



## Selecting humour in tourism settings – A guide for tourism operators



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### ABSTRACT

There appears to be an increase in the number of tourism publications focusing on humour. These new directions explore theoretical and conceptual ideas. The cumulative value of these studies suggests that employing humour in such situations as tour guiding and attractions facilitates positive memorable tourists' experiences and is good for the success of tourism businesses. There are, however, almost no studies outlining a framework that tourism operators can use to select humour that is appropriate for their setting and target audience. This study explores the practical issues in the application of humour by tourism operators and proposes an accessible, applied framework for the implementation of humour. It is envisaged that tourism operators may find such a framework helpful in guiding their decisions to use humour in their experiential offerings. Further, the steps proposed in the framework may also deliver fresh opportunities for researchers.

### 1. Introduction

Multiple stakeholders are involved in creating tourist experiences. The players include tourists acting alone or in concert with others, as well as those who construct and manage the settings where experiences are realised (Prebensen, Chen, & Uysal, 2014). This study considers the way tourism managers, and specifically tour guides, can employ the tool of humour to build distinct, desirable, and positive tourist experiences.

Humour in the context of tourism is a relatively new area of study. Initial studies reveal that appropriate humour can lead to more engaging and enjoyable experiences for tourists (Pabel & Pearce, 2015; Pearce & Pabel, 2015). The term humour itself is multifaceted and dynamic. It can refer to a mood, a talent, a frame of mind, a temperament, or a virtue (Ruch, 2002). If defined in terms of outcomes, humour is an act, a statement or a communication that results in amusement. It may, but does not have to produce outright laughter. It is recognised in the emerging humour literature that the perception of humour is a subjective phenomenon and depends on the individual's cultural background, their mood, and past experiences (El Refaie, 2011; Vuorela, 2005).

Although tourists travel for a combination of reasons, much tourist consumption is about “travelling for personal enjoyment, which generates hedonic value for the customer” (Prebensen et al., 2014, p. xi). Fun, enjoyment, and entertainment have long been recognised as persistent travel motives (Cohen, 2011; Kler & Tribe, 2012). The creation and popularity of simulated worlds such as amusement parks, hybrid

entertainment environments such as interactive museums, and themed shopping malls across the globe support this view (Bryman, 2004; Smith, MacLeod, & Robertson, 2010). One route to enhance tourists' need for fun and playfulness in these hedonic and hybrid settings is by including humour in the design of the tourism experiences.

Common circumstances where tourists are likely to be exposed to humour include presentations by tour guides and tourism attraction personnel. Studies of guided tours have been a part of the tourism literature for some time (Pearce, 1984; Schmidt, 1979). Cohen (1985) identified four core roles (the guide as a wayfinder, animator, interaction controller, and information agent) but there have been extensions and refinements to these basic functions (Weiler & Black, 2015). Some representative examples of this interest in the multiple roles of the guide are apparent in the work of Howard, Thwaites, and Smith (2001), who emphasized cultural mediation, and McIntyre and Haig (2002), who highlighted differences between ecotourism guides and other tourism communicators. Recent research on tour guides' use of humour by Zhang and Pearce (2016) not only identified the entertainment value of humour, but also its control and surveillance functions. Their study argues that tour guides use humour to give instructions and to control certain tourist behaviours.

Despite the development of tourism research about humour, there is no existing work identifying what criteria tourism presenters should consider when they decide to use humour as a part of their experiential offerings. Instead, the existing practical guidance tends to be vague and circumspect. For example, Struthers (2011) observed that humour is an elusive subject with its many different conceptualisations making it

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challenging to offer comprehensive guidance for its use. In many tour guide handbooks, practitioners are often encouraged to use humour without specific advice on how to go about the selection process. The aim of this study is, therefore, to offer practical guidance for tourism businesses and tour guides wishing to enhance tourist experiences through humour. To achieve this aim, the study addresses the following research objectives:

- conduct a systematic review of existing studies examining the tourism humour relationship by taking a design thinking approach;
- propose a model to guide tourism operators through the process of choosing humour appropriate to their setting and target audience.

## 2. Designing tourism experiences to include humour

In addressing the first research objective, the researchers offer a systematic review of existing studies examining the tourism humour relationship. The review is underpinned by recent thinking in design science in tourism (Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2016). Several works have been published which focus on the importance of designing engaging customer experiences. For example, when paying attention to the experiential side of consumption situations, Shaw, Dibeehi, and Walden (2010) state that it is important to not just provide the customer with what they want but also attend to *how* the experience is delivered. Furthermore, the much-cited work of Pine and Gilmore (1999) revealed how businesses add value for their customers by transitioning from service delivery to experience creation. They argue that it is important to provide customers with the opportunity to connect with the experience by making their consumption occasions more engaging. From this standpoint, it is no longer sufficient to simply sell products and services, since customers “want to have an interesting life, experience new aspects of life or new places, be entertained and learn in an enjoyable way” (Darmer & Sundbo, 2008, p. 3).

In building on earlier work, Prebensen et al. (2014) focused on the ways in which value creation is changing within the tourism industry. Their studies address the many factors that affect value creation and co-creation in tourism experiences, although humour was not considered in any detail in their analyses. In a further elaboration of these issues, Fesenmaier and Xiang (2016) argue for *design thinking* which includes design, development, and evaluation as a basis for innovation. They describe design as a clear roadmap where key issues to consider include the staging of the experience over time and monitoring the emotions which tourists report. Their work also stresses the physical layout and movement of tourists through the spaces created. As noted by Pearce and Zare (2017), the very basis of good design lies in accessing the emic view of the tourists, and in this sense predicting how tourists might respond to types of humour during any tour becomes an important factor in good experience design. Customer feedback is pivotal in this process to minimise the risk of failure. When aiming to enhance a tourism experience through an injection of humour, a tourism presenter's ability to anticipate and respond to the audience reaction is likely to be central to creating enjoyable and entertaining presentations.

It can also be noted that communication during guided tours and presentations is usually a two-way process where the tourism personnel encourage input and questions from the tourists (Ballantyne, Crabtree, Ham, Hughes, & Weiler, 2000). More specifically, McDonnell (2001) found that it was essential for presenters to be knowledgeable about their area (41%), to use humour and fun to develop good rapport with customers (33%), to give interesting commentary (15%), and to be easy to understand (5%). Negative aspects of tour guiding were identified as not being enthusiastic and personable (3%), and being difficult to understand in terms of having a local accent (3%). Thus, the way in which educational material is delivered does in fact help to reinforce the message (Jennings & Weiler, 2006). Indigenous tour guides also recognize the use of humour during guided tours to change the pace of a tour, to renew people's interest and to ensure that everyone is having an

enjoyable experience (Howard et al., 2001).

Bryman (2004) identified three types of work by presenters – emotional labour, aesthetic labour, and performative labour. All three labour types are helpful for successful humour delivery. Firstly, emotional labour is about enacting the right emotions to make a certain type of humour work for its situation. The ability to mimic surprise and disgust, or even simulate affection, can all play a role in delivering an amusing and entertaining tour guide performance (Pearce, 2009). The emotional labour of guides has been repeatedly identified as important in recent studies (Goleman, 1998; Harris, 2005; Torland, 2011; Weiler & Black, 2015). In developing studies of humour and its role in tourist-guide encounters, Pearce and Pabel (2015) emphasize that the skill of being amusing and entertaining involves choosing and delivering the right material for the right audience at the right time.

The second dimension in Bryman's analysis, aesthetic labour, is about the displaying the right look and appearance for the humour to work well. For the guided tour context, Zhang and Pearce (2016) note the way guides in the London Dungeon attend to their appearance to provide key aesthetic support for their comic efforts. Bryman (2004) predicts that aesthetic labour will become increasingly important in commercial settings through appropriate clothing, make-up and props. He cites the example of a living heritage museum where staff in costume are perceived as more credible in their delivery of long-forgotten skills.

The final consideration, performative labour, is established through the combined effects of emotional and aesthetic labour. Work is performative and therefore performative labour includes functional considerations to perform a role within character. In the context of humour, it means that the delivery of humour is just as important as the content of the humour itself (Franzini, 2012). Facial expressions, gestures and vocal variety are integral elements for successful humour delivery and can all be developed through practice (Franzini, 2012; Powell & Andresen, 1985). Smiling, laughing, nodding slowly, tightening of the lips, winking, rolling of the eyes, uplifting one eyebrow can be added to the verbal cues to make the humour work (Caucci & Kreuz, 2012; Hancock, 2004). The required performance may be as simple as one extended look at an audience member, an act which may signal surprise, amusement at the other or feigned flirtatious interest (Pearce, 2009). Another consideration is being able to manage timing. The use of pauses and silences can generate curiosity in the audience, and thus build momentum in telling a joke (Stroobants, 2009).

## 3. A conceptual model for selecting humour in tourism settings

Following the review of key points from the existing knowledge base, the second objective of this research is to propose a model to guide tourism operators through the process of selecting humour appropriate to their setting and target audience. The body of knowledge used to propose a conceptual model for the selection of humour at tourism settings is based on the published literature with a special focus given to studies investigating humour in tourism contexts or service encounters. At the broad level, there has been work identifying the various patterns and pathways that are possible in the broad ambit of the tourism humour relationship (Pearce, 2009). The more specific conceptual model of humour developed by Pearce and Pabel (2015) considered several features which make humour work, including the tourism context, the tourist's personality and individual profile, and the tourism presentation. Mathies, Chiew, and Kleinaltenkamp (2016) developed a framework to guide the inclusion of humour in service interactions. They found that humour during service encounters “is an affiliative behaviour which strengthens rapport between service employees and their customers” (Mathies et al., 2016, p. 137). Further, the new design thinking emphasis in tourism studies suggests that attending to the emotional qualities of the tourism experience can be a core pathway to build success in engaging customers (Fesenmaier & Xiang, 2016). The preceding studies take a rather general approach to

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