

Editorial: humour and its use in tourism contexts

Anja Pabel

Central Queensland University, Australia
a.pabel@cqu.edu.au

1. Introduction

Humour has received attention from many academic disciplines including anthropology, psychology, biology, computer science, linguistics, literary and cultural studies, neuroscience, philosophy, religious studies and sociology (Martin 2007). However, research on humour and its value for tourism experiences only started to emerge in the early 2000s, making it a relatively new area of research with many unexplored aspects that warrant further investigation. The study of humour in tourism increasingly recognises that tourists react to and redefine situations for their hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing (Pearce & Mohammadi 2018).

As humour scholars, we know that humour is one of the most fascinating yet confusing facets of human behaviour. Needless to say, without humour and laughter, life would be “intolerable and suffocatingly intense” (Zijderveld 1983: iv). But what makes tourism settings and situations an interesting area for studying humour? Firstly, tourism brings people from different languages and cultural backgrounds together. This sometimes results in amusing miscommunications which offer opportunities to investigate humour in multicultural communication situations. Additionally, as tourists visit new and unfamiliar environments, they may engage in unusual or inappropriate behaviour, which is often perceived as humorous by the locals at a destination (Wall 2000).

There are plenty of opportunities to study humour in diverse tourism contexts. Three distinctions can be made in the tourism-humour relationship. Firstly, there is humour for tourists. It is often used to enhance the general appeal of promotional campaigns or on-site tourism experiences, i.e. official tourist websites (Kang & Mastin 2008) and in on-site tourism presentations (Pabel & Pearce 2016). Secondly, there is humour about tourists. For example, Cohen’s work (2010) explored the relationship between jokes about tourists and the stereotypical image of the modern tourist. The humour investigated in some of these jokes often mocks the tourists’ limited cultural capital and pokes fun at their lack of knowledge about travelling. Finally, there is humour by tourists, which may be used to cope with awkward, frustrating and stressful travel situations. Applying Stebbin’s (1996) social comic relief theory to the tourism settings, Frew (2006) found that humour allows tourists to gain control of some negative situations and makes them appear less threatening (Solomon 1996). Humour can help tourists with transportation problems (traffic jams, airport delays, and cancellations), coping with bad weather conditions, less than satisfying accommodation settings, and unfamiliar food types as well as in the interaction with locals or tourism employees (Frew 2006).

Most studies on the tourism-humour relationship focus on humour that is created for the purpose of entertainment, as an attention-grabber and to make tourists feel comfortable. The role of the tour guide plays an important part in facilitating a quality tourism experience irrespective of the tour setting (Black & Weiler 2005). Apart from roles such as leader and communicator, a tour guide also needs to be an entertainer aiming to produce positive feelings and a warm atmosphere for the tourists (Heung 2008). Humour achieves such outcomes by entertaining and providing fun (Ball & Johnson 2000).

Humour can also play an important role in tourism interpretation. In this context, interpretation of information is about providing tourists with new insights and a better understanding of the area they visit and the culture and environment they experience (Reisinger & Steiner 2006). Moscardo et al. (2004) recognise that effective interpretation should include humour, metaphors and analogies when explanations are given to tourists. They note that this helps visitors build links between the information given and their previous knowledge. Adding humour to certain situations creates increased mindfulness by “forcing people to see a new and unexpected side to a given situation” (Carson & Langer 2006: 41). Likewise, safety messages appear more palatable to tourists when wrapped in humour, although the message must still prevail (Pearce & Pabel 2015; Zhang & Pearce 2016).

Once back at home, remembering funny travel experiences may lead to mental benefits such as increased wellbeing by savouring memories about the good times. Thinking back and remembering how tourists felt during humorous travel episodes can also take them back to how they felt in that moment and help them regain the positive feelings associated with the memory (De Bloom et al. 2010). Positive tourism is a new emerging area that provides further avenues for interconnecting aspects of tourism, humour and positive psychology, focusing on finding strategies to enhance peoples’ emotional, social and psychological wellbeing (Filep et al. 2017).

2. Tourism and humour: summaries of the contributions

This special issue comprises seven articles sharing the common theme of enhancing our knowledge about the tourism-humour relationship. Yet, each article approaches the topic of humour from different perspectives. The humour sources and the contexts in which humour are studied are diverse. Several papers investigate humour as a tourism marketing tactic, including Chinese social media posts to Weibo, tourism destination marketing in Spain, and destination marketing imagery in the viral meme video “America First, the Netherlands Second”. Various papers study how to appropriately use humour during on-site tourism experiences, for example in Estonian accommodation establishments and at a living heritage museum in Slovenia. There is also a paper exploring the views of Australian tourism operators on humour in supplier-customer interactions.

The papers presented in this issue employ various research methods including quantitative (e.g., surveys) and qualitative (e.g., focus groups, self-reflection) approaches. The articles also use a variety of analytical techniques such as content analysis and semiotic analysis for qualitative content, and descriptive and inferential statistics to explain quantitative data. Several papers also propose theoretical concepts to establish grounds for further investigation and testing.

In the first article, Jing Ge investigates visual social media marketing through the lens of Weibo posts containing humorous images shared by five Chinese provincial destination marketing organisations (DMOs). Using a mix of content analysis and semiotic analysis, she

found that humour is regarded as a symbolic resource to enhance the marketing efforts of tourism firms. Many social media posts adopt non-product-related content to engage with consumers. The non-adoption of product promotion and advertising elements in formulating humour posts emphasise that engagement is the core of social media marketing. The study offers implications for tourism organisations wishing to use social media-based visual humour to enhance their marketing efforts.

Continuing with the social media theme, Maja Turnšek and Petr Janecek carried out a detailed investigation of the popular meme video “America First, the Netherlands Second” focusing on the intertwining of satirical political expression and destination marketing imagery. In the context of this study, destination marketing imagery showcases stunning representations of the presented country’s natural beauties, intertwined with humorous representations of selected travel attractions. The findings indicate that although the video itself was presented in a self-critical and satirical manner, the humour and the typical destination imagery of the Netherlands resulted in the participants’ positive evaluation of the country.

In the next article, Miriam Porres-Guerrero and Concepción Foronda-Robles discuss the link between humour and tourism by analysing “Spain Marks”, an international campaign used to promote Spain as a tourism destination. This campaign showcased an innovative use of humour by breaking away from traditional forms of advertising and offered a fresh and contemporary image of Spain as a tourism destination. The study found that the use of humour in tourism marketing can work as an engagement strategy that portrays the uniqueness of a destination. However, the researchers also state that achieving positive outcomes can be a difficult task since humour appreciation is highly subjective especially when a campaign is targeted at multiple international audiences.

Moving towards broader tourism management, Marit Piirman, Stephen Pratt, Melanie Smith and Heli Tooman assessed humour use in Estonian accommodation settings. Their study contributes to the relatively under-researched area of humour studies in hospitality by analysing the use of different forms of humour in accommodation establishments. Using various research methods, they conclude that multiple forms of humour are used in accommodation establishments to provide information and enhance the overall guest experience. The authors propose a tiered decision support model to guide accommodation establishments in how humour could be applied more effectively in their marketing communication and service processes.

In the next article, Anja Pabel and Philip Pearce explore humour in supplier-customer interactions using responses collected from tourism industry stakeholders. Since much of the existing literature on the tourism-humour relationship focuses on the perceptions of tourists, this study offers a new angle by exploring the views of Australia-based tourism operators. The findings show that many operators already used their Australian sense of humour with their customers, but they are keen to learn about new ways to apply humour to their business operations. The authors provide some strategies to guide the development of humour workshops aimed at tourism industry professionals in terms of content and presentation delivery.

For the next article, Maja Turnšek, Tatjana Zupančič and Barbara Pavlakovič “travel back to school” and explore the concepts of authenticity, functions of humour and experience design dimensions in the context of a living heritage museum in Slovenia. “Smart Head Primary School” is a re-enactment of teaching as it was done in the 1950s in Slovenia. The experience is popular due to its extensive inclusion of humour. It is the role of a strict “teacher” (tour guide) to interpret to the “pupils” (visitors) the various elements of the region’s heritage. Using Pearce’s (2009) model of the three functions of humour in tourism and Pine and Gilmore’s

(1999) four dimensions of experience design as guiding theoretical frameworks, the findings indicate that through effective use of humour, visitors are able to perceive and recognise the difference between objective and constructive authenticity more effectively.

The issue ends with a paper on the humour repertoire concept by Anja Pabel and Philip Pearce, who are proposing an all-encompassing framework for researching humour in tourism and leisure. The term *humour repertoire* encompasses the totality of a person's abilities and skills to both appreciate and produce humour. The authors present the *humour repertoire framework* and, via an online empirical study, address selected components of the conceptual scheme. Attention is given to the multiple social and contextual factors beyond the individual level that need to be considered when assessing humour in diverse tourism contexts. Fresh research directions are indicated by considering the richness of the repertoire framework and links to cognitive schema research.

3. Conclusion

This issue provides a mix of basic research and applied research to expand the existing base of theoretical knowledge, and to provide answers to more practical problems in this area of study. The broad range of topics and contexts represented in this special issue may have implications for tour operators, accommodation establishments, and destination marketing organisations. These papers may become a guide for tourism operators wishing to include more humour into their tourism experiences. It is also hoped that this issue will serve as a source of inspiration for scholars from both disciplines, tourism research and humour research, to carry out future studies that will advance our understanding of humour and laughter in tourism settings. For me as a guest editor of this special issue, it is very pleasing to see an increasing number of scholars researching the tourism-humour relationship.

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