Tourism and Recreation

Can MEMEs affect destination awareness and destination choice? A study based on stimulus-organism-response model

MEME'ler destinasyon farkındalığı ve destinasyon seçimini etkileyebilir mi? Uyaran-organizma-tepki modeline dayalı bir çalışma

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ABSTRACT

MEMEs are an image presented about real or fictional entities, brands, or destinations. It is an important issue what effect MEMEs, which are frequently used especially among the young generation, have on awareness and choice. This study investigated 1) the relationships between a MEME's entertainment value, attitude toward the MEME, destination awareness, and intention to visit; 2) the mediating effect of attitude toward a MEME on the relationship between the MEME's entertainment value and destination awareness and intention to visit; 3) the moderating effect of like intention and share intention on the relationship between attitude toward the MEME and destination awareness and intention to visit. Data were collected between 1 December 2022 and 7 March 2023 using convenience sampling, yielding 294 valid responses. A survey was used as a data collection tool. The analysis revealed significant positive relationships between a MEME's entertainment value and attitude toward MEME, between attitude toward a MEME and destination awareness, between attitude toward a MEME and intention to visit, and between destination awareness and intention to visit. In addition, attitude toward the MEME partially mediated the effect of the MEME's entertainment value on destination awareness and behavioral intention. Finally, share intention moderated the relationship between attitude toward the MEME and destination awareness.

ÖZET

MEME'ler, gerçek veya kurgusal varlıklar, markalar veya destinasyonlar hakkında sunulan görsellerdir. Özellikle genç nesil arasında sıkça kullanılan MEME'lerin bilinirlik ve tercih üzerindeki etkileri önemli bir konudur.Bu çalışmada, 1) MEME'nin eğlence değeri, MEME'ye yönelik tutum, destinasyon farkındalığı ve ziyaret etme niyeti arasındaki ilişkiler; 2) MEME'ye yönelik tutumun, MEME'nin eğlence değeri ile destinasyon farkındalığı ve ziyaret etme niyeti arasındaki ilişki üzerindeki aracılık etkisi; 3) MEME'ye yönelik tutum ile destinasyon farkındalığı ve ziyaret etme niyeti arasındaki ilişkide beğenme niyetinin ve paylaşma niyetinin düzenleyici etkisi araştırılmıştır. Veriler, 1 Aralık 2022 ile 7 Mart 2023 arasında kolayda örnekleme yöntemi kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Veri toplama süreci sonunda 294 geçerli veri elde edilmiştir. Veri toplama aracı olarak anket kullanılmıştır. Analizler sonucunda, MEME'nin eğlence değeri ile MEME'ye yönelik tutum arasında, MEME'ye yönelik tutum ile destinasyon farkındalığı arasında, MEME'ye yönelik tutum ile ziyaret etme niyeti arasında ve destinasyon farkındalığı ile ziyaret etme niyeti arasında anlamlı ve pozitif ilişkiler olduğunu bulgulanmıştır. Bunlara ek olarak, MEME'ye yönelik tutumun, MEME'nin eğlence değerinin destinasyon farkındalığı ve davranışsal niyet üzerindeki etkisinde kısmi aracılık rolü oynadığı tespit edilmiştir. Son olarak, paylaşma niyetinin, MEME'ye yönelik tutum ile destinasyon farkındalığı arasındaki düzenleyici rol oynadığı görülmüştür.

1. Introduction

With the spread of social media channels, user-generated media content is increasing constantly. These contents are shared with other users in various ways. An increasingly popular form is MEME (the Greek word, *mimeme*, which means "imitated thing") which provoke opinions from almost all users. MEMEs have attracted attention as a phenomenon needing investigation, especially in tourism (Yhee et al., 2021). Under the hashtag #jokerstairs on Instagram, MEMEs have become increasingly popular thanks to images and videos shared among social media users. People presenting their travels to other users on social media has introduced the MEME tourism paradigm (Yhee et al., 2021). For example,

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many people flocked to New York's Bronx to imitate a scene from the movie "Joker", in which the eponymous main character dances on a staircase in that district. There have been so many visits that the area appeared as a religious place on Google maps (Mahdawi, 2019). In Dawkins (1976) defines tourist MEMEs as the transference of a place, time period, culture, and/or behaviors in the context of tourist movements. MEMEs are an image presented about real or fictional entities, brands, or destinations (Henderson et al., 1998).

A MEME is the sharing of any image by editing it with elements, such as text and sound (Miltner, 2018). The image can have original or popular content (Grundlingh, 2018). Increasing use of social media channels has changed and differentiated the perception of entertainment value (Dobni, 2007), constituted by the images, text, and/or sounds within a MEME. In tourism, having a high entertainment value has become important in promoting and raising awareness about brands or destinations (Dobni, 2007). Social media posts about certain topics attract particular attention, particularly about healthy living, travel, food and beverage, beauty, and fashion (Swant, 2016). The entertainment value of shared content directly determines potential customers' brand awareness and purchasing decisions (Brown & Hayes, 2008; Scott, 2015).

Changing people's attitudes can be difficult because they are guarded by a defense mechanism whereby people tend to seek information from memory to maintain and strengthen their existing attitudes. Unless new information is sufficiently convincing, people tend to retain their existing attitudes (Hayes & King, 2014). Social media shares have the potential to accelerate attitude changes. Since everyone can share via social media at any time, people can support similar posts and form attitudes without scanning or verification (Forelle et al., 2015). MEMEs influence people's attitudes (Lee et al., 2019). For example, emotional behaviors in social media posts affect people's destination choices (Schoner-Schatz et al., 2021) due to emotional contagion. That is, contagion of social media users by the reactions, expressions, and images in these posts, which can increase intention to visit (Schoner-Schotz et al., 2021). Social media users increase their purchasing preference if they have positive attitudes toward shared items (Evans et al., 2017).

Social media content is increasingly influencing users' decisions about which destinations to visit (Kim & Chae, 2018). Likewise, social media is becoming increasingly important and significantly impacting users' brand awareness (Moro & Rita, 2018; Sigala, 2018). In addition to attracting the attention of potential tourists, social media can increase destination awareness and intention to visit a destination (Yhee et al., 2021). MEMEs can be used as a way to motivate users to visit a destination by increasing destination awareness through social media sharing. Users create their own experiences with contents to the destination (Owen & Zatori, 2021).

The research model for the present study draws on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) model, used to explain human behavior by analyzing people's cognitive and emotional states affected by environmental stimuli (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this model, the stimulus refers to arousing aspects of environmental factors; organism is the state of the human being affected by the stimuli, whose responses are mediated by emotional and cognitive factors; response is the outcome based on the individual's emotional and cognitive states. These factors can be characterized as decisions and behaviors (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The present study also draws on Social Influence Theory (SIT), Social Learning Theory (SLT), Social Contagion Theory (SCT), and Social Comparison Theory (SOCT) in creating the research model and developing the hypotheses. The study has two main aims: to determine whether MEMEs affect attitudes by terms of their entertainment value; to determine the mediating effect of attitude on the effect of a MEME's entertainment value on destination awareness and intention to visit. The majority of studies on MEMEs are observed to be conceptual in nature. Furthermore, it can be noted that there are very few studies on MEMEs that go beyond conceptual aspects. Especially, the younger generation commonly uses MEMEs today. However, examples of businesses or destinations utilizing MEMEs as tools for awareness and marketing are scarce. This research is crucial both for filling the gaps in the literature and providing insights for practitioners. Additionally, the significance of the study is heightened as the proposed model will be tested for the first time.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. MEME's Entertainment Value

Internet MEMEs are considered as digital entertainment tools due to their humorous features (Dynel & Messerli, 2020). Therefore, a MEME should be both entertaining and attractive to be shared (Klein, 2019). People share MEMEs that they enjoy people and wait for their reactions (Wagener, 2021). The main motivation is the desire to share funny memes that people want to remember (Bury, 2016). People can appreciate the entertainment value of memes from different angles while the entertainment value of specific elements within MEMEs may differ (Pajunen, 2017). For example, some people focus on the part that creates visual entertainment, whereas others prioritize surprising or interesting content (Górka, 2014). By attracting the viewer's attention (Murray et al., 2014), a MEME's entertainment value can create positive emotions (Börzsei, 2013). A MEME with entertainment value can develop symbolic value if it is viewed frequently. People spread the MEME around to indicate that they have positive feelings and to share the entertainment (Teng et al., 2022). It enables people to distance themselves from difficulties or stress caused by daily social life (Olena et al., 2020). These important effects make the entertainment value of MEMEs important (Horváth & Mitev, 2016). MEMEs with entertaining content increase positive emotions and attitudes (Jung et al., 2011). In relation to tourism specifically, entertainment value positively affects brand awareness (Lou & Yuan, 2019), purchase intention (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020), and intention to visit (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020).

2.2. Attitude Toward MEME

An attitude is the tendency to evaluate an individual, entity, or object positively or negatively, which in turn can cause cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Changes in attitudes may occur more

easily due to social media shares. Since everyone can share via social media at any time, it is normal for individuals to support similar posts and form attitudes without scanning or verification (Forelle et al., 2015). Another factor that is as important as attractiveness and entertainment value in determining the success and frequent sharing of MEMEs is the attitude they create in people. This is more effective if people feel intense emotions towards a MEME (Heylighen & Chielens, 2009) because one factor that determines people's behavior is the attitudes they have or develop (Boyd & Richerson, 1994; Hagger, 2019). Thus, if a MEME causes strong positive attitudes, people share it more quickly (Anderson et al., 2003). Conversely, a meme is not shared frequently if it does not arouse such attitudes because its content is not considered attractive and entertaining (Guadagno et al., 2013). In short, MEMEs help people develop attitudes and shape their behavioral intentions (Lee et al., 2019). Hence, social media users will have stronger purchasing preferences for particular items if their attitudes are positive (Evans et al., 2017). In tourism, destination images shared in MEMEs are also important for raising awareness because a positive attitude and awareness can increase people's preference for a destination (Han & Chen, 2022).

2.3. Like Intention and Share Intention

One behavior that makes social media content popular is liking (Kim, 2018). Intention to like refers to the probability of individuals hitting the 'like' button when they see the content. Hence, the number of likes is evidence of the content's popularity (De Vries et al., 2012). The higher the number of likes, the stronger the interaction with individuals (Ho & Dempsey, 2010). Emotional attitude toward the content strongly determines both intention to like and intention to share (Winter et al., 2015). The more that individuals find the content attractive and entertaining, the more probable their liking behavior (Verhagen et al., 2012) because liking is shaped according to personal attitudes and feelings (Chang et al., 2015). In addition to entertaining and funny content, individuals also like information that they find interesting (Hossain et al., 2019). This indicates that individuals are more influenced by liking and commenting on social media posts (Boley et al., 2018).

Likes and comments also increase memorability even more (Gaffar et al., 2022) while both positive or negative attitudes can be formed based on likes and comments (Sedera et al., 2017). Share intention is the thought of sharing social media content or posts with others (De Vries et al., 2012). Social media users share various memes related to different topics (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The main factor affecting intention to share social media MEMEs is the person's attitude towards them (Shwartz-Asher et al., 2020). In particular, individuals are motivated to share MEMEs that they consider attractive and fun (Lee et al., 2010) as a source of enjoyment (Oliveira et al., 2020) and a desire to interact with like-minded people (Bilgihan et al., 2016). Individuals may also believe that their relationships can be strengthened by sharing positive things with others (Peters & Kashima, 2007), or because they find it easier to communicate and socialize by sharing MEMEs (Chung & Koo, 2015).

2.4. Destination Awareness

Awareness is knowledge that a topic or situation exists (Van Niekerk & Saayman, 2013), which nowadays requires attention to online communication channels. More specifically, destination awareness, referring to what people know or presume to know about a destination (Konecnik & Gartner, 2007), critically depends on social media (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). The fact that a person has already heard about the name of a destination while on vacation indicates the destination's fame (Milman & Pizam, 1995). That is, destination recognition depends on destination awareness (Vila et al., 2021). Besides destination awareness, other factors attracting visitors include being a prominent place, being heard by one's family and/or friends, being distinct from other destinations, and easily coming to mind (Kim et al., 2018). Awareness not only makes a destination more likely to be preferred over other destinations and competing destination brands (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). A destination's fame depends on various appeal elements, including destination-related visual and auditory content social media (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Consumer-generated content can be more effective in achieving destination awareness, mainly because certain people share impartially, which has a positive impact on consumer buying decisions (Dedeoğlu, 2019). In particular, destination images in MEMEs generate curiosity in viewers, which increases their intention to visit the destination (Isa & Ramli, 2014; Ervina & Octaviany, 2022).

2.5. Intention to Visit

Intention is the main factor that creates and influences behaviors (Ajzen, 1991), and the last step before the behavior is performed (Hunter, 2006). Intention is shaped by the individual's attitude towards the target behavior (Lam & Hsu, 2006; Wang & Ritchie, 2012). Destination visit intention has been defined in various ways: the desire or probability of visiting a chosen destination (Chen et al., 2014; Luo & Ye, 2020); planning to visit a destination or the thought of visiting a destination in the future (Horng et al., 2012); and the likelihood that tourists will visit a particular destination (Luo & Ye, 2020). Intention to visit a destination depends on attitude towards it (Shin & Jeong, 2022). Attitude can be affected by social media content (Ayeh, 2015), which enables individuals to increase their knowledge and awareness (Baber & Baber, 2023). This in turn increases their interest in the destination as they form a perception of the destination's image (Milman & Pizam, 1995). If individuals who develop destination awareness from information about it develop a positive image perception, then their destination visit intention increases (Benslimane & Semaoune, 2021).

3. Hypotheses Development

3.1. MEME's Entertainment Value and Attitude Toward MEME

Images or videos with or without text published on social media can effectively promote products and services (Dobni, 2007). MEMEs shared by social media users consciously or subconsciously promote product, service, or destinations (Yhee et al., 2021). MEMEs with entertainment value can

shape social media users' attitudes. In particular, humorous MEMEs attract more attention and enter their subconscious (Dynel & Messerli, 2020; Wagener, 2021). In terms of SLT, a meme's entertainment value can change attitudes. SLT also predicts that social media users may be alerted to a meme's entertainment value because people perceive each other, interact, and reproduce the behaviors observed during communication (Bandura & Walters, 1977). This observational learning includes three cognitive processes, attention, retention, and motivation (Bandura & Walters, 1977), which can shape attitudes. In particular, a meme's entertainment value can affect people's attitudes (Jung et al., 2011; Horváth & Mitev, 2016; Teng et al., 2022). Drawing on SLT and related empirical studies, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_1: MEME's entertainment value positively affects attitude toward MEME.

3.2. Attitude Toward MEME, Destination Awareness, and Intention to Visit

MEMEs shared by social media users can affect individual attitudes. Although attitudes are not generally changed easily, they can be changed more easily if many people share information neutrally (Forelle et al., 2015). Hence, in tourism, MEMEs about destinations or their icons can encourage individuals to research about what they saw, thereby increasing destination brand awareness (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Individuals previously formed or changing attitudes can effectively raise awareness (Lee et al., 2019; Han & Chen, 2022). Intention to visit is also affected by attitudes (Shin & Jeong, 2022). Hence, seeing destinations in MEMEs can influence individuals' vacation plans and destination choices (Han & Chen, 2022). SIT, which has been studied both directly and indirectly in social psychology and used in studies of attitude change (Turner, 1991), can help explain how attitudes are shaped. SIT can also help explain persuasive communication efforts. According to SIT, decision-making process can be realized more easily by shaping attitudes (Richins, 2000) and predicts that individuals can be affected by social media shares, which are essential for awareness-raising. Drawing on SIT and related empirical studies, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_2: Attitude toward MEME positively affects destination awareness.

H_3: Attitude toward MEME positively affects intention to visit.

3.3. Destination Awareness and Intention to Visit

MEMEs with entertaining and attractive images, attract more attention from social media users. In particular, destination visuals raise awareness (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). By obtaining image information from unbiased users or by conducting their own searches, people can become more interested in a particular destination (Dedeoğlu, 2019). People are more likely to travel to destinations represented in social media images through comparisons, whether memes are shared by acquaintances or strangers. SOCT can explain this

in terms of an internal need for people to compare themselves to others for self-assessment (Festinger, 1954). Through such comparisons, individuals are more likely to communicate with individuals or groups they see in social media posts and copy their behaviors, which in turn makes them more inclined to go to a place visited by others (Liu et al., 2019). Drawing on SOCT and related empirical studies, the following hypothesis can be proposed:

H_4: Destination awareness positively affects intention to visit.

3.4. Mediating Role of Attitude Toward MEME

Having been frequently used to promote tangible products, entertainment value has recently it been commonly used for services. MEMEs with entertainment value are also shared by other social media users, increasing the awareness of destinations with visuals (Teng et al., 2022). By revealing an items entertainment value, a social media posts' sounds, text, colors, and other visual elements can change the viewer's awareness. The entertainment value and attractiveness of shared items can increase the intentions of social media users to visit the destinations they see (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). However, attitudes have a critical mediating effect on the effect of entertainment value on destination awareness and intention to visit a destination (Han & Chen, 2022). SCT can explain how attitudes can be shaped by what is shared on social media. SCT refers to the dissemination and adoption of knowledge, emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of individuals, groups, or organizations among other individuals, groups, or organizations (Bowden et al., 2017; Park et al., 2018). That is, it is possible to influence other people's behavior by disseminating an idea and an application through social media interactions (Plé & Demangeot, 2020). Drawing on SCT and related empirical studies, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_{5a}: Attitude toward MEME mediates the relationship between the MEME's entertainment value and destination awareness.

H_{5b}: Attitude toward MEME mediates the relationship between the MEME's entertainment value and intention to visit.

3.5. Moderating Role of Like Intention and Share Intention

MEMEs with entertainment and attractive values increase sharing (Wen et al., 2014) and likes (Menon et al., 2019). Sharing and likes by neutral users can enable attitudes to be formed more easily, although they are generally difficult to change (Forelle et al., 2015). According to SIT, more shares and likes attracts more attention about sharing (Kelman, 1961). That is, the more that posts are seen on social media channels, the greater the meme's impact on individual awareness and intention to visit. Drawing on SIT and related empirical studies, the following hypotheses can be proposed:

H_{6a}: Like intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness.

H_{6b}: Share intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness.

H_{6c}: *Like intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit.*

H_{6d}: *Share intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit.*

4. Methods

4.1. Sample

The universe of this research is students studying in tourism faculties in Turkey, totaling 43,865 individuals (Council of Higher Education, 2023). Giving the time and money cost of reach all students, an appropriate sampling size and method was determined. Convenience sampling was preferred while the necessary sample size was calculated as 380 participants (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013: 263-264). Data collection was carried out between 1 December 2022 and 7 March 2023 using face-to-face and online methods. A survey was used as a data collection tool. A total of 317 questionnaires were returned from 25 different tourism faculties. However, 23 were excluded from further analysis for being incomplete, or failing the normal distribution and sling analyses. Thus,

a total of 294 valid questionnaires were included. While this sample did not reach the calculated number, 294 participants could still represent the universe in this study because, according to Kline (2011), the sample size should at least ten times the number of items in the questionnaire. Given that the questionnaire had 24 items, 240 participants represent a sufficient sample.

Table 1 presents the participants' demographic characteristics and other information *("This study was carried out the decision of Isparta University of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee at its meeting dated 22.05.2023 and numbered 152/01.")*

4.2. Measures

The questionnaire comprised two parts. The first part asked for the participants' demographic characteristics and other information. The second part included six scales adapted from previous studies to measure the research variables. For all scale items, participants responded using a five-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 5=Strongly Agree). The MEME's Entertainment Value scale (Lou & Yuan, 2019)
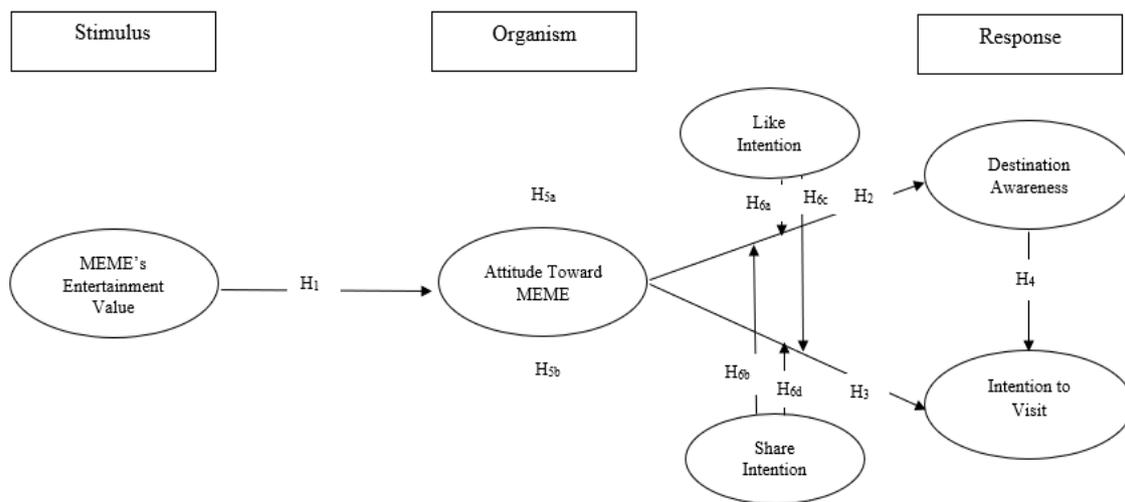

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Characteristics and Other Information

Gender	n	%	Which social media channels do you use?	n	%
Female	156	53.1	Instagram	267	45.4
Male	138	46.9	Twitter	128	21.8
Age			Facebook	56	9.4
22 years and below	192	65.3	YouTube	35	5.9
23 years and above	102	34.7	TikTok	27	4.6
How much time do you spend on social media channels per day?			Snapchat	27	4.6
Less than an hour	9	3.1	Reddit	6	1.0
Between one hour and three hours	118	40.1	Pinterest	5	1.0
More than three hours	167	56.8	Others	37	6.3

had five items (α = .89). Examples items include "MEMEs are exciting" and "MEMEs are enjoyable". The Attitude Toward MEME scale (Han & Chen, 2022) also had five items (α = .95). Example items include "I think the MEMEs are wise" and "I have a generally positive attitude to MEMEs". The Like Intention scale and Share Intention scale (Chang et al., 2015) each had three items (α = .97 and .96, respectively). Example items include, respectively, "I intend to press like the MEMEs" and "I expect to share MEMEs on social media". The Destination Awareness scale (Dabbous & Barakat, 2020) had four items (α = .83). Example items include "I pay attention to the destination in the MEMEs" and "Seeing a destination in the MEMEs makes me interested in that destination". The Intention to Visit scale (Gaffar et al., 2022) had three items.

4.3. Common Method Bias (CMB)

Before further analysis, the skewness and kurtosis values were checked. Skewness varied between -1.242 and .340 while kurtosis varied between -.925 and 1.128. Since these values were within the reference range, the data met the assumptions of normal distribution (Hair et al., 2010). Two different values are checked for CMB. First, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.399 to 2.749, which was less than 3.3, thereby indicating no CMB (Kock & Lynn, 2012). Second, all variable items were gathered under a single factor using the Harman Single Factor Model (HSFM). The total explained variance was below 30% (28.631%), which also indicated no CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2012).

4.4. Analytic Approach

SPSS, LISREL and AMOS package programs were used in the analysis of the data. Normal distribution and sling analyses were carried out using SPSS package program. The participants' demographic information (Table 1) and exploratory factor analyses were also carried out in SPSS. The explanatory factor analysis indicated that one item should be excluded from further analysis because its factor loading was less than .50 (Hair et al., 2010). LISREL was used for the confirmatory factor analysis (Table 2). Standardized values of items should be greater than .50 (Hair et al., 2010), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values should be greater than .50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), and Composite Reality (CR) values should be greater than .60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Correlation analysis and discriminant analysis were performed to determine the variables' validity. For goodness-of-fit, the RMSEA, AGFI, GFI, CFI, NFI, and SRMR indices were checked. AMOS was used to test the hypotheses.

5. Results

Explanatory factor analysis was performed before the confirmatory factor analysis. The explanatory factor analysis used varimax rotation, item factor loadings had to be greater than .500, the difference between item factor loadings had to at least .100, and each factor had to comprise at least three items (Hair et al., 2006). The explanatory factor analysis indicated that one item from the MEME's entertainment value scale should be excluded because its factor loading was less than .50. The confirmatory factor analysis was performed indicated that two items should be excluded because their standardized

loadings were less than .50: one from the attitude toward MEME scale and one from the destination awareness scale.

Table 2. Overall Reliability of Constructs and Factor Loadings of Indicators

Scale ItemS	Standardized Loading	T-value	Factor Loadings	AVE	α / CR
MEME's Entertainment Value				.63	.86/.87
MEV1	.75	14.50	.818		
MEV2	.68	12.79	.782		
MEV3	.85	17.52	.886		
MEV4	-	-	-		
MEV5	.87	18.30	.888		
Attitude Toward MEME				.61	.86/.86
ATM1	.85	17.75	.869		
ATM2	.68	12.73	.792		
ATM3	.80	15.96	.870		
ATM4	-	-	-		
ATM5	.78	15.34	.825		
Like Intention				.57	.79/.80
LI1	.77	14.71	.855		
LI2	.64	11.52	.807		
LI3	.84	16.41	.868		
Share Intention				.85	.94/.94
SI1	.89	19.30	.936		
SI2	.96	22.00	.963		
SI3	.91	20.00	.940		
Destination Awareness				.75	.91/.92
DA1	.89	19.27	.908		
DA2	.93	20.74	.940		
DA3	.93	20.83	.938		
DA4	.68	13.10	.780		
DA5	-	-	-		
Intention to Visit				.75	.88/.89
IV1	.92	20.14	.932		
IV2	.96	21.67	.946		
IV3	.69	13.34	.832		

Table 2 presents the overall reliability of constructs and factor loadings of indicators. The standardized loadings of the remaining items were all greater than .50 (Hair et al., 2010), while the AVE and CR values were also above the reference values. Goodness of fit indices were also within an acceptable range ("*Chi-Square: 349.39; df: 174; Normalized Chi-Square: 2.00; RMSEA: .059; AGFI: .86; GFI: .90; CFI: .98; NFI: .97; SRMR: .055*"). The Normalized Chi-Square value below 5 (Wheaton, 1987), RMSEA value below .08 (Hair et al., 2010), CFI value exceeding .95 (Hair et al., 2010), GFI value surpassing .90 (Kline, 1998), NFI value exceeding .90 (Hair et al., 2010), and AGFI value exceeding .80 (Zikmund, 2003), collectively suggest a favorable fit index. Table 3 presents the relationships between variables, means, and standard deviations. MEME's entertainment value correlated positively with attitude toward MEME (r=.756; p<0.01), like intention (r=.472; p<0.01), share intention (r=.256; p<0.01), destination awareness (r=.390; p<0.01), and intention to visit (r=.305; p<0.01).

Table 3. Correlation Values

Scales	Correlation					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
MEME's Entertainment Value (1)	1.000					
Attitude Toward MEME (2)	.756**	1.000				
Like Intention (3)	.472**	.579**	1.000			
Share Intention (4)	.256**	.312**	.517**	1.000		
Destination Awareness (5)	.390**	.403**	.447**	.407**	1.000	
Intention to Visit (6)	.305**	.273**	.390**	.442**	.663**	1.000
Mean	3.773	3.867	3.563	2.988	3.711	3.496
Std. Deviation	.797	.758	.778	1.115	.937	.966

**Correlation significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Attitude toward MEME correlated positively with like intention (r=.579; p<0.01), share intention (r=.312; p<0.01), destination awareness (r=.403; p<0.01), and intention to visit (r=.273; p<0.01). Like intention correlated positively with share intention (r=.517; p<0.01), destination awareness (r=.447; p<0.01), and intention to visit (r=.390; p<0.01). Share intention correlated positively with destination awareness (r=.407; p<0.01) and intention to visit (r=.442; p<0.01). Lastly, destination awareness correlated positively with intention to visit (r=.663; p<0.01).

Table 4. Discriminant Validity

Construct	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 MEME's Entertainment Value	(.63)					
2 Attitude Toward MEME	.46**	(.61)				
3 Like Intention	.32**	.52**	(.57)			
4 Share Intention	.08**	.11**	.35**	(.85)		
5 Destination Awareness	.18**	.21**	.26**	.17**	(.75)	
6 Intention to Visit	.10**	.08**	.19**	.19**	.46**	(.75)

**denotes significance at 0.01

Table 4 presents the discriminant validity results to test if the variables diverge sufficiently from each other. Values in parentheses represent the AVE values while the other values represent the square of the correlation values between the variables. The figures indicate that the variables have discriminant validity because the values outside the parentheses are smaller than those within (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 5 presents the path estimates of the structural model (Figure 1). The analysis revealed significant positive relationships between MEME's entertainment value and attitude toward a MEME (β=.688; p≤0.001), between MEME's entertainment value and destination awareness (β=.456; p≤0.001), and between MEME's entertainment value and intention to visit (β=.385; p≤0.001). There were also significant positive relationships between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness (β=.662; p≤0.001), between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit (β=.426; p≤0.001), and between destination awareness and intention to visit (β=.674; p≤0.001). Thus, H_1, H_2, H_3, and H_4 were supported, respectively.

Figure 2 presents the path results of the structural model. The analysis, which was conducted considering the mediator conditions stated by Baron & Kenny (1986), showed that MEME's entertainment value has significant effects on destination awareness (β=.456; p<0.001) and intention to visit (β=.385; p<0.001). The β values decreased in the mediator effect model, which included these detected results. This indicates that attitude toward a MEME partially mediates the effect of MEME's entertainment value on destination awareness and intention to visit. Thus, H_{5a} and H_{5b} were partially supported.

Regarding the moderator effects, like intention moderated the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness (Figure 3). That is, the positive relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness was stronger in the presence of lower like intention (t value=2.498; p=.013). However, higher like intention had no significant effect on the relationship (t value=.200; p=.841).

The moderator role of like intention in the relationship between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit was also tested. The results indicated that low (t value=.410; p=.682) or high like intention (t value =-.686; p= .493) did not moderate the relationship. However, share intention moderated the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness (Figure 4). High (t value=2.440; p=.015) or low (t value=5.368; p=.000) share intention strengthened the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness. Finally, high (t-value= -1.250; p= .212) or low (t-value=1.771; p= .078) share intention moderated the relationship between attitude towards MEME and intention to visit. The moderating effect tests revealed that H_{6a} (that like intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness) were partially supported while H_{6b} (that share intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and destination awareness) was fully supported. Conversely, H_{6c} (that like intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit) and H_{6d} (that share intention moderates the relationship between attitude toward MEME and intention to visit) were not supported.
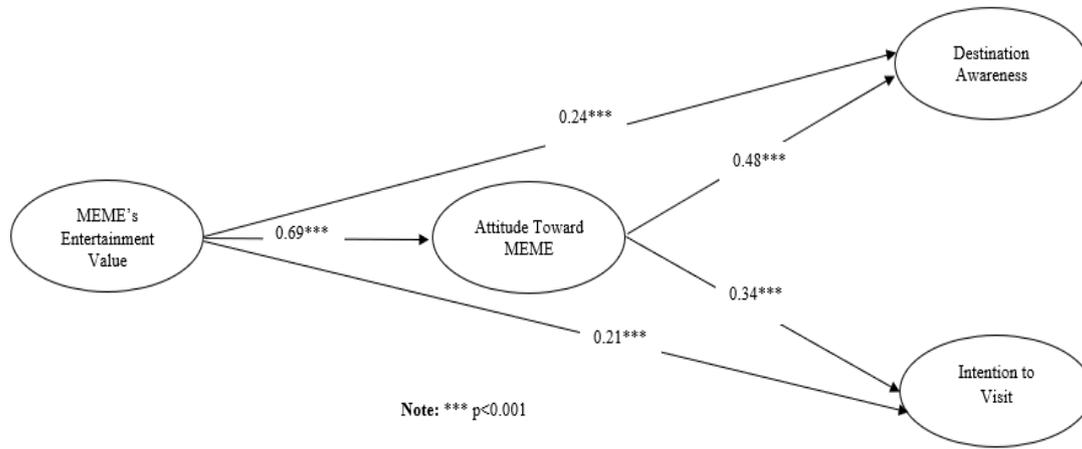
Table 5. Path Estimates of Structural Model

Hypotheses			B	S.E.	t-value
MEME's Entertainment Value	⟶	Attitude Toward MEME	.688	.052	12.81***
MEME's Entertainment Value	⟶	Destination Awareness	.456	.085	6.42***
MEME's Entertainment Value	⟶	Intention to Visit	.385	.083	4.68***
Attitude Toward MEME	⟶	Destination Awareness	.662	.090	7.38***
Attitude Toward MEME	⟶	Intention to Visit	.426	.090	4.73***
Destination Awareness	⟶	Intention to Visit	.674	.054	12.47***

Note: *** p<0.001

Note: *** p<0.001

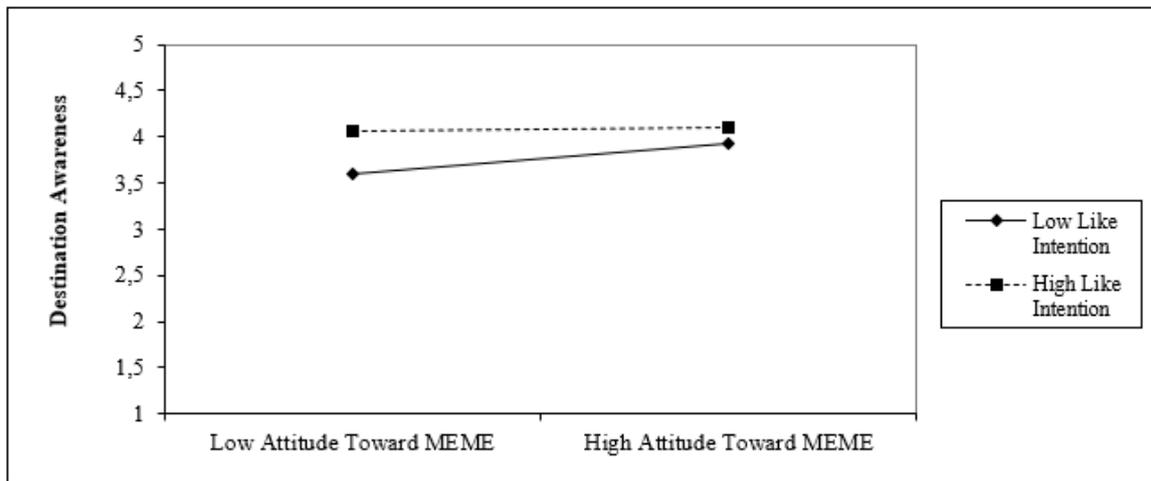**Figure 2.** Path Result for Mediator Effect Model

Figure 3. Moderating Effect of Like Intention on the Relationship between Attitude Toward MEME and Destination Awareness
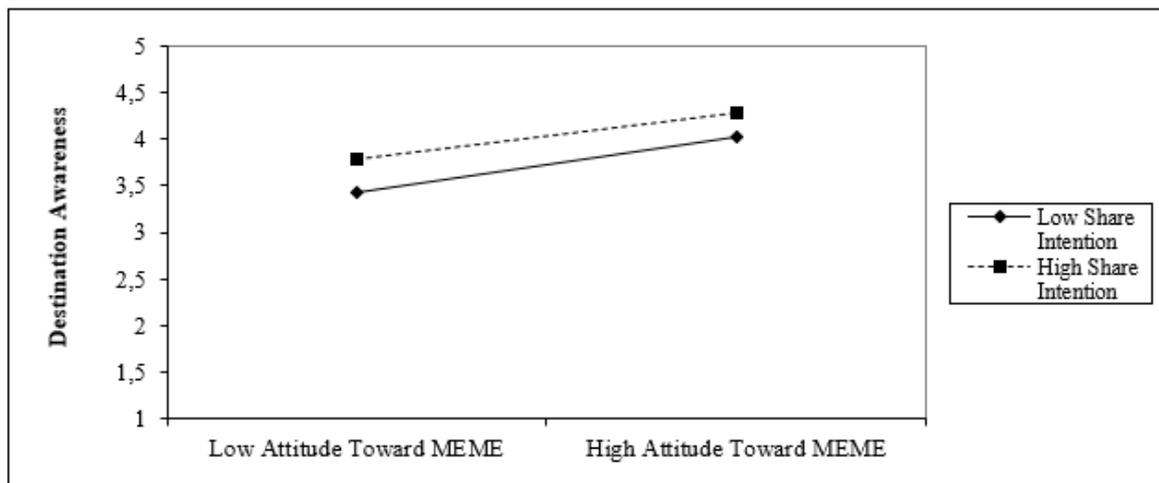

Figure 4. Moderating Effect of Share Intention on the Relationship between Attitude Toward a MEME and Destination Awareness

6.   Conclusion and Suggestion

The results of this study are especially important to tourism destinations because they demonstrate that MEMEs, which are frequently seen on social media channels, can increase awareness, promotion, and preference for tourism destinations. The analysis indicated that a MEME's entertainment value positively affects attitude toward the MEME (H_1). Individuals' attitudes toward MEMEs can be positively shaped through visuals, texts, or sounds in MEMEs that give pleasure to individuals. In addition, attitude toward a MEME positively affects destination awareness and intention to visit that destination (H_2 and H_3). That is, destinations can use MEMEs as a promotional tool, particularly to attract Gen-Z individuals. Individuals who gain destination awareness through MEMEs may develop greater intention to visit that destination (H_4). Individuals who research and collect information about a destination through MEMEs may also disseminate that information to those around them and also develop an intention to visit it. Moreover, attitude toward MEME mediates the relationship between a MEME's entertainment value and destination awareness, and between a MEME's entertainment value and intention to visit (H_{5a} and H_{5b}). That is, although a MEME's entertainment value is an important factor in raising destination awareness and intention to visit, the effect partially depends on attitude toward that MEME. If the attitude is negative, the effect of the MEME's entertainment value may be low. Finally, liking and sharing intentions moderate the relationship between attitude toward a MEME and destination awareness, and between attitude toward a MEME and intention to visit (H_{6a}, H_{6b}, H_{6c}, and H_{6d}). That is, the positive relationship between attitude towards a MEME and destination awareness was stronger in the presence of lower like intention while both high and low share intention strengthen the relationship between attitude toward a MEME and destination awareness.

6.1. Theoretical Implications

MEMEs are frequently used as digital entertainment tools. Their entertainment value can be increased by images, texts, and/or sounds, and by social media sharing. Similar to Teng et al. (2022), we found that attitudes toward MEMEs are positively affected by their entertainment value. Thus, it is necessary to create MEMEs with entertainment value to affect attitudes. Furthermore, MEMEs with entertainment value attract more attention (Dynel & Messerli, 2020; Wagener, 2021). Thus, attitudes about any product, service, object, or destination can be shaped via MEMEs (Yhee et al., 2021). SLT can help explain this as it assumes that attitudes are formed through a series of three cognitive processes, namely attention, retention, and motivation (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Thus, entertainment value may be an antecedent variable in this cognitive process.

Sharing on social media can shape attitudes. Certain behaviors can be encouraged by MEMEs by shaping cognitive and emotional attitudes (Forelle et al., 2015). Visuals can be effective for promoting and raising awareness (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). MEMEs shared by neutral individuals increase other people's curiosity of individuals, which pushes them to do

research to gain information about the destination (Dedeoğlu, 2019). The resulting attitude can then change the individual's intention to visit that destination (Ervina & Octaviany, 2022). SIT can help explain this because it assumes that shaping attitudes makes the decision-making process easier (Richins, 2000). That is, positive attitudes towards MEMEs affect people's destination awareness and intention to visit.

This study showed that destination awareness can increase intention to visit. This awareness can be increased by providing destination-related information in MEMEs (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020). Individuals with destination awareness can be expected to conduct research to gain more information about the destination (Dedeoğlu, 2019). Furthermore, information obtained about a destination makes people more curious about it or keep it in mind, which in turn can increase intention to visit (Liu et al., 2019). SOCT can help explain this because it suggests that individuals compare themselves with others that they see in social media posts and wish to perform similar behaviors. Thus, social media MEME posts can affect intention to visit.

Entertainment value in MEMEs can be created through text, colors, sounds, and/or images in order to increase awareness about the represented destination (Teng et al., 2022). MEMEs can also help promote a previously known destination, thereby increasing intention to visit (Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). However, while entertainment value is an important factor affecting destination awareness and intention to visit, attitudes may also be important (Han & Chen, 2022). In the present study, attitude toward MEME partially mediated the relationship. That is, attitude affects destination awareness and visit intention as well as perceived entertainment value, although factors other than attitudes may also be effective. SCT can help explain this because interactions on social media make it possible to affect individual behavior by disseminating ideas and/or applications (Plé & Demangeot, 2020).

Attitudes are an important determining factor of behavior. In particular, the present study demonstrated the positive effect of attitudes toward MEMEs on destination awareness and intention to visit. There may also be other important factors, such as like intention and share intention for MEMEs that like other MEMEs or receive more likes become popular on social media (Kim, 2018), which in turn may increase interaction. If many neutral people like a MEME, this may change the attitudes and behaviors of others (Forelle et al., 2015). Individuals that like a MEME may remember more items because they look at the MEME more carefully. In addition, especially intention to share will increase due to liking. The more a MEME is shared, the more likely it will be seen by individuals on social media. Accordingly, the present study tested the moderating effect of like intention and share intention. However, neither had any significant moderating effect on the effect of attitude and intention to visit. On the other hand, like and share intentions moderated the effect of attitude on destination awareness. Contrary to expectations, the positive relationship between attitude toward a MEME and destination awareness was stronger in the presence of lower like intention. This may be because individuals also pay attention to MEMEs, which are much less likely to be liked, while some items are remembered for their images. On the

other hand, both high and low share intention strengthen the relationship between attitude toward a MEME and destination awareness. That is, MEMEs with entertainment value and visual appeal are important for increasing destination awareness. Individuals pay more attention to these MEMEs with their share intention because they enjoyed them.

6.2. Practical Implications

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be made to destination management organizations and tourism enterprises operating in particular destinations. It is clear that social media can be used for awareness raising, promotion, and advertising (Dedeoğlu et al., 2020; Han & Chen, 2022). Innovation and entertainment value are important in sharing on social media channels (Dynel & Messerli, 2020; Wagener, 2021). Hence, MEME posts have recently become valuable. MEMEs can enable destination management organizations to showcase their valuable tourism attractions. Through MEMEs with visual, written, and/or auditory entertainment value regarding awareness and promotion can enable these organizations to reach different target groups. Such posts can attract attention and increase the tendency to research about the destination (Lou & Yuan, 2019; Abbas Naqvi et al., 2020). In addition, MEMEs can be a strategic tool for tourism enterprises in the destination to promote their products and services as well as the destination to potential visitors. Finally, tourism enterprises can use MEME posts to in create a positive image and increase potential customers.

6.3. Limitations and Future Research

The study had several limitations. First, due to the recent earthquake in Turkey, the sample size was below the number calculated as necessary (380). Instead, the approach of Kline (2011) was adopted, which meant that a sample size of 294 valid questionnaire responses was considered adequate. The second limitation was the use of convenience sampling rather than quota sampling. Nevertheless, students from 25 different tourism faculties were reached. Third, although face-to-face data collection was preferred, due to the earthquake, an online questionnaire was used instead. These research findings can be generalized to the Turkey context. Since MEMEs are a new topic in tourism, future research can focus on identifying the features that increase memes' attractiveness, determining what meme contents are needed for promotion and advertising, and how tourism enterprises can use MEMEs as a marketing tool. Finally, the present findings indicated that there should be other mediating variables apart from attitude toward MEMEs, which was only a partial mediator. Future research could therefore identify the other factors through which MEMEs may affect destination preferences.

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