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Tourists' responses to humour

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ABSTRACT

Building on the existing tourism–humour literature, the study investigated tourists' views of the categories of humour used by Australian tour guides. The researchers also evaluated tourists' responses to the experimental manipulation of humour levels. The tourists' commentary on the settings revealed that guides in one business emphasised predominantly funny stories and self-deprecatory humour, while in the second context the visitor experience was facilitated relatively more often through amusing exaggerations. In a quasi-experiment implemented within existing tourism businesses, the guides were encouraged to add more humour to their presentations. The manipulation did not enhance perceived levels of amusement but the prevailing levels of humour contributed significantly to the tourists' comfort, concentration and connection levels.

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Introduction

Tourism and travel effectively co-locate people with different language and socio-cultural backgrounds in unfamiliar settings. This propinquity has immense potential to result in humorous miscommunication and actions. Moreover, as tourists find themselves in unfamiliar environments, they may engage in rather unusual and sometimes amusing behaviours to manage these situations (Wall, 2000). The conjunction of these interests—humour and holidays, laughter and locations—has

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the potential to stimulate fresh academic directions in tourism and achieve potentially important commercial goals.

It can certainly be argued that the topic of humour in tourism settings is a broad and relatively underexplored new research space (Pearce, 2009). In particular, it should be noted that previous research on the tourism–humour relationship has paid limited attention to how humour is perceived by tourists themselves (Frew, 2006a, 2006b). This lack of humour studies in tourism research leads to multiple opportunities to make some key contributions to the tourism literature and, beyond that, reflect on the way tourism businesses might benefit from the study of this topic.

The limited work on humour and tourism has, in part, attended to forms of humour and general humour themes (Cohen, 2011; Frew, 2006a, 2006b; Pearce & Pabel, 2014). Studies have not, however, addressed context in any detail. The present study investigates the use of humour in two tourism contexts, both of which involve tour guides. The two tourism settings selected—a wildlife park and an adventure activity—allowed for a comparative analysis to be undertaken. The possibility exists that the use of humour varies markedly across different tourism operations, even in the same region. Both sites studied were in Far North Queensland, Australia, which is a popular international destination for a range of age and nationality based market segments. The overarching aim, which was set at both study sites, was to identify, from the tourists' perspective, what role humour plays in creating enjoyable and engaging experiences. This aim serves to build some foundation work for humour appreciation by tourists. This study specifically sought to investigate how any variations in the level of provided humour affected tourists' immediate and likely future responses to the tour and these sorts of humour linked experiences. The importance of this theme lies in assessing whether humour acts as a drawcard for tourist operations and supports or interferes with future behavioural choices.

Humour and tourism businesses

The role of humour in tourism is being appreciated in a variety of tourism business contexts. The 'Humour in Business Award' in New Zealand was designed to celebrate ways in which humour is included in the workplace such as making a difference to teamwork, engaging customers and contributing to the overall well-being and productivity of an organisation (Scoop Media, 2008). In 2008 this humour award went to a tourism business, the Canyon Swing in Queenstown, which was acknowledged for its use of humour not only for entertaining customers but also for managing their anxieties and fears about the adrenalin based activities of the company. Other long-standing tourist attractions, including specific attractions in the Disney theme parks, demonstrations at the Polynesian cultural centre and a number of Grand Canyon guided tours employ humour to manage customers' anxiety or build rapport with the audience (Pearce, 2008).

In other tourism and hospitality contexts humour has also been acknowledged as a business tool and a defining element of company identity. Two hospitality businesses which have used humour to create a niche for themselves include the American restaurant and bar "T.G.I. Friday's" and the United Kingdom pub "It's a Scream." These two organisations decided to emphasise the role of humour by "stressing fun as part of their operations and pursuing deliberate actions to promote and use humour" (Johnson & Ball, 2000, p. 21). Humour also appears successful in providing some airline businesses with a point of differentiation. Shaw, Debechi, and Walden (2010) provide the example of how Southwest Airlines employees created fun experiences for travellers. The humorous actions and comments of the Southwest aircrew were so distinctive that the company was perceived by the public as offering a different experience from other airlines in the North American market. The strategy resulted in increased dividends for Southwest Airlines. In the South African context Kulula Airlines has adopted similar tactics and some humour has been a part of the approach to safety messages by Virgin Airlines for some time (Branson, 2007).

Other tourism operations appear to feel the need to include humour as a part of their entertainment offerings. For example, some museums have responded to the competitive pressure from amusement parks and shopping malls by repositioning themselves with more humour in their signs and descriptions (Bryman, 2004). The point is to make museums more appealing to a broad market by embellishing the displays with humour to provide a "palace of amusement" (Van Aalst & Boogaarts, 2002, p. 197).

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