



Highlighting the benefits of tourism humour: The views of tourists



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 August 2015

Received in revised form 8 October 2015

Accepted 9 October 2015

Keywords:

Humour

Laughter

Tourist experience

Comparative advantage

ABSTRACT

The study considered tourists' perspectives about humour. It explored both the perceived benefits of humour for the tourists themselves and advantages for the businesses they visit. The work offers empirical data embellishing existing conceptual approaches. The data were collected across five tourism settings in Australia where humour was a well-recognised component of the experience. Both a questionnaire-based survey and focus group discussions were employed to access key information. The study identified a suite of reasons as to why humour should be encouraged during tourism experiences. The findings highlighted the role humour plays for tourists in connecting with others and in coping with difficult and stressful travel situations. Additionally, the research outlined key ways humour adds value for tourism businesses, notably in terms of providing truly memorable experiences. Further benefits of using humour for the businesses lie in distinctiveness, engagement with customers and enhancing the likelihood of repeat business.

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1. Introduction

The central interest of this study lies in the benefits of humour both to tourists and the business they attend. The generic benefits of humour have been well documented in the broad medicine literature and an increasing number of health practitioners regularly expose their patients to humour (Agarwal, 2014). Evidence suggests that humour plays a vital role in dissipating tension, stress, anxiety and depression, and therefore improves immune system functioning (Berk et al., 1989; Yovetich, Dale, & Hudak, 1990). These outcomes are linked to the biochemical reactions that occur in the human body during mirthful laughter including a decrease in stress hormones such as cortisol, dopac and epinephrine (Berk et al., 1989) and an increase in beneficial chemicals such as beta-endorphins. A study by Berk, Tan, and Berk (2008) found that even the anticipation of a laughter event reduced the stress hormones cortisol, epinephrine and dopac for their experiment group.

The psychophysiological benefits of humour resulting in rich and engaging laughter have been compared by Berk (2001) to the health benefits gained from participating in aerobic exercise. This is because of an increase in muscle contraction, oxygen consumption, respiratory rate and heart rate (Fry, 1977). Furthermore, research by Overeem, Taal, Ocal Gezici, Lammers, and Van Dijk (2004) found that muscle tone is relaxed for up to 45 min after a mirthful laughter session. Psychological benefits of humour include improved self-esteem (Kuiper & Martin, 1998) and a sense of control (Stroobants, 2009; Crawford & Calabiano, 2011). More comprehensive summaries recording the psychological and physiological

benefits of humour and laughter are provided in the work of Berk (2001); Rosner (2002) and Agarwal (2014).

While there appear to be many benefits of humour resulting from mirthful laughter in general, this study investigates the benefits to be gained from humorous tourism experiences. Within the area of tourism, only limited empirical research exists on the potential benefits derived from humour in travel experiences. There are, however, some scholars who appreciate the potential for tourism to be a rich source of humour. For example, Wall (2000) stated that because tourism brings together people from all over the world using different languages in unfamiliar environments, there is much potential for humour to arise in the novel situations.

The existing studies on the tourism–humour relationship (Frew, 2006a, 2006b; Cohen, 2010, 2011; Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Pabel, 2014) all highlight the importance of additional empirical work. The book *Tourism and Humour* by Pearce and Pabel (2015) is one of the few to explore some of the latent benefits that are derived from humour-filled tourism experiences. Many questions remain unanswered about the potential benefits that humour can have and it is the purpose of this study to begin to fill this void. The explicit purpose of this study is to provide more comprehensive evidence on the advantages gained from humorous tourism experiences for both tourists and tourism operators. Two study methods will be used to demonstrate how these benefits are derived: The first method, a questionnaire study, has as its aim identifying respondents' perceptions concerning the advantages of engaging in humour during tourism experiences. Allied to this first aim, this study will also explore and assess a second aim on the nature of tourism settings where humour plays a key role. The second method, based on focus groups, will be used to investigate a third aim: tourists' views of

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the perceived benefits to be gained by tourism operators who are successful in their application of humour.

2. Literature review

2.1. Impact of humour on the tourist experience

2.1.1. For tourists

One overarching tourist motivational theme is to have fun and a “good” time. For example, Edensor (2000) argued that most people would consider tourism to be a time for play and fun rather than work. Frew (2006a) pointed out there are many tourists whose motivations are purely to have fun and to share a good time through laughter. Smith, MacLeod, and Robertson (2010) have suggested that contemporary tourism appears to have become a lot more playful and that post-tourists have different expectations than traditional or cultural tourists in that they view tourism as a game. It has been argued that contemporary tourists want to be entertained and so they are actively looking for simulated, fun-filled worlds and experiences to meet their expectations (Smith et al., 2010).

Some tourists may benefit from humorous tourism experiences after the holiday has finished (Frew, 2006a). Once back at home, remembering and recounting amusing travel experiences may lead to psychological benefits such as increased well-being. Social benefits too may derive from humour in the sense of improved relationships with travel companions. Many humorous experiences are written down in a travel journal or a travel blog and read again months or even years later to relive memories (Pearce & Pabel, 2015).

Not all tourism experiences are inherently entertaining and amusing. It has also been acknowledged that there can be travel situations which are perceived as negative. Diener, Scollon, Oishi, Dzokoto, and Suh (2000) highlighted that holidays can be stressful (delayed flights, lost reservations, long waiting periods), include conflicts (trying to keep every family member happy) and travel may have boring periods. Frew (2006b) has previously applied Stebbins (1996) theory of social comic relief to explain the ways humour can be helpful for tourists in coping with stressful or frustrating travel situations. She suggested that using humour has the potential to help tourists cope with transport problems, bad weather conditions, inadequate accommodation and unappetising food. The existing literature has not yet specified how humour is helpful in dealing with these unpleasant holiday experiences. In addition to finding out why tourists think that humour should be encouraged during on-site tourism experiences, this study is also exploring travel episodes where humour might have played a key role for the research participants in coping with difficult and awkward travel experiences.

2.1.2. For tourism operators

Multiple studies have been conducted on workplace humour and these can also be related to tourism businesses. For example, Plester and Orams (2008) show how humour contributes to the development of the organisational culture at workplaces where it can not only be tolerated but is also encouraged. Additionally, humour has been found to have positive impacts on group performance by fostering collegiality amongst employees (Avolio, Howell, & Sosik, 1999; Holmes, 2006). This is because humour and laughter are helpful in lightening the atmosphere which can enhance communication and strengthen in-group bonds (Ruch, 1993). However, Rogerson-Revell (2007) expressed concern about the use of humour in multicultural business meetings where it should be handled with care as jokes, jibes and jesting can be perceived differently across nations and cultures.

In the context of tourism, humour might not only be an important factor in the tourists' experience but it may also have implications for managing the tourist setting. Frew (2006a) expressed a view that destination managers should actively provide support for humorous events and festivals. Research by Johnson and Ball (2000) found that humour can be a source of satisfaction with an overall setting. They state that by

“converting a stranger into a friend; someone who is at ease in their surroundings, who enjoys their interaction with the service provider ... (then there is a) wish to return as a result and (customers) speak glowingly of their experiences” (Johnson & Ball, 2000, p. 17). Pastorelli (2003) also argues that tourism experiences are a key reference point for feelings, thoughts and memories. He highlights a view that using humour can play a vital role in ensuring that these points of reference are built on positive connections. An important question for the present study lies in addressing what are the potential benefits for tourism businesses who use humour in their interactions with their customers.

While the studies cited provide some indicators that a body of knowledge about tourism and humour is beginning to develop, they also highlight the need for further research effort. The purpose of this study is to provide more comprehensive evidence concerning the benefits that humour brings to tourism experiences, not just for tourists but also for tourism operators. The specific aims to be addressed are as follows:

1. identify respondents' perceptions concerning the advantages of engaging in humour during tourism experiences;
2. explore and assess various tourism experiences where humour plays a key role; and
3. investigate the tourists' views of benefits to be gained by tourism operators who are successful in their application of humour.

3. Materials and methods

The data collected for this study were part of a larger three and a half year project conducted to study humour in tourism settings. Data were collected at five tourism settings all of which were located in Tropical North Queensland (TNQ), the far North East of Queensland, Australia. This region is known for its tropical climate, enjoyable, laidback lifestyle and local characters (Tourism and Events Queensland, 2014a). Tourism is one of the key economic drivers for the TNQ region which provides access to two World Heritage sites, the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics of Queensland; both are major drawcards for tourists (Advance Cairns, 2011). TNQ attracted 2.3 million international and domestic tourists for the year ending June 2014 (Tourism and Events Queensland, 2014b). For Cairns, the biggest city in TNQ, tourism has contributed an estimated \$2.6 billion to the regional economy in 2013 (Cairns Regional Council, 2015).

3.1. Research methods and analysis

The first part of the study used a questionnaire to assess the outcomes of humour at two tourism settings, an adventure tourism setting and a wildlife tourism setting in northern Australia. The adventure tourism attraction is based on zip-lining in Cape Tribulation which is approximately two hours north of Cairns. As part of the experience, tourists are fitted into harnesses that enable them to glide through the canopy of the ancient Daintree rainforest on flying fox zip-lines, which are suspended up to 20 m above the ground. The wildlife tourism operator is located north of Cairns and offers educational and entertaining presentations including displays and talks about crocodiles, snakes, cassowaries, koalas and other wildlife. Questionnaires were administered in August and September 2013.

The total sample size of the questionnaire study across both data collection sites consisted of 514 participants. The respondents' gender split included more females (55.7%) than males (44.3%). The sample consisted of domestic (66.9%) and international (33.1%) participants. International respondents arrived from the UK and Ireland (9.4%), Continental Europe (9.0%), North America (7.8%), New Zealand (5.3%) and other emerging destinations (1.6%).

The average age of respondents was 40 years with a range of 18 to 83. The open-ended questions that this research focused on were subjected to content analysis by the researchers as well as analysis through the qualitative software tool Leximancer. Content analysis

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