumatic diseases (Küçük and Kılıç, 2018). Although the 1-meter-high wall built along the beachline in 2021 was criticized by visitors for spoiling the view, it prevented the golden sand from being blown onto the road by strong winds, which would have polluted the pedestrian walkway and wasted the precious sand. (Karasu Haberleri, 2021). The season in the region lasts about 4 months, starting in June and continuing until the end of September (Küçük and Kılıç, 2018). There are food and beverage establishments and music venues along the beachline (Karasu Municipality, 2024a).



Image 1: Karasu Beach (Photographed by the authors.)

However, Karasu's tourism appeal has not reached a sufficiently high level due to the region's underdevelopment. Karasu is a destination on the Black Sea beach, which means the sea is quite rough and can become deep over short distances due to the tides. This situation may be perceived as more dangerous for visitors. This situation is likely to have contributed to the underdevelopment of Karasu's tourism appeal. The lack of sufficient demand for the region for such reasons may have led local administrators to use their budgets more strategically. Furthermore, Karasu beach does not have the blue flag feature that 567 beaches in Turkey have due to their commitment to cleanliness criteria (Blue Flag Turkey, 2024).

4. The Tourist Appeal of the Balıkesir / Gömeç Beach

Gömeç, located on the Aegean Sea beach in Turkey, was liberated from Greek occupation in 1922. Due to the intensive honey production in the district center, the region was named “Gömeç,” meaning “honeycomb,” and began district activities in 1956. The district covers a total area of 223 km², 70% of which is mountainous and 30% is flat (Balıkesir Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, Gömeç, 2024). The Gömeç region was included in the Edremit-Burhaniye beachal zone master plan in 1978. Within this plan, only measures for agricultural development and conservation were addressed, and Gömeç’s tourism potential was overlooked, with insufficient emphasis placed on permanent housing construction. In the following process, the issue of permanent housing construction was first raised in 1987, and the first step was taken with a plan for 160 residences (Gömeç Municipality, 2024b). In Balıkesir, a total of 49 beaches meet the cleanliness criteria for the blue flag, four of which are in the Karaağaç region of Gömeç (Blue Flag Turkey, 2024).



Image 2: Gömeç Beach (Gömeç Municipality, 2024c)

According to a 2017 article in Habertürk's Health section, experts have stated that spending time at sea is beneficial for acne, asthma, scoliosis, depression, allergies, brain health, the immune system, and psychology due to the effects of sea water and sea sand (Habertürk, Health, 2017). In open seas, a special area called a "sea bath" is created by surrounding a designated area with stakes, with the aim of allowing people to comfortably benefit from sea water. The benefits of sea water contact with the human body were first mentioned by Hüseyin Hulki (1894), an Ottoman scholar who engaged in scientific activities in the field of medicine with the aim of benefiting his country (Hayırlıdağ and Büken, 2019:156-158). The iodine found in seawater accelerates blood circulation upon contact with the body (Hayırlıdağ and Büken, 2019:156-158). The salinity rate of the Aegean Sea, which is the subject of this research, is around 33‰ in the north and 37‰ in the south, while the salinity rate of the Black Sea, which is the subject of the research with the Karasu beach, is 18‰ (Yelkenci, 2023). Thus, it is possible to say that the benefits of iodine in seawater are more prominent in the Aegean Sea. While emphasizing the importance of people with heart conditions consulting their doctors before entering the sea, it is noted that seawater is beneficial against diseases such as swelling, stomach disorders, chickenpox, measles, fever, chickenpox, pneumonia, whooping cough, mental fatigue, physical weakness, and even for children who are slow to walk (Hulki, 1894, cited in Hayırlıdağ and Büken, 2019:156-158). Hulki (1984) also emphasized that even sea air is good for the body. It has been stated that spending time by the sea allows seawater to reach the body

through the air, causing a salty taste on the lips and the intake of abundant oxygen, which provides joy, vitality, and strength to people (Hulki, 1894, cited in Hayırlıdağ and Büken, 2019:156-158). Another Ottoman scholar, Dr. Besim Ömer, addressed the topic of bathing in the sea and discussed the health benefits of warm and cold seawater. He emphasized that warm water is good for pain relief, while cold water is good for lung diseases and the nervous system (Ömer, 1887, cited in Gültekin, 2019). Looking at the average sea water temperatures in Turkey, the average temperature of the Black Sea in 2022 was 16.3oC, while the average temperature of the Aegean Sea in 2022 was 19.6 oC (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, 2022). Thus, temperatures between 12-16 degrees are defined as “cold,” while those between 16-20 degrees are defined as “cool” (Ömer, 1887, cited in Gültekin, 2019:367). Therefore, it is possible to say that the waters of the Aegean Sea, especially those of the Black Sea, are beneficial for lung diseases and the nervous system.

5. Planned Behavior Theory (PBT)

The subject of the research can be explained using the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The Theory of Planned Behavior is an extension of the Theory of Reasoned Action proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein in the 1970s (Ajzen, 1991:181). In this extended theory, the variable “perceived behavioral control” has been added to the model in addition to attitude and subjective norm. Perceived behavioral control refers to the difficulty or ease that individuals themselves assess in performing a behavior. According to this theory, even if an individual intends to exhibit a behavior based on their attitudes and subjective norms, this intention may be terminated or continued due to a number of organizational reasons (Ajzen, 1991). While in this theory, individuals’ behaviors are shaped by subjective norms and attitudes, this study draws attention to the necessity of directing behaviors towards an environmentally friendly approach, without considering individuals’ attitudes and subjective norms regarding their green hotel preferences. This intersection is where the research topic and the theory converge. In other words, individuals’ attitudes and behaviors should be structured by an external factor in a way that positively increases their awareness, without leaving them to their own intentions. To put it more clearly, this research aims to increase individuals’ awareness of the sand, sea water, and air of the Karasu and Gömeç beachline and to encourage them to benefit from these components, known as thalassotherapy. Furthermore, it aims to raise awareness about the historical structures located along the beach within the scope of cultural tourism and to foster a sense of preservation for these structures.

6. Methodology

This section includes explanations regarding the background of the study, the research question, its purpose, importance, original value, and widespread impact, limitations, reasons for selecting the field area, population-sample, method, and the process of preparing the interview form.

6.1. Background of the Study

Destinations, when considered as brands in their own right, represent not only the products they possess or the natural, socio-cultural, and artificial attractions they harbor, along with their service features, but also an organizational structure. Therefore, when tourists visit a destination, the experiential and symbolic benefits of the destination emerge as functional benefits in the destination's identity (Konencik and Gartner, 2007:4). In other words, every experience gained during tourism activities takes on a positive or negative meaning for destination visitors. In addition, individuals associate their own identities with destinations. According to Aaker (2009), while the core identity of a brand makes it unique, the extended identity determines where and how the brand is represented. Therefore, when destinations that have become brands are associated with personality traits that individuals are happy to represent, the emotional bond between the destination and the individuals will increase, and the behavior of revisiting the relevant destination may emerge (Qu et al., 2011). At this point, what is important is the work done on marketing destinations in a way that is appropriate for the target audience (Blain et al., 2005). Within the scope of this work, it is important to consider not only local and foreign tourists who visit the destination but also the residents of the destination (Zenker et. al., 2017:16). In attractiveness creation efforts, the fundamental purpose of the local community's values and brand identity must coincide (Gómez Aguilar et al., 2016:210). Otherwise, disagreements between the local population and tourists are likely to arise. As a result, the region will not

be able to benefit from tourism. The region's tourist values will be doomed to disappear over time. For example, from the past to the present, there has been a rumor among the people that there are lost cities in the depths of the Black Sea, referred to as the "lost country of the Black Sea." However, the lack of scientific data on the subject casts doubt on its authenticity. Nevertheless, it is beneficial to conduct sufficient studies on the subject in order to determine the destination identity of the region and make it one of the region's attractions. Otherwise, a potential attraction will be lost. In this research, the beachline in the Karasu district of Sakarya and the district in the Gömeç district of Balıkesir are planned as the field area. These beachlines represent destinations preferred mostly by middle-aged and older individuals. The tranquil and peaceful characteristics of the destinations may coincide with the demands of the individuals visiting them.

6.2. Research Question

The ecological, historical, and cultural values of destinations must align with the purchasing power, cultural backgrounds, and spiritual and symbolic values of individuals living in or visiting those destinations (Wheeler et al., 2011). This is because destinations, which are a fundamental part of tourism activities, play an important role in individuals' decisions regarding their tourism experience. When evaluating tourism activities, individuals consider the tourism event as a whole, including all activities such as transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, and entertainment. In this case, a general positive or negative evaluation emerges. All activities influence each other. For example, a study conducted in Taiwan found that Taiwanese local foods have a weak influence on destination attractiveness (Lin et al., 2011). It is likely that not all foods in Taiwan are bad, or that there are attractive factors in Taiwan that distinguish it from other destinations, but the overall assessment was found to be negative. This is because tourism can be perceived as a luxury experience worldwide, so tourists have many alternatives, and negative factors are likely to overshadow all other factors. In fact, another study by Bregoli (2013) examined the destination appeal of Edinburgh, Scotland, and concluded that all stakeholders in the region shared a common role in creating a positive destination identity and that this collective working system should be continued. Positive evaluations of destinations by tourists were found to positively influence tourists' intention to revisit the same destination and contribute to strengthening destination brand identity and destination attractiveness (Yen et. al., 2020). Therefore, for destinations to be attractive to tourists, they must be able to meet tourist expectations, and local governments must work together. In addition, for

tourist attractiveness to be sustainable, expectations must be researched dynamically. Only destinations that attract a specific group of tourists or visitors and fail to attract sufficient interest from tourists and locals despite their characteristics need to be researched in terms of their contribution to tourism activities. Based on the literature, the research question was designed as follows: *“Is it possible to determine visitor opinions regarding the Karasu and Gömeç beaches?”* The general objective of the research is to determine the opinions of visitors and tourists about the Gömeç beachline in Balıkesir on the Aegean Sea and the Karasu beachline in Sakarya on the Black Sea, and to make comparative evaluations between the two destinations in terms of sea sand, water, air, and beachal features.

6.3. The Purpose of the Research

The primary and secondary objectives have been determined to clarify the research question. The primary (1,5) and secondary (2,3,4) objectives of the research are listed below: Identifying the prominent opinions of visitors to the Karasu/Gömeç beachline.

1. Determining opinions on the role of seawater in health tourism in Karasu / Gömeç.
2. Determining opinions on the role of sea sand in health tourism in Karasu / Gömeç.
3. Determining opinions on the role of sea air in health tourism in Karasu / Gömeç.
4. Determining opinions on the historical structures located on the Karasu beach.

When applying content analysis to the research findings, the opinions of visitors to Karasu and Gömeç were compared. The objectives determined based on the explanation of the research question are divided into two dimensions. The theme of the first objective is to identify the perceptions of visitors regarding the benefits of Karasu and Gömeç seawater, sand, and air in terms of health tourism within the scope of thalassotherapy. The theme of the second objective is to determine the opinions regarding the historical structures located on the Karasu beach. The aim is to determine the opinions of visitors or locals regarding the historical stone structures still existing on the Karasu beach today. It is thought that these historical structures on the beach may be valued by individuals as an element consistent with the possible historical past of the Black Sea. Thus, it is likely that their preferences for the region will be shaped.

This study will evaluate the opinions of locals and tourists visiting the beaches of Sakarya/Karasu and Balıkesir/Gömeç. The high concentration of second home ownership in both Karasu and Gömeç districts, coupled with a population that is predominantly elderly and mostly retired, has led to a slowdown in the economic, social, and environmental development of these regions, resulting in similar changes.

The use of these secondary structures, which people purchase and prefer to stay in during the summer months or purchase and rent out to others, has seen a significant increase during the summer months of the year, particularly due to demand from the middle-aged group (Okuyucu and Somuncu, 2017:258). For example, in Karasu, second home ownership has increased significantly since the 1990s and even more so since 2010 (Küçük and Kılıç, 2018). In a study conducted in 2015, the reasons for choosing Karasu as a region for purchasing a second home were found to be proximity to permanent residence, recommendations from friends and relatives, and the region's nature and cultural richness, while beach elements were found to be effective in only 7.4% of cases (Küçük and Kılıç, 2018). A study conducted in Gömeç in 2020 found that tourism awareness was underdeveloped, particularly in the villages of Gömeç (Yalın, 2020). Consequently, in the destinations in question, tourism resources are not being protected, the rate of utilization of natural resources is declining, and the welfare levels of both the local population and visitors remain low. This research has an "exploratory" nature due to the use of an original interview form and the application of in-depth interview techniques.

6.4. The Importance of Research

The research will address the benefits of the sea, sand, and air of the Karasu/Gömeç region for human health. It is believed that the research results can raise awareness of the region's wealth in terms of health tourism and contribute to the development of the region's health tourism potential. It is also believed that the research can contribute to the promotion and protection of the region in terms of cultural tourism. Therefore, the importance of the research is demonstrated by the fact that the research results are expected to increase the region's health tourism potential and contribute to cultural tourism. It is believed that the protection of the Karasu and Gömeç beaches and the promotion of the benefits of these natural resources for human health will increase the interest of local and foreign tourists in the destination. Furthermore, it is believed that raising awareness among the local population and potential tourists about the benefits of the beaches, sea water, and air of Karasu and Gömeç can increase the attractiveness of the destination. For

visitors to choose these regions and benefit from health tourism through the beaches, it is also crucial that the hospitals in the region meet international standards. Certain criteria must be met in order to qualify as a hospital with international standards. According to the General Directorate of Health Services, hospitals with a health tourism authorization certificate, which is a document aimed at developing health services internationally, are expected to have a minimum score of 85 in the final health quality standards assessment conducted prior to the inspection that will be carried out upon application. Patients must be able to access detailed information about the doctors' CVs on the hospital's website. The infrastructure must be in place to allow payments to be deposited into the hospital's accounts in advance, before the patient arrives at the hospital. After the decision to treat has been made, the process must proceed with the patient being clearly informed, using forms prepared in the patient's language, about the treatment sequence, what will be done during and after treatment, and what the patient must do even after being discharged. In addition, physicians are expected to be able to speak the same language as the patient (Turkish Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Health Services, [SHGM], 2024). In general, the three main tasks of healthcare institutions, where modern marketing concepts prevail, can be summarized as follows: understanding the needs of the community, selecting and specializing in service areas with high competitive power, and informing healthcare personnel and other staff about patient satisfaction (Kotler and Clarke, 1987). The issues that healthcare institution managers should pay attention to for patient satisfaction and preference are listed below (Tunç and Sevin, 2000:2):

- Providing adequate training and testing for employees
- Having a separate job description for each job
- Monitoring compliance with work rules
- Monitoring the use of the right tools at the right time
- Monitoring work discipline in accordance with accreditation standards

As of 2024, the number of hospitals in Turkey with international health tourism authorization certificates has reached 652. There are a total of 5 hospitals in Sakarya with health tourism authorization certificates, none of which are located in the Karasu region. In Balıkesir, there are a total of 6 hospitals with health tourism authorization certificates, none of which are located in the Gömeç region (Turkish Ministry of Health, General Directorate of Health Services, [SHGM], 2024). Therefore, this study is important in terms of attracting international tourists to the region for both

beach and health tourism purposes, especially by taking advantage of the thalassotherapy feature of the Karasu and Gömeç beaches. This is because, as part of the 2025-2029 strategic planning efforts, Karasu Municipality conducted a survey for citizens on its website, asking questions about their satisfaction with municipal services, suggestions for improvement, and whether they had any new project proposals (Karasu Municipality, 2024b). Thus, it is important in terms of making officials aware of certain shortcomings in the region and showing that local administrators are eager for the region's development. Furthermore, pointing out the unknown aspects of the Black Sea with the definition of Karasu, located on the Black Sea beach, as a lost country, is important in terms of determining opinions on historical structures, which is one of the objectives of this research. It is important to obtain the opinions of locals or visitors to the region on this subject.

6.5. Original Value and Widespread Impact

The absence of studies on the Karasu and Gömeç beaches in the literature highlights the necessity of this research. There is no study in the literature on the Karasu beachal region that addresses visitors' opinions regarding the sea, sand, and air in the context of thalassotherapy. In this respect, the study is expected to contribute to the literature from both medical and tourism science perspectives, combining health tourism aspects. Future studies may focus solely on either medical or tourism aspects. Furthermore, the comparison of opinions regarding the Karasu and Gömeç beaches in this study, revealing both distinct and common findings, adds an original dimension. The study suggests that identifying the perceived benefits of the Karasu and Gömeç beaches could lead to an increase in visitor numbers for health tourism purposes. Recommendations for incorporating thalassotherapy units into hospital operations are also expected to contribute to the region's economic development. It is thought that determining the health benefits of the Karasu and Gömeç beachal components, whose benefits in terms of health tourism have been identified, could foster positive social relationships among local and foreign visitors to the region. Furthermore, it is believed that an increase in the number of local and foreign tourists in the region could lead to economic and social prosperity, and that the research could contribute to society in this regard. The interview form used as a data collection tool in the study was prepared within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991), which added originality to the study. The research findings will be interpreted within the framework of the relevant theory. On the other hand, there are few studies in the literature on the destinations of Karasu

(Zengin et al., 2023; Küçük and Kılıç, 2018; Şolt, 2018; Uzmanoğlu and Soylu, 2006) and Gömeç (Yalın, 2020), even if they are on topics different from the subject of this research. The fact that both destinations will be addressed together in this research is another dimension that adds originality to the study.

Considering that natural resources are rapidly depleting, this research emphasizes the importance of other natural resources, particularly in the Karasu and Gömeç beachal areas, both for sustainable living and for the successful future of the tourism industry. Recommendations for intensifying future scientific research in these areas will contribute to the scientific literature. This study will highlight the development of health tourism, the protection of resources, and the raising of awareness by gathering the opinions of locals and visitors in the relevant destinations. Similar problems can be explained by considering similar destinations. It is believed that solutions can be developed and a scientific contribution can be made by addressing the potential problems between different destinations in the region. As a result of the findings of the research, technological support can be provided for the well-being of visitors and locals in these destinations, as in destinations classified as smart cities. If the average population is high, it is thought that an information network could be developed with simple technological support to enable visitors and locals in the region to benefit more easily from the region's opportunities, and that this research could provide a technological contribution.

6.6. Limitedness

The scope of the research is limited to the beachal areas of Karasu District in Sakarya Province and Gömeç District in Balıkesir Province. The reason for choosing Sakarya/Karasu for field research is that, compared to most other beaches, its shores are covered with sea sand and have a high sea salt content. On the other hand, Sakarya/Karasu is close to areas with a high concentration of local and foreign visitors, such as Istanbul, and is easily accessible for visitors. The reason for selecting Balıkesir/Gömeç as the research area is that Balıkesir, a tourist city, is one of the important beachal tourism destinations.

Another limitation of the study is that it was conducted with individuals who responded positively to the interview request. The reluctance of visitors to the beach to participate in interviews or their refusal to respond positively to interview requests due to reasons such as time constraints constituted

a limitation and was also a determining factor in the length of the data collection process.

6.7. Reason for Field Selection in the Study

The beachline of Karasu District, located on Turkey's Black Sea beach and north of Sakarya (Adapazarı), and the beachline of Gömeç District, located south of Balıkesir, are beaches that generally have a potential for domestic and foreign tourists aged 40 and above. This is because neither region is sufficiently open to foreign tourism. The insufficient infrastructure and tourist appeal of these regions cause them to lose priority to their competitors in terms of beach appeal. The fact that locals reside in both regions with the mindset of owning a second home may also be considered a reason for this decline in competitiveness.

Although the Karasu and Gömeç beaches do not stand out as major attractions during the summer months, they contribute to maintaining activity in the region throughout both summer and winter for their existing target audience. However, as they are locals of the region, they do not act from a tourist perspective, and their expectations from local authorities remain at a level that meets basic needs, just like those of the locals. The people, who are more closed to possible close relationships with tourists, lead a relatively quiet life throughout the year. The common point of these two beach destinations is their target audience of middle-aged and older people, and there is a widespread view among the people that the sand, sea water, and clean air of Karasu beach are healing. Therefore, the shores of Karasu and Gömeç were chosen for this study to determine opinions regarding awareness of the sea water, sand, air, and historical structure of the region.

6.8. Population and Sample

The study population consists of people visiting the Karasu and Gömeç beach. The population of Karasu district, which is mostly preferred by Laz, Georgian, and immigrants, is 70,600 according to the latest census conducted in 2022. In the summer months, this population rises to 700,000 (Karasu District Governor's Office, 2024). The population of Gömeç district is 14,175 according to the latest data from 2019 (Gömeç Municipality, 2024a).

The sample includes individuals who accepted the interview request. Furthermore, the "Purposive Sampling" technique was preferred for reaching participants. Purposive Sampling was chosen because attention was paid to

factors such as half of the participants being locals and half being tourists, participants being middle-aged and older, and a balanced distribution of women and men.

6.9. Methodology Applied in the Scope of the Research

A qualitative design was used to explain the problem of this research. The interview technique was used as the data collection tool for the research. The MAXQDA (24.4.1.) Qualitative Data Analysis Program was used to examine the data obtained from all participants. With content analysis, documents, information, interviews, or audio/video recordings can be compared and analyzed (Coşkun et al., 2015). Content analysis consists of four stages: selecting the research topic, coding the data, organizing the codes and themes, and expressing and interpreting the findings (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2016). These stages are, in order: (1) determining the questions by conducting a literature review and obtaining expert opinions, (2) identifying the most frequently repeated statements in the obtained data, (3) combining the statements under themes associated with the subject by the researcher, and (4) analyzing, tabulating, and visualizing the data.

Based on studies in the literature, it was considered that information about beaches could be examined through the opinions of visitors. Accordingly, the research topic was based on deductive logic and grounded in the literature, and a semi-structured interview form was developed and designed in a qualitative dimension. It was observed that existing similar studies in the literature generally focused on destination brand-themed topics and followed a quantitative design. Therefore, unlike the literature, a qualitative design was chosen for this research. In addition, it was determined that there are few studies in the literature with a theoretical basis, and care was taken to ensure that this research also had a theoretical basis. The interview questions were prepared in light of the research theory, and the theory was also used in interpreting the findings of the research.

During the data collection phase of the research, “Semi-Structured Interviews” will be conducted with visitors to the Karasu and Gömeç beaches. Qualitative research enables in-depth investigation of the subject of interest, allows for on-site examination of events and phenomena, and facilitates the evaluation of participants’ thoughts regarding these events and phenomena. Furthermore, it is possible to collect data using a semi-structured research form that allows researchers to ask in-depth questions about the subject and to expand and rephrase questions according to the course of the discussion (Merriam, 2018:13-16). In this context, a pool of questions was created

for semi-structured interviews within the scope of the research, primarily linked to planned behavior theory, to determine the characteristics that make beaches attractive and to examine visitor behavior.

6.10. Interview Form Used in the Study

During the data collection phase of the research, “Semi-Structured Interviews” will be conducted with individuals visiting the Sakarya/Karasu and Balıkesir/Gömeç beachlines. Qualitative research enables in-depth investigation of the subject of interest, allows for on-site examination of events and phenomena, and facilitates the evaluation of participants’ thoughts regarding these events and phenomena. Furthermore, it is possible to collect data using a semi-structured research form that allows researchers to ask in-depth questions about the subject and to expand and rephrase questions according to the course of the discussion (Merriam, 2018:13-16). In this context, the characteristics of the Karasu and Gömeç beachlines were first determined within the scope of the research. The research questions were prepared to determine visitors’ positive and negative opinions about the Karasu and Gömeç beach. Since the scales used in existing studies on the Karasu beach in the literature were considered insufficient to explain the topic and research problem to be addressed in this study, a new semi-structured form was developed when determining the interview questions. The purpose of the semi-structured interview form developed is to determine visitors’ opinions about Karasu and Gömeç beaches. When developing the interview form, care should be taken to ensure that the items describe a single feature and that the item is appropriate for the structure to be explained (Gültekin, 2017; Tekin, 2000). Attention was paid to ensuring that the questions included in the developed interview form were in line with the main and sub-objectives of the research and that the two main dimensions within the objectives could be explained. After the interview form was prepared, questions should be directed to experts in order to eliminate a number of problems such as scientific errors, difficulties in comprehensibility, and grammar mistakes (Atılğan et al., 2013). The interview form prepared to conduct semi-structured interviews was revised by submitting it to three experts working at different universities. Each question was prepared in a clear and concise manner, ensuring that the responses from participants did not resemble those obtained in the context of the research topic. The interview form contains a total of 4 questions, and the interview duration will be approximately 35-40 minutes. Before the final field research, it is beneficial to conduct a pre-test to identify points that may be difficult for respondents to understand (Crocker and Algina, 1986). In this sense, two participants

were asked questions before the field research, and the necessary corrections were made. According to Coşkun et al. (2017) and Lin (1976:137), data collection tools prepared based on literature review and expert opinions add an exploratory feature to research. In this study, a new interview form was prepared using an inductive approach supported by the literature, and expert opinions were consulted to finalize this form. In terms of creating a new interview form and accessing a broad pool of information, this study, which has an inductive approach, has an exploratory feature in its general outline. This is because exploratory studies aim to provide preliminary information, determine whether more comprehensive studies on the subject should be conducted, and develop data collection tools for use in future studies (Earl, 2004:88). The semi-structured interview questions were prepared within the framework of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991:181), which is supported by the general literature on the subject and clarifies the factors that influence individual behavior. Prior to the field research, Karasu and Gömeç Municipalities and Provincial Culture and Tourism Directorates were contacted to obtain expert opinions, and authorized persons were asked what elements were known and prominent among the public on the Karasu and Gömeç beaches. It was stated that there was the highest demand for sea sand on the Karasu beach.

The interviews were conducted between August 9, 2025, and August 18, 2025. The data was obtained from 24 individuals who responded positively to the interview request. Care was taken to ensure a balanced distribution of participants for the purpose of comparison in the research findings. For this reason, content analysis was applied to the valid data obtained from a total of 24 participants, 12 from Karasu and 12 from Gömeç. Verbatim note-taking was used during the data collection phase, and audio recordings were made with the participants' permission. The interview form was prepared with the support of the literature, in line with the purpose of the research, and with the input of three experts knowledgeable on the research topic. The questions included in the interview forms, prepared separately for visitors to the Karasu and Gömeç beaches, are listed below:

1. *What is your gender?*
2. *What is your age?*
3. *What is your marital status? If married, how many children do you have?*
4. *What is your educational background?*
5. *What is your income level?* 6. *Where are you coming from to the Karasu/Gömeç beach?*

7. *Could you tell us why you prefer the Karasu/Gömeç beach?*

8. *Do your relatives prefer the Karasu/Gömeç beach? Why do you think so?*

9. *How would you rate the Karasu/Gömeç beach? (In terms of its nature (sea, sand, air, etc.), environmental layout, and socio-cultural characteristics).*

10. *How do your relatives evaluate the Karasu / Gömeç beach? (In terms of its nature (sea, sand, air, etc.), environmental layout, and socio-cultural characteristics).* 11. *Are there any elements along the Karasu/Gömeç beachline that you find noteworthy in a positive way? If so, what are they? (e.g., beach cleanliness, service quality).*

12. *Are there any elements along the Karasu/Gömeç beachline that you find noteworthy in a negative way? If so, what are they? (e.g., beach cleanliness, illegal construction).*

To test the validity of the data obtained from the interview questions, three experts in this field were consulted to confirm that the questions to be asked during the interviews were appropriate for the purpose of this research and that each question was sufficiently explanatory. The MAXQDA qualitative data analysis program will be used to analyze the responses obtained from the interviews. The validity and reliability of the data obtained from the interviews were also assessed using the MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis program.

The research's ethics committee permission request was evaluated at the Balıkesir University Social and Human Sciences Research meeting and approved by decision dated 09.09.2024 and numbered E-19928322-050.04-421859.

7. Findings and Comments

This section presents the findings of the analysis. First, the validity and reliability values of the findings are presented regarding the analysis phase. Then, tables related to content analysis are presented.

7.1. Validity and Reliability of the Analyses Performed

In qualitative research, ensuring the credibility of findings and results is important (Noble and Smith, 2015). In this study, the reliability of the scale used in the first step was provided by the average levels of criteria related to images in the semiotic analysis phase, and in the final stage, the validity of the coding performed in the content analysis phase must be proven. The reliability of the findings reached as a result of the research was examined and checked by three experts who were familiar with the research topic and method. In addition, in order to test the validity and reliability of the coding performed in the research, the codes were checked, i.e., inter-coder agreement was achieved using the MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis Program. The coders were named Coder 1 and Coder 2. Before comparing the codes, the list of codes was delivered to the other coder without showing the coded sections. The 186 codes made by Coder 1 and the 173 codes made by Coder 2 on the documents were compared. The presence of codes in the documents was determined to be 92.98%. Thus, it was determined that both coders used the same codes to a high degree. The code frequency in the compared documents was determined to be 92.40%. In other words, it was determined that the number of codes in the documents was close to each other. The code overlap rate between documents was determined to be 96.38%. In other words, the same codes were marked in the same sections in the compared documents. Table 1 below shows the validity and reliability of the overlap rate of the coding performed.

Table 1: Kappa Value of Codes

		Encoder 1		
		1	0	
Encoder 2	1	a = 346	b = 13	359
	0	c = 0	0	0
		346	13	359
$P(\text{observed}) = P_o = a / (a + b + c) = 0.96$				
$P(\text{chance}) = P_c = 1 / \text{Number of Codes} = 1 / 58 = 0.02$				
Kappa = $(P_o - P_c) / (1 - P_c) = 0.96$				

Source: Obtained by the authors using the MAXQDA Qualitative Data Analysis Program.

Cohen’s Kappa statistic tests the validity and reliability of different codings made by coders (Guest et al., 2012; Yardley, 2008). According to Brennan and Prediger (1981), a Kappa value above 75% is considered acceptable. According to Creswell (2016), a value above 80% is sufficient for the validity and reliability of codes. In this case, it is possible to say that the qualitative findings of the study are valid and reliable.

In the study, subcodes guiding the analysis phase of the comments were determined in the context of the topics highlighted in the content of the comments. The subcodes were grouped under headings by theme. The main coding was carried out in the context of the Theory of Planned Behavior. Therefore, the elements shaping individuals’ behaviors and behavioral tendencies were coded differently.

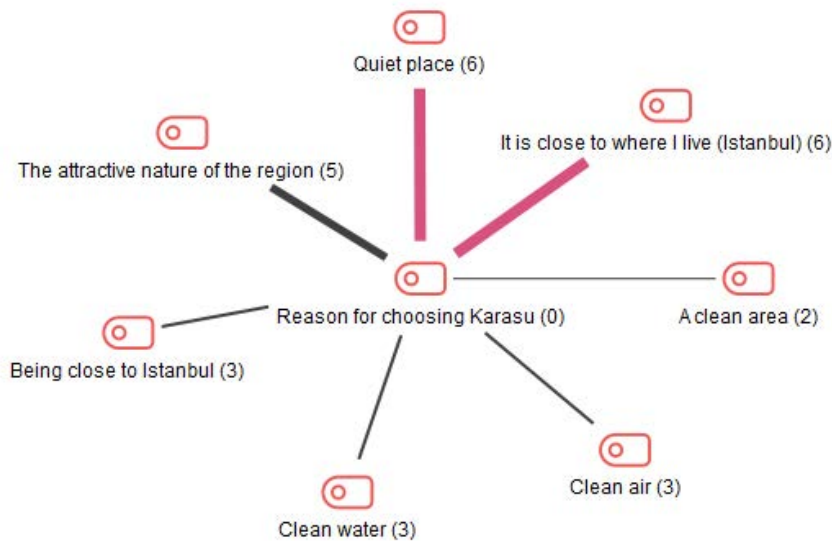
The study sought to determine which provinces visitors to Karasu Beach came from. According to Table 2, it was determined that visitors to Karasu Beach came from neighboring provinces, with the majority of participants (6) coming from Istanbul and the city center (4).

Table 2: Destinations of visitors coming to Karasu



Table 3 examines the reasons visitors choose Karasu Beach. The majority of visitors (12) prefer Karasu Beach because it is close to where they live and because the area is quiet.

Table 3: Reasons visitors choose Karasu beach



Since visitors to the region are generally elderly, and considering that the reason for their visit may be to accompany someone, the reasons for visiting

the region of participants’ relatives who had previously visited the region were also examined. At this point, as shown in Table 4, it was determined that the main reason for choosing the beach was the appeal of the region’s natural beauty (13).

Table 4: Reasons why visitors’ relatives prefer Karasu beach

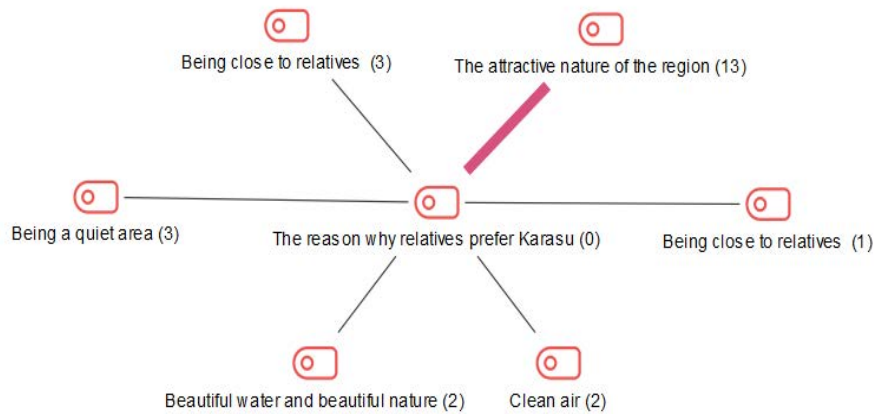


Table 5 lists the factors that satisfied visitors after visiting Karasu Beach. The majority of participants (8) emphasized that the reasonable prices in the region were a reason for their satisfaction.

Table 5: Factors that satisfy visitors on the Karasu beach

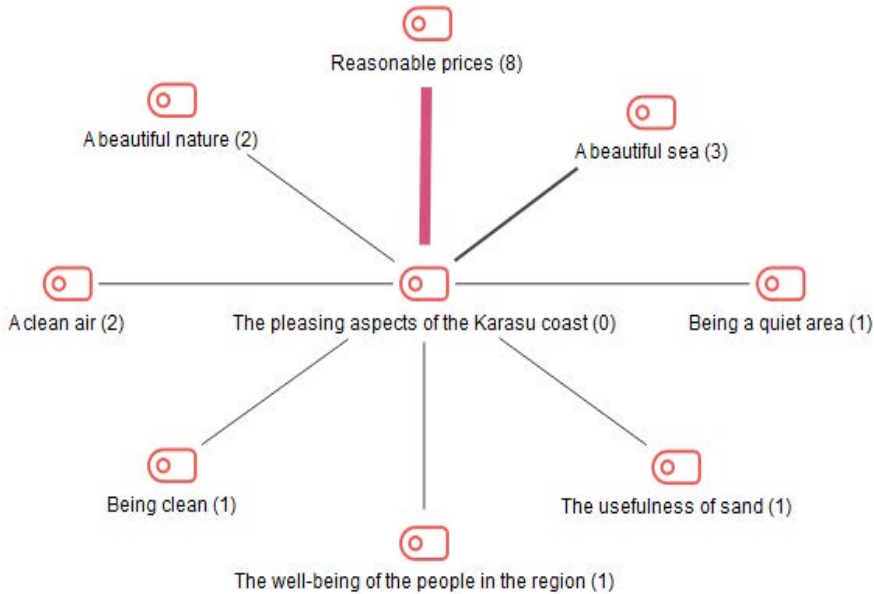


Table 6 shows that no single factor emerged as a clear source of satisfaction among visitors’ relatives. However, elements such as the cleanliness of the beach, the beautiful natural surroundings, and appreciation of the beach landscape stood out.

Table 6: Factors that satisfy visitors’ relatives at Karasu beach

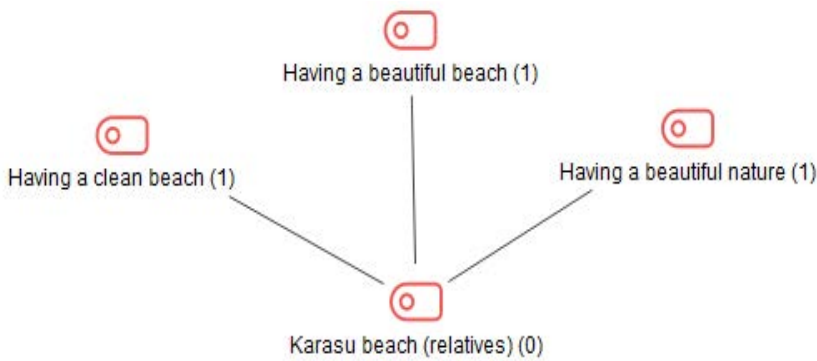
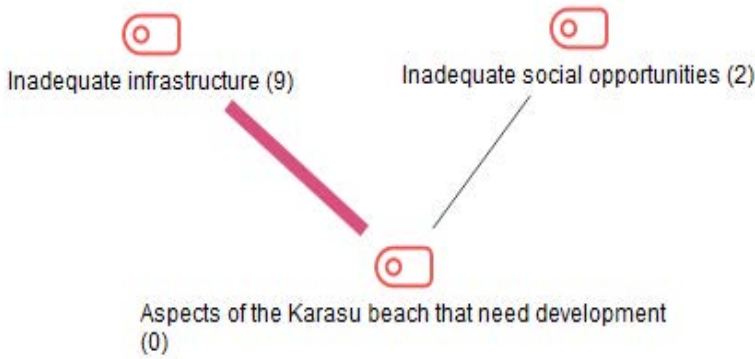


Table 7 lists the elements that visitors felt were lacking on the Karasu beach. The majority of participants (9) emphasized that the region’s infrastructure was weak.

Table 7: Weaknesses of the Karasu beachline

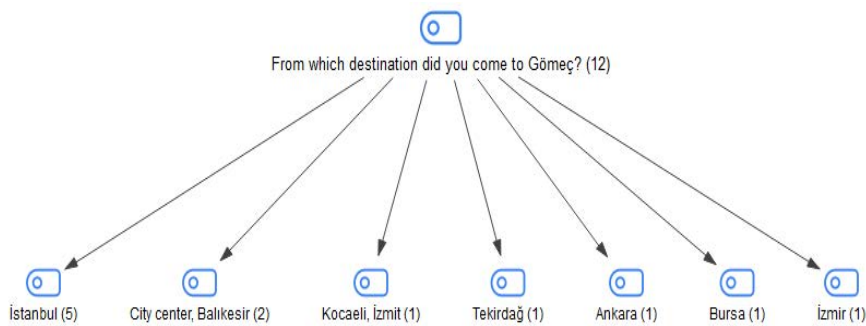


In general, it was determined that participants chose Karasu Beach because they came from nearby areas and preferred it due to reasons such as the tranquility of the region, the appeal of its nature, and the availability of affordable prices. It was found that participants did not sufficiently emphasize the prominent sand, air, and water of the Karasu beach. It is

possible to say that participants mostly visited the beach for reasons such as relaxation and vacation, and that visits to the region did not occur for health reasons. The lack of infrastructure in the region stood out as the main factor causing dissatisfaction.

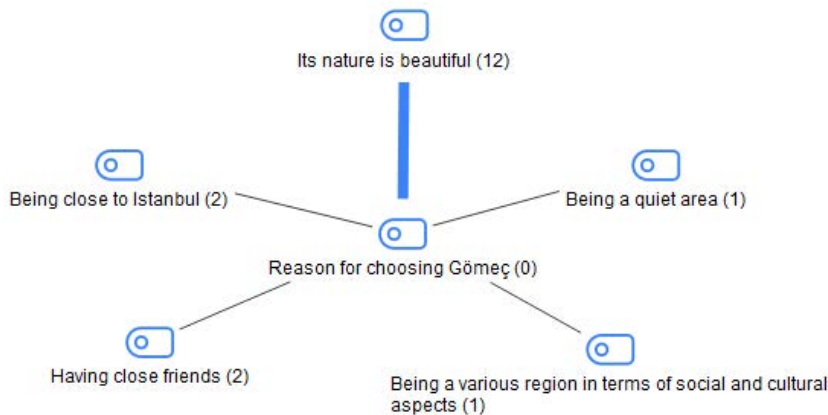
According to Table 8, it has been determined that the majority of visitors to Gömeç come from the Marmara Region. It has been determined that the majority of participants (5) come from Istanbul, followed by visitors from the city center.

Table 8: Destinations where visitors to Gömeç reside



According to Table 9, the reasons for choosing Gömeç beach were examined. It was determined that the majority of visitors (12) chose Gömeç beach because of its beautiful nature.

Table 9: Reasons visitors choose Gömeç beach



Since visitors to the region are generally older, as is the case with the Karasu destination, and since the reason for their visit may be to accompany someone, the reasons for visiting the region of participants' relatives who had previously visited the region were also examined. At this point, as shown in Table 10, it was determined that the region's natural beauty was the main reason for choosing the beach, as indicated by the majority (11).

Table 10: Reasons why visitors' relatives prefer Gömeç beach

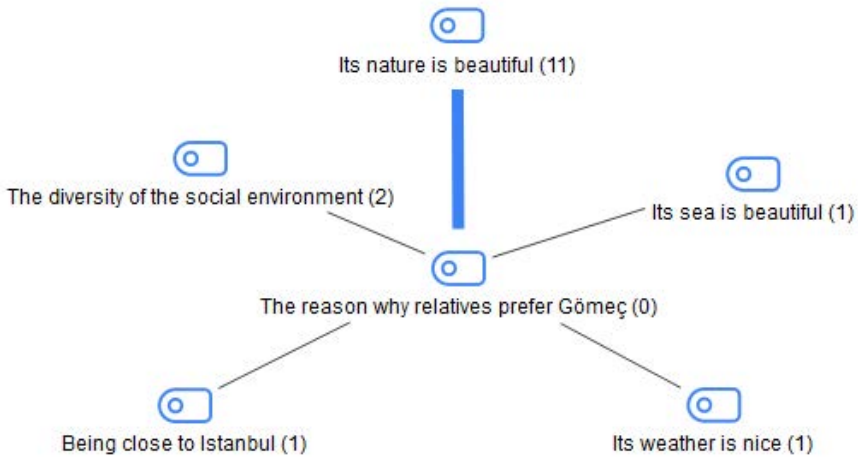


Table 11 lists the factors that satisfied visitors after visiting Gömeç beach. The majority of participants (11) emphasized that their satisfaction stemmed from their appreciation of the region's natural beauty.

Table 11: Factors that satisfy visitors on the Gömeç beach

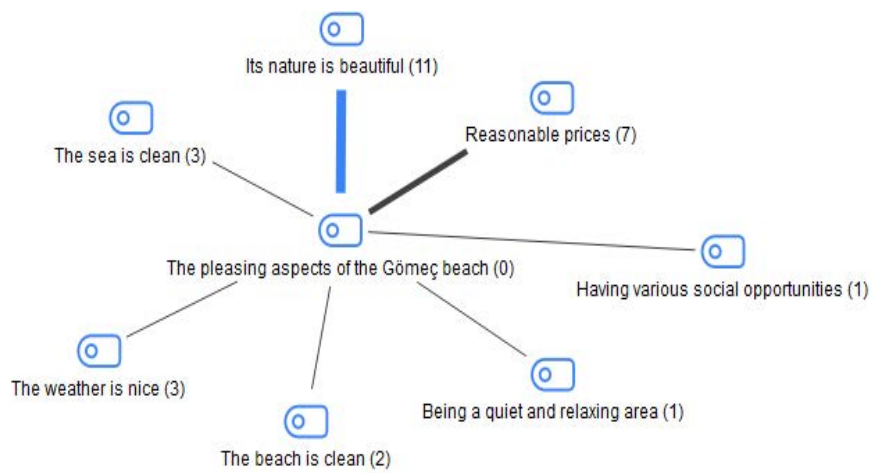


Table 12 examines the factors that satisfy visitors’ relatives. Gömeç Beach stands out as an attraction due to its beautiful natural environment for visitors’ relatives.

Table 12: Factors that satisfy visitors’ relatives on the Gömeç beach

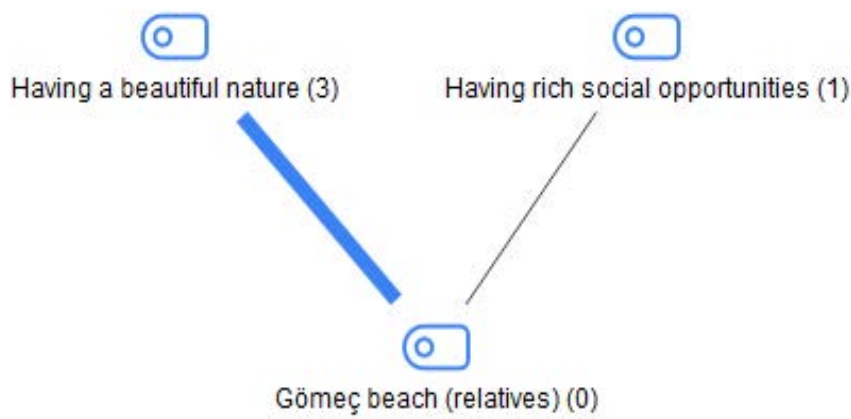
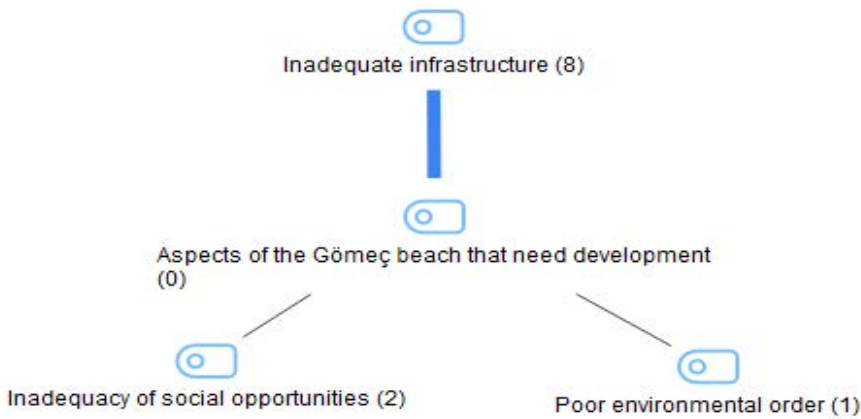


Table 13 lists the elements that visitors felt were lacking on Gömeç beach. The majority of participants (8) emphasized that the region’s infrastructure was weak, as noted in the comments of Karasu beach participants.

Table 13: Weaknesses of the Gömeç beachline



In general, it has been determined that participants came from surrounding areas and that the region’s attractive nature drew visitors. Insufficient infrastructure in the region stood out as a key factor causing dissatisfaction, as was the case on the Karasu beach.

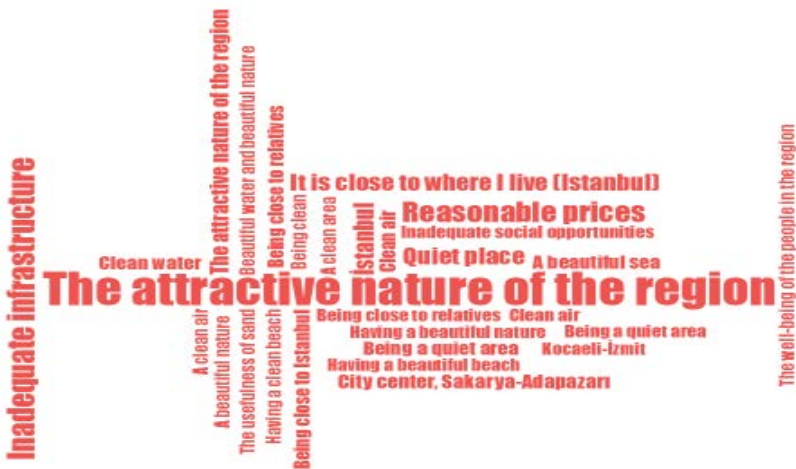


Figure 1: Keyword Cloud Regarding Karasu Beach

According to Figure 1, the concepts that stand out among all codes related to the entire Karasu beachline are listed. Among the total of 186 codes, 13 codes stand out regarding the natural beauty of the region. In other words, it is seen that the nature of the region is appreciated by tourists and locals.



Figure 2: Tag Cloud Related to Gömeç Beach

According to Figure 2, the concepts that stand out among all codes related to the entire Gömeç beachline are listed. Among the total of 186 codes, 12 codes stand out regarding the beauty of the region's nature. In other words, it is seen that the region's nature is appreciated by tourists and locals.



Figure 3: Total Code Cloud Regarding Karasu and Gömeç Shores

According to Figure 3, the most prominent concepts among all codes are listed. Out of a total of 186 codes, 13 codes stand out regarding the high natural appeal of the region and 12 codes regarding the beauty of the region's nature. In other words, it is seen that visitors to both Karasu and Gömeç beaches are generally satisfied.

Table 14: Demographic characteristics of participants

Demographic Variables		Karasu Beach	Gömeç Beach
Gender	Female	5	5
	Male	7	7
Age	48-60	7	8
	61-70	5	4
Marital status	Married	12	12
	Single	-	-
Number of children	1	2	1
	2	4	4
	3	4	4
	4	2	3
Level of education	Primary education	3	1
	High School	4	5
	Associate degree	2	2
	Bachelor's degree	3	4
	Graduate	-	-
Income level	20,000 and under	-	-
	20.001-35.000 between	8	4
	35.001-50.000 between	3	7
	50.001-65.000 between	1	1
	65.001 above	-	-

According to Table 14, the majority of participants are married and have more than one child. Looking at the age distribution, it can be seen that the participants included in the study range from 48 to 60 years old. Their income levels mostly range from 20,000 to 50,000.

8. Discussion

The research found that the region's natural resources are not sufficiently recognized. Therefore, it has become necessary for the tourism and health sectors in the region to work together to inform the public about this issue. A 2018 study conducted among residents of Karasu indicated that health resources are among the most essential elements for a region to be livable (Şolt, 2018). In other words, individuals value adequate health conditions for themselves and their loved ones. When evaluated within the scope of this research, the fact that family members or friends influence individuals' behavior in choosing a beachal destination reflects the situation of being influenced by the environment, as explained by planned behavior theory. According to this conclusion, which presents an advantageous situation for local administrators, it is possible to carry out effective marketing activities for both potential visitors of middle age and above and their immediate surroundings. At this point, it is suggested that health units based on thalassotherapy, which is compatible with Karasu's sea, sand, and clean air, be established in hospitals serving the Karasu region and made known to the public. Indeed, it has been determined that health factors account for 0.5% of the elements influencing the demand for second homes in Karasu (Küçük and Kılıç, 2018). Therefore, the importance of health factors for the development of the region is evident. Moreover, taking such action would enable the locals of the region to benefit more from tourism. Economic growth will emerge in the region. Research conducted by Jin and colleagues (2013) found that, rather than entertainment elements in the region, the abundance of job opportunities attracted more new visitors to the region. This study included middle-aged and older participants, but it was observed that the participants were not aware of the health resources in the region. A study conducted on adults aged 65 and over, who are part of the third-age tourism participant group, found that older consumers expect health care services to be effectively planned at their travel destinations and

to be able to communicate easily with staff providing health services via telecommunications devices (Nikitina and Vorontsova, 2015). Research conducted by Yao and colleagues (2023) concluded that individuals' psychological sense of ownership towards a destination increases when they find opportunities for healthy living there. Therefore, adults shape their travel preferences according to destinations that meet their expected health criteria. On the other hand, children can cause excessive spending on purchases. They also influence adults' purchasing decisions (Rose et al., 2003). In other words, in the Karasu and Gömeç regions, the potential expectations of the elderly, who are the main visitors and residents of the region, based on health expectations, should be considered within the framework of environmental control in individual behavior as explained by the theory. Furthermore, service planning should be carried out by taking into account the expectations of individuals' children and grandchildren.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

Within the scope of this research, an attempt was made to answer the research question designed as follows: *“Is it possible to determine visitor opinions regarding the Karasu and Gömeç beaches?”*. In this regard, fundamental and sub-objectives were determined to clarify the research question. The main (1,5) and sub-objectives (2,3,4) of the research are as follows: 1. Determining the prominent opinions of visitors to the Karasu / Gömeç beach,

2. Determining opinions on the place of seawater in health tourism in Karasu / Gömeç,

3. Determining opinions on the place of sea sand in health tourism in Karasu / Gömeç,

4. Determining opinions on the role of sea air in health tourism in Karasu/Gömeç,

5. Determining opinions on the historical structures located on the Karasu beach. The findings obtained from Karasu and Gömeç were compared.

The objectives identified in response to the research question are divided into two dimensions. The theme of the first objective is to determine visitors' perceptions of the benefits of Karasu and Gömeç seawater, sand, and air for health tourism within the scope of thalassotherapy. The theme of the second objective is to determine opinions regarding the historical structures located on the Karasu beach. As a result of the research, a total of 186 codes were identified, with the prominent codes highlighting findings that both Karasu and Gömeç beaches are beautiful. It was determined that most participants visited Karasu beach because they lived close to the area. In addition, the quiet nature of the region and the affordability of prices compared to other destinations were highlighted as attractive features, while the region's inadequate infrastructure was highlighted as a source of dissatisfaction. Regarding the Gömeç beach, the majority of participants emphasized

that their proximity to the destination was the reason for visiting, similar to visitors to the Karasu beach. On the other hand, it was found that the region's natural beauty is an attractive feature. Similar to visitors to Karasu Beach, dissatisfaction with Gömeç also stems primarily from inadequate infrastructure.

The main objective of the study, which was to identify the benefits of the beachal air, sand, and water, was not achieved. Furthermore, it was determined that participants did not have sufficient interest or awareness regarding the historical fabric of the region, which was a secondary objective of the study. Participants were mostly married, middle-aged or older, generally had more than one child, and were of middle-income level. Planned behavior theory was used as a basis for this research, and according to this theory, it shows that participants' behaviors were shaped by the influence of their relatives. Recommendations related to the subject are listed below:

- According to the research results, visitors were generally satisfied with the beach quality of both destinations. However, the lack of sufficient awareness regarding the healing sand, air, and sea water, which are the main unique features of the beaches, necessitates detailed quantitative or qualitative research on beach quality.
- As a result of the findings obtained within the scope of the research, it is considered important for local governments to take action by conducting research on transportation and the various demands and expectations of visitors in the region, as the lack of infrastructure stands out in both destinations, in order to maintain destination loyalty.
- The research did not reveal any findings related to beachal air, sand, or seawater. However, there is a natural healing resource in the region that is difficult to recognize. For this reason, it is beneficial to inform the public and to carry out integrated work between the health sector and the tourism sector.
- Efforts must be made to market the region's rich resources, such as the sea air, water, and the sand of the beach, which is described as golden in the area. For example, similar marketing efforts could be carried out in these regions, such as selling the clean air in Hallstatt, Austria, in water bottles.
- It was also determined that visitors lacked knowledge about the historical structure of the region, which was one of the objectives of the research. In this case, it is only possible to examine the mysterious

structure of the Black Sea, which has not yet been sufficiently clarified, in light of different research questions.

- The research results highlight the importance of establishing an integrated working system with the region's healthcare institutions, particularly given the public's lack of awareness regarding the therapeutic properties of Karasu's sea sand, water, and air. It would be beneficial to support hospitals in the region within the scope of the health tourism authorization certificate and to promote thalassotherapy-centered services. This would contribute to the economic development of the region. In addition, this would allow the situation of Karasu beach sand, which has been endangered over the years due to landscaping, to be controlled and protected.
- This study examines the destination brand and attractiveness of the beaches where the field research was conducted. However, it is thought that quantitative studies could be conducted on beach quality and beach attractiveness, and that different theories, such as the extended self theory, which explains the reasons influencing individuals' purchasing preferences, could be used.

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Comparison of Opinions on Sakarya / Karasu and Balıkesir / Gömeç Beaches

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