

# Humour in supplier-customer interactions: the views of Australian tourism operators

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## Abstract

*Much of the literature on the tourism-humour relationship focuses on the perceptions of tourists. Little research exists on the views of tourism operators. The aim of this study is to report on feedback provided by tourism industry stakeholders after they participated in a workshop intended to enhance their knowledge of humour and its use in customer interactions. Three interactive workshops were held with 23 participants for the purpose of informing tourism personnel how to use humour effectively when interacting directly with customers. The tourism operators' perspectives are used to highlight ways humour can be used as a strategic tool for customer engagement.*

*Keywords: humour, tourism management, tourism operator, customer service, customer interactions.*

## 1. Introduction

Research on the use of humour in business contexts has been growing in recent years with much of the existing literature focusing on customers' appreciation of humour (Gremmler & Gwinner 2000; van Dolen, de Ruyter & Streukens 2008). Tourism scholars have also started to explore the interesting field of humour research and its effects on tourists' experiences. Although the tourism literature suggests that humour has positive effects on tourism experiences, here too, existing research has focused on customers and their perception of what is amusing (Frew 2006; Pearce 2009; Cohen 2011; Pearce & Pabel 2014; Pabel & Pearce 2016). There is little available information on tourism operators' perspectives. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by reporting on feedback provided by tourism industry stakeholders

after they participated in workshops intended to enhance their knowledge of humour and its use in customer interactions. Considering the knowledge gained from the workshop-specific feedback is important for two reasons. Firstly, no previous studies have looked at the perspectives of tourism operators when using humour. Building an inventory of these perspectives offers a platform for further work. Secondly, the information presented in this paper can be used for quality assurance and evaluation purposes when designing further workshops intended for tourism industry professionals.

Three areas of research from the literature shape the direction of the present study. First, the tourism literature informs us that many contemporary tourists prioritise hedonic motivations and enjoy the sense of fun generated by playful encounters (Smith, MacLeod & Robertson 2010; Cohen 2011). This pattern of behaviour is a result of individuals wishing to experience “new places, be entertained and learn in an enjoyable way” (Darmer & Sundbo 2008: 3). Smith, MacLeod and Robertson (2010) agree, observing that tourists are actively seeking simulated, fun-filled experiences to meet their expectations. In responding to this customer trend, many tourism attractions increasingly feel the need to include more entertainment and fun into their experiential offerings. For example, Pearce (2009) notes the power of humour to set a tone for cultural performances at the Polynesian Cultural Centre in Hawaii, as well as for themed tourist rides such as the Jungle Cruise in Disneyland. Despite the existence of humour in these and many other tourism settings, how tourist operators evaluate and execute humour has not been explored.

Second, research on the experience economy highlights the importance for businesses to stage enjoyable and memorable experiences that give customers the opportunity to connect actively with the experience (Pine & Gilmore 1999). The emotional character of the service encounter is becoming increasingly important as much emphasis is now placed on “creating a pleasant and entertaining experience for customers” (Wong 2004: 371). Following this emphasis, attention needs to be paid to how an experience is delivered (Shaw, Dibeehi & Walden 2010). Including humour in customer-employee interactions is one way of making the tourists’ experiences more *enchanting* (cf. Ritzer 1999). Much of the humour included in tourism presentations is not spontaneous but is pre-planned or scripted to ensure that the experience offered to tourists is appropriate and engaging (Pearce 2009; Zhang & Pearce 2016). It is likely that such scripting is influenced by the service providers’ attitudes to the style and appropriateness of humour use.

Third, many existing studies in the humour literature document the benefits of humour and laughter. Laughter is contagious and simply smiling is infectious (Johnson & Ball 2000). Since a smiling face is indicative of a positive mood in most cultures, tour guides are encouraged to smile, be relaxed and have fun since an audience will pick up on these cues and start to match these moods (Pastorelli 2003). The contagiousness of humour has been documented in various studies where it has been shown that humour is able to not just elevate one’s personal mood but also works to draw in bystanders (Provine 2000). It is unlikely that these kinds of successes emerge without thoughtful planning. Hence, exploring the views of tourism operators about humour and understanding their views on constructing amusing presentations can advance our understanding of the interaction routines that make up successful encounters.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Humour in customer service interactions**

Across the years, many definitions have been proposed for the multidisciplinary term of humour. For a comprehensive review of how the term developed over time and across various academic disciplines, readers are referred to Martin (2007). Franzini (2012) argued that effective humour is doing or saying something that is funny, but the communication is also considerate of others who may be different to the presenter. Well executed humour results in greater social cohesion without engendering feelings of embarrassment or humiliation in others. The view offered by Franzini is highly appropriate for customer service situations, since it focuses on the importance of avoiding humour that may potentially create feelings of embarrassment and humiliation. It also stresses the effectiveness of humour based on being considerate of others who may be different. In tourism settings, people from various national and cultural backgrounds often come together and this audience diversity presents a challenge to those who attempt to make them smile and laugh.

Two types of humour appear to be well suited to the humour offerings we can detect in service encounters. Affiliative humour facilitates the process of getting to know others, encourages group bonding and is also helpful in decreasing unpleasant tension that may exist within groups (Martin et al. 2003). This form of humour is positive and other-centric. Another type of humour that is also applicable is self-enhancing humour. This second type of humour is also positive in nature, non-detrimental to others and used to enhance the self (Martin et al. 2003). This humour type is recommended for employees in improving social interactions and solving problems (Führ 2008). It is built on a prevailing positive outlook and an ability to see the funny side of events even when they are unpleasant (Mathies et al. 2016). Both humour types depend on the skill and personality of the presenter. Individuals involved in presenting face-to-face humour in tourism include transport personnel, front-desk hotel employees, other hotel staff, restaurant personnel, tour guides, and tour agents. Good presenters are likely to be 'people persons' with personality traits such as extroversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness (Ekinci & Dawes 2009). It must be remembered, however, that tourists can react to, modify and redefine situations for their particular hedonic and eudaimonic well-being (Pearce & Mohammadi 2018). Indeed, what is not seen as funny at the time or even what is stressful, may be turned into a humorous account once the tourist returns home (Pabel & Pearce 2015).

#### *2.1.1. Possible benefits of humour in customer service encounters*

One benefit of deliberately using humour in customer service encounters is its rapport-building capacity (Gremler & Gwinner 2000; van Dolen et al. 2008). Laughter is known to create stronger social bonds (Kashdan et al. 2014). When humour is used appropriately, customers feel their presence is valued, and a more personal link to the service individual can be established. The ingratiation power of humour has been found to make the sender (i.e., service employee) more attractive and facilitates agreement from the target (i.e., customer) (Cooper 2005). Pleasant service interactions built on the effective use of humour lead to positive service outcomes such as positive word-of-mouth and enhanced customer loyalty (Gremler & Gwinner 2000). Beyond face-to-face customer interactions and considering online service encounters, building some resilience to difficult issues is also possible through humour. Using the example of an online travel agency, van Dolen et al. (2008) conducted an experiment to determine if humour would be helpful in communicating successful and

unsuccessful booking outcomes. Their study found that humour was useful in alleviating the unfavourable outcomes of an unsuccessful booking. The role of humour changes in this case from one based on enjoyment and affiliation to one that is driven by the need to relieve negative emotions. However, this can be quite difficult to achieve particularly when no previous rapport has been built between the parties involved in the service recovery situation.

Secondly, humour can reduce stress (Putz & Breuer 2017). Finding the amusing elements in a troubling situation is regarded as a coping strategy for employees to deal with emotional challenges and to alleviate the everyday difficulties in their work (Abel 2002; Martin 2007; Plester 2009). Stress reduction deriving from the use of humour can also be a benefit for tourists (Mathies et al. 2016; McGraw, Warren & Kan 2015). On occasions the use of humour may provide distinctiveness as well as reductions in tourists' anxiety. As an example, airlines such as Air New Zealand and Southwest Airlines were able to build a positive image based on their humorous inflight safety demonstrations that were perceived by travellers as a different approach compared to other airlines (Pearce & Pabel 2015). Mathies et al. (2016) make an interesting distinction between *what* is delivered (the core service, for example the flight) versus *how* it is delivered (the actual service encounter) with effective humour use likely to be perceived by customers as a unique experience. Such comparative advantages should be explored further, and if deemed appropriate for an organisation's overall business model, might also be converted into a competitive advantage (Ritchie & Crouch 2003).

### 2.1.2. Failed humour in customer service encounters

Sometimes humour can be seen as trivialising a problem. Care should be taken when using humour in complaint management and/or service recovery because the customer may feel that their complaint has been treated in a playful rather than serious manner (McGraw, Warren & Kan 2015). This may lead to unfavourable perceptions of a company. Furthermore, Bippus (2003) points out that during tense situations, inappropriate humour is likely to have negative consequences. Service failure should be dealt with in a prompt and efficient manner, rather than with humour that is likely to be interpreted as inappropriate and likely to lead to further dissatisfaction (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks 2003). Mathies et al. (2016) argue that occasionally the use of light-hearted humour is appropriate for minor service failures.

Failed and offensive humour can even be the cause for service failure itself (McColl-Kennedy & Sparks 2003). The outcome of such failed or offensive humour is that customers feel uncomfortable and distrust the employee or the organisation. They may be left wondering about the competence and integrity of the employee who used inappropriate humour (Mathies et al. 2016). Any additional attempts at using humour during the service recovery situation will then be interpreted as unwelcome and rude by the customer. Again, the type of humour used is pivotal to these varied outcomes. It can be proposed that self-deprecating humour where the employee directs criticism at themselves may defuse rather than inflame the situation.

In an age when it is easy for customers to air their frustrations online via various social media channels, negative reactions to humour may have damaging consequences for any service organisation. Customers who perceive the humour encountered during a service interaction as offensive or belittling are likely to air their dissatisfaction online. This has important implications for service-based businesses since negative reviews on some online review websites are difficult, if not impossible to remove, even if a negative customer review has been dealt with by the organisation effectively and efficiently. The outcome is that other people are still able to read any negative review and form their own opinion about the organisation.

## **2.2. Humour in tourism settings**

Despite some attendant risks as previously noted, the use of humour is increasingly being embraced by travel and tourism organisations (Zhang & Pearce 2016; Pearce & Pabel 2015). In the pre-holiday stages, humour on websites or in tour brochures is helpful in stimulating curiosity for certain tourism experiences. For example, the brochure for a guided tour around the Atherton Tablelands in the North Queensland region of Australia informs potential customers: ‘Warning! This tour contains laughter!’ During the actual tourism experience, humour helps to establish visitor comfort levels by providing entertainment and fun, it assists in visitor concentration by increasing mindfulness and it establishes rapport between the tour guide and the tourist audience as well as amongst tourists themselves (Pearce 2009; Pearce & Pabel 2015).

For other organisations, humour represents an important strategic tool that is used to engage multicultural target markets (cf. Vuorela 2005). For example, the Yeoman Warders of the Tower of London use humour very effectively in their presentations to tourist crowds by providing a balance of information and humour. There are multiple YouTube clips showing the audience having fun, interacting with and essentially co-creating their experience with the Beefeaters (see also Zhang & Pearce 2016). Tourism experiences of the more adventurous kind such as skydiving, scuba diving and white-water rafting include humour in their safety briefings. This is done for two reasons. Firstly, humour is helpful in reinforcing appropriate behaviours by conveying any rules and regulations in a fun way. Secondly, by checking the reactions/responses of tourists to humour, tour guides can ascertain their customers’ English-speaking capacity. When the guide’s humour is greeted by blank looks, the reactions may also indicate the audience is not understanding important safety messages. Further, travel agents involved in the sale of tours can also use humour strategically to make their customers feel engaged and positive about the purchases, thus reducing anxieties associated with the sale.

Humour in the post-trip holiday stage is based on the overall evaluation of a trip. It has been associated with generating enduring memories of enjoyable and fun experiences (Pabel & Pearce 2015). Humour has also been found to create an impression of professionalism, and a perception of value creation. For example, Pabel and Pearce (2015) state that the effective use of humour by tour guides has the potential to contribute to a more professional image of the tourism business. An impression of competency is created in the minds of customers because some tour guides are so knowledgeable about their tour settings that they are able to make it fun. Providing the right balance between facts and fun is important in tourism interpretation. Many tourists wish to learn about their chosen destination’s natural history or its culture. At the same time, they also want to have engaging and fun experiences. Edutainment is the convergence of education and entertainment aiming to promote learning through interactivity and involvement with an activity (Green & McNeese 2007). Tourism attractions can use this to their advantage by providing factual information in such a way that tourists find the interactions enjoyable, without realising they are learning at the same time.

The sense of humour of the tourists themselves also warrants consideration (Pabel & Pearce 2018). Familiarity with the topic of a humorous story is needed to facilitate the detection and evaluation of any amusing incongruities or analogies (Ruch 2008). However, within the tourism context, the sharing of an in-group joke may not necessarily lead to successful detection of the incongruity unless the humour is preceded by an explanation of the humorous variables involved. Many Australian tour guides are rather skilful in this regard and tend to wrap up a joke in an elaborate story. One example includes an intricate story where politicians are compared with cane toads. It is important to understand that cane toads are far

from being loveable cousins of frogs – they poison pets and injure humans with their toxins (Department of the Environment and Energy 2010). In this case, the humorous story presumes an awareness that cane toads are seen locally as an unattractive, often bloated pest. Successful humour appreciation is only possible if all parties are familiar with the humour topic (Meyer 2000). This indicates that tour guides' story-telling capability and knowledge of their audience is important in making humour work in the multicultural situations created in tourism.

### 2.2.1. Humour at Australian tourism settings

Australia is a good location to study the use of humour in tourism settings. Australia's high temperatures and summer heat has contributed to a general laissez-faire attitude amongst its inhabitants where idioms such as *no worries* or *she'll be right mate* (translated as *everything is ok*) are frequently used. Interestingly, it is not unusual in Australian interactions to show a positive and good-natured attitude by making a potentially offensive remark (Sinkeviciute 2017) and even moderate swearing is not considered taboo (Lewis 2006).

In Australia, self-deprecating humour is often deployed to avoid appearing immodest or pompous; it is a tool used to avoid taking oneself too seriously (Sinkeviciute 2017). While English is Australia's national language, Australians also have their own unique colloquial dialect called *Strine*, a term invented by Australian author, graphic designer and abstract painter Alistair Morrison in 1964 (National Archives of Australia 2018). Australian English has been described as "humorous, inventive, original and bursting with vitality" (Lewis 2006: 207). There are many words and expressions which may appear rather confusing or odd to international visitors, i.e., *banana bender* = Queenslander, or *across the ditch* = New Zealand. *Strine* is often combined with the Australian sense of humour which tends to be loaded with irony and irreverence. Examples are reverse nicknames such as calling someone with red hair *bluey* or abbreviating many words and adding an 'o' or 'ie' at the end, i.e., Simpson becomes Simo and a brick layer becomes a *brickie*.

Based on Australian-made movies such as *Crocodile Dundee* and *The Castle*, international tourists may expect Australian tour guides to have a great sense of humour and be good at *taking the piss*. Franzini (2012) defines this colloquial expression as a form of teasing that refers to playful banter and humorous strategies intending to deflate someone's ego in an overall context of good-spirited camaraderie. Teasing and (self-)mockery are regular and recognisable practices in Australian interactions and it also appears rather natural for strangers to playfully mock each other while getting acquainted (Haugh 2011; 2014). Furthermore, Sinkeviciute (2017) makes the point that such jocular behaviour and banter are perceived as a type of bonding, rather than as antagonising or insulting verbal routines. The use of humour in interactions with customers and tourists resonates with Australians. However, there are some dangers too. For example, the teasing and banter which many Australians would consider normal in their day-to-day interactions can make people from other nationalities feel uncomfortable. In Australian interactions, it also appears that "it is mandatory to be able to take a joke" (Penney 2012: 157). If one is not able to take a joke, then this individual is likely to be perceived as being too serious.

A study on Australian workplace humour showed that humour was widespread in 26 percent of workplaces, and an occasional occurrence in 59 percent (Wijewardena, Samaratunge, Härtel & Kirk-Brown 2016). Just 0.2 percent of respondents considered it unacceptable. The outcomes of such workplace humour include creating an enjoyable work environment, the strengthening of bonds between colleagues and relieving stress and boredom. A humour-friendly culture at work can be achieved by encouraging employees to use humour with positive intentions such as anecdotes, puns and banter (Wijewardena et al. 2016). While moments of playfulness and humorous banter can be functional for employees because they

lead to enhanced communication, creativity and bonding, Lyttle (2007) also warns that workplace humour can be a distraction from the job and may cause offence to others. In workplaces, as with other professional settings, humour should be used with care due to differences in people's sense of humour (Romero & Cruthirds 2006).

Considerable potential exists for Australian tourism managers to use humour to achieve positive outcomes for both employees and customers. It is not an easy feat to use humour well, particularly if it is aimed at a mix of domestic and international tourists. Rogerson-Revell (2007) looked at the use of humour in intercultural business meetings and found that it should be handled with care since some humour can be perceived differently across nations and cultures. All this makes humour a very subjective experience (Beard 2014). To achieve positive results, it is helpful to learn some tactics to incorporate humour in interactions with customers. Additionally, it is also worthwhile to find out what tourism operators' perspectives are about using humour with customers.

Building on these considerations of the benefits and necessary caveats of being "funny", this study seeks to access the views of tourism industry personnel. The context for the work involves those working in face-to-face tourism encounters in an Australian context. The aim is to identify specific reactions about humour use in supplier-customer social interactions from the industry stakeholders.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Description of workshops

Three half-day workshops involving tourism industry personnel were conducted from May to July 2017. The title of the workshop was *Using Humour in Tourism for a Terrific Customer Experience* and it was aimed at tourism industry stakeholders in the North Queensland region. Attendees were those who sought to learn more about how to use humour more effectively in interacting with customers. The workshops were advertised through various tourism newsletters and networks. Interested individuals self-selected to participate in the workshops. Each session was facilitated by the first author and included interactive activities to encourage participants to be more playful and to experiment with their own sense of humour. Twenty-three (23) participants joined the humour workshops.

The workshops consisted of three sections:

1. What is humour?

This section provided theoretical background information on the term humour. Whilst this section was not necessarily focused on any type of business, it provided general information on the history of the term humour as well as current definitions. It also outlined the distinctions between humour appreciation and humour production.

2. Why incorporate humour in interactions with customers?

This section prompted workshop participants to think about their own tourism businesses when answering questions such as, "What role do you think humour currently plays in your tourism business?" and "How are you currently using humour with your customers?" This section also outlined the main benefits of using humour in interactions with customers.

3. How to incorporate more humour in interactions with customers?

This section outlined factors affecting humour delivery at tourism settings, i.e., the specific tourism attraction, the tourist audience, the tourism presenter and the humour technique type. The final session also showcased a flowchart including several steps on how to incorporate humour in presentations to tourists. Finally, general guidelines were provided on how to apply humour effectively in customer service settings, i.e., how to avoid humour pitfalls, and rules for using politically correct humour with tourism audiences.

The participants were owners, managers or employees of diverse tourism operations, i.e., reef and rainforest operators, accommodation providers, restaurants and wine cellar businesses, and destination marketing organisations. Every workshop participant was handed a *Humour Workshop Feedback Form* which entailed two sections: one to be completed before the start of the workshop and one section to be completed after the workshop. This study reports on the responses provided by the participating tourism stakeholders in their feedback forms.

### **3.2. Research design and data analysis**

The research uses a qualitative methodology. The research team recognises that the data are collected from tourism industry professionals who had an interest in learning more about humour in customer interactions. The workshops were facilitated by the first author and designed to be participatory in nature. The feedback form was designed for quality assurance and evaluation purposes. The style of questions used in the feedback questionnaire included one closed-ended question and six open-ended questions. The collected feedback was analysed inductively using thematic content analysis to establish any emerging themes from the data.

### **3.3. Epistemological considerations**

The knowledge created from this study is based on an analysis of the respondents' answers to key questions augmented by dynamic interactions between the facilitator of the workshops and the tourism industry participants. The role of the workshop facilitator was to inform the participants on how humour can be used effectively in interactions with customers. The contribution of the tourism personnel as experienced experts also needs to be recognised in contributing to the findings through rich discussion. In reflecting on the interactions that took place during the three workshops, the facilitator and the participants learned from each other and their experiences. From an epistemological standpoint, the type of knowledge created from the workshops can be regarded as applied in nature with an explicit focus on serving economic performativity (Tribe 2002). The work involves a special case of practical problem-solving to achieve outcomes such as improved and engaging service (Belhassen & Caton 2009).

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. Expectations before the humour workshops**

The workshop participants were asked whether they were currently using humour to engage with their customers. Twenty-one participants stated that they were currently using humour in interactions with customers. During the workshops, participants shared their own experiences about humour and its application to their specific tourism settings. Some participants stated that they used humour in interpretation to inform visitors about the region's geography, flora and fauna, while others included humour when presenting important safety messages. Other examples shared included using humour to sell tours. The view was expressed that more tours



were sold when humour was used compared to straight-forward, information-packed sales presentations. Table 1 shows some of the comments on how workshop participants used humour according to the most frequent outcomes of humour in tourism settings.

Table 1. Extent to which workshop participants currently used humour with customers

<b>Comfort</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use of humour to diffuse a situation, e.g., to make guests feel more at ease</li> <li>- Joking about shared knowledge, e.g., going to the gym/working out</li> <li>- Sharing of personal anecdotes and examples of silly things</li> <li>- Friendly banter to improve the customers’ day, to make them feel comfortable and to gain their trust</li> <li>- Using humour to create a relaxed atmosphere</li> <li>- Hosting of games/events which can lead to humour and laughter, e.g., Friday afternoon raffles to give customers a good experience and make them smile</li> <li>- Include humour in the farewell process to make the customers walk away with an enjoyable experience</li> <li>- Recognition that tourists or visitors are on holidays and are looking for fun things/enjoyable experiences</li> </ul>
<b>Connection</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Friendly welcome greeting with humour to break the ice</li> <li>- Using (sometimes amusing) gestures to break down language barriers</li> </ul>
<b>Concentration</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Humorous warning to be aware of the wildlife in North Queensland, i.e., marine stingers, crocodiles, and mosquitoes</li> <li>- Humorous information/explanations about the local area, including maps</li> <li>- Keeping customers interested and alert whilst explaining the marine environment</li> </ul>

Only two participants said they did not use humour. The explanations for not using humour with customers were based on personal shyness and feeling too reserved/uncomfortable in sharing humour with customers. One participant wrote: “My clients come to me for support and information, so I don’t feel that a lot of humour is necessary.”

The feedback form also asked the workshop participants to outline, using an open-ended question, what they wished to gain from the humour workshop. Table 2 highlights the different expectations that participants had before the workshop. The total count of comments is 27 since several participants wrote down more than one answer.

Table 2. Expectations before the workshops

<b>Category</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Customer engagement	Learn to use humour to engage/interact with customers; improve relationships with customers	8
Customer enjoyment	Making customers feel at ease, add more enjoyment/value to the experience	7
Cultural considerations	Awareness about using humour with different nationalities	4

Information sharing	Knowing how to use humour when sharing information	3
Connecting with customers	Humour as a means to ‘break the ice’ and connect with customers	2
Limits of humour	Use of humour without coming across as sarcastic or belittling	2
Fostering positive recommendations	Knowing how to use humour to spread positive word of mouth	1

#### 4.2. Reflections after the humour workshops

After the workshops, participants were asked to reflect on the workshops and what they had learned. Table 3 outlines the categories of what workshop participants learned about humour and includes example comments.

Table 3. Participants’ comments after the workshops

Category	Example comments by workshop participants
Making the experience more memorable	Humour integrated in talks to create the impression of professionalism; the idea of edutainment was interesting
Creating the impression of professionalism	Understanding using humour will allow the client to remember the experience more
Learning about the benefits of humour	The importance of humour to businesses and benefits it can generate; learning about positive humour and how to implement it
Finding out how other tourism operators used humour	The examples of what other businesses and other tourism operators do to inject humour in the workplace
Learning about the variables affecting humour	Breaking down the different components of humour; knowing the Do’s and Don’ts; different types of humour and knowing your audiences
Creating own humour that fits business/encouraging staff members to use humour	Creating our own humour – think outside the square; looking forward to going back and having a humour session with my staff to incorporate more humour into our business; reminder to share funny things on social media
Appreciation for humour in tourism settings	Reinforced what I already believed – humour is important in our industry
Concerns about how humour should differ across different customer groups	Voicing concern that any humour use depends on the customer and on the customer service situation, i.e., service recovery situations

Reflecting on what they had learned, participants were also asked to outline what they liked and did not like about the workshops. This question was asked to ensure the quality of future workshops. The responses were categorised into two areas, the content of the workshop and the fun and interactive style of presenting the session (see Table 4).

Table 4. Workshop elements liked by workshop participants

Content	Presentation style
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using humour more effectively in the workplace and with customers</li> <li>- Being more mindful of differences in humour appreciation and nationalities</li> <li>- Learning how to add humour to briefings, safety demonstrations and talks, it helps to create comfort and connection between people involved</li> <li>- Insights about the relevance of humour to our business and the positive effect using humour has, not only with the clients, but also staff</li> <li>- Applying the presenter’s principles to our business to think of ways to increase humour</li> <li>- In every industry you can incorporate some form of humour</li> <li>- It was very helpful in generating thoughts surrounding bringing humour into the workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Informative and light-hearted</li> <li>- The information was presented in a very personable and entertaining way, it made listening to the theory behind it enjoyable</li> <li>- The workshop was interesting, fun and interactive</li> <li>- Very good presentation with a relaxed style</li> <li>- Interactions between presenter and audience were great</li> <li>- Very professional, factual and clear presentation</li> <li>- Very informative and realistic</li> </ul>

In the comments section for the least helpful aspects, many participants responded with ‘not applicable’ and some reiterated that they enjoyed the session and thought the workshops were helpful. Only two participants included points that they disliked. The first point was that some aspects of the workshop seemed rather obvious, i.e., cultural differences in humour appreciation and the need to change humour for different tourist audiences. The second point was that the first part of the workshop included “too much theory” and was perceived as not relevant to the workshop.

Additionally, participants were asked whether they had any suggestions on how to improve the workshop. One suggestion was to include more information on cultural aspects of humour appreciation. Another suggestion was the inclusion of short video clips to showcase how other tourism operators used humour. A few participants enjoyed learning about the health aspects of humour and their suggestion was to incorporate a short laughter yoga session to try it out for themselves. A further recommendation was to spend more time to focus on their own workplaces including specific humour strategies applicable to their tourism setting.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This study set out to uncover the perceptions of tourism operators who wished to deliberately include humour into interactions with their customers. The data presented are based on the feedback provided by the tourism industry professionals who participated in half-day workshops on how to incorporate humour into interactions with the customers. Since humour as a communications tool is based on the interactions/co-creation between a sender and a receiver, considering the perspectives of the humour sender/producer adds a new dimension to

studying humour in tourism settings. Hence this study contributes to the current literature on the tourism-humour relationship by explicitly focusing on the tourism operators' perspectives. Knowledge of this kind is helpful in designing future humour workshops aimed at tourism industry professionals and has relevance for other individuals or organisations in customer service settings wishing to use more humour.

The workshops were designed to foster a greater understanding of humour and its effective use amongst tourism industry professionals. By understanding the nature of humour and some of its positive as well as negative consequences, it is hoped that the tourism stakeholders who participated in the workshops have become more knowledgeable about strategies for incorporating effective humour into their day-to-day operation and for enhancing their customers' experiences. The majority of participants ( $n = 21$ ) stated that they were currently using humour in interactions with customers. Table 1 shows the participants' answers categorised according to the most frequently used outcomes for humour used in tourism settings – the trilogy of comfort, connection and concentration (Pearce 2009; Pearce & Pabel 2016). Workshop participants indicated that their use of effective humour helped to build connections with their customers and created enjoyable experiences and, according to the conversation during the workshops, these links have had a positive effect on their profitability.

Although most workshop participants already used their Australian sense of humour with their customers, they were also keen to learn about new ways to apply this tool to their business operations. Table 2 outlines the various expectations they had before the start of the workshops. They wished to learn about applying humour strategically in customer engagement. Likewise, gaining knowledge about cultural consideration and the limits of humour were also expected from the workshops.

As Table 4 documents, the content of the workshops and the presentation style of the facilitator are important when training sessions of this type are delivered to industry professionals. The tourism stakeholders voiced their critique about the first part of the workshop that for them included "too much theory." It was suggested that the theory section of the workshop could be replaced with information that was based on a more applied approach. The participants made several useful suggestions for improving future workshops. One suggestion was to include more information on the cultural aspects of humour appreciation. Using humour effectively across cultures was clearly important for those tourism operators who deal mainly with international tourists. Every business deals with different audiences and it might be challenging for some operators to decide whom to target when using humour. Tourist audiences from diverse backgrounds will have unique humour display rules (i.e., concealed vs. explicit laughter, intensity of laughter) based on their culture's value system (Vuorela 2005; Alharthi 2014) and workshop participants would have liked more information on this topic. Essentially, it is up to the individual tourism operator to select specific target groups and to research their likes and dislikes. The presentation style was described as clear, informative, realistic, personable and entertaining. In creating and delivering an effective presentation, Kaltenbach and Soetikno (2016) acknowledge the importance of being clear with relevant content and suggest employing emotions in the delivery. The research team was mindful of these sorts of issues in running the workshops and recommends that all presenters of similar events consider these issues closely.

Providing tourists with a great time through interpretation with a dash of humour requires preparation including researching their clients' background before they arrive and engaging with them in meaningful ways. Finding out as much information as possible about who the tourist audience is in terms of their demographic and psychographic features (i.e., age groups, their cultural differences, their main travel motivations for coming to the region) is an important step in preparing to integrate more humour into tourist scripts. The most common

humour categories used during tourism experiences are amusing stories, friendly teasing, self-deprecatory humour and funny exaggerations (Pabel & Pearce 2016). However, the type of humour used will differ depending on clients who might, for example, range from honeymooning tourists, groups of backpackers and families with children. When decisions are made on what humorous metaphors, parables, puzzles, or curious case studies to use in explanations, it is important to introduce new concepts slowly and to assess the knowledge base of the audience (Anderson 2016).

A further suggestion for improvement was that workshop participants wanted to spend more time working out humour strategies that would fit their individual tourism operation. This call for an individual business orientation is likely to be a challenge in a group presentation format. Therefore, a possible extension of the current workshops would be to provide sessions for individual tourism operators to target humour strategies specific to their operation. These one-on-one humour sessions could involve the entire team of a particular tourism business and may include humour brainstorming, role-playing and sharing of amusing customer interactions. During humour brainstorming sessions, the employees could decide as a team what aspect of their experiential offering should include more humour and do some research around their ideas.

Workshop participants reported that they were keen on sharing what they had learned with their employees. They indicated a desire to motivate their employees to design their own humour suited to appropriate situations. This is where the humour brainstorming sessions with employees might be useful in ascertaining what humour is appropriate to share and how often humour should be used. For example, to capture the audience's attention, a light-hearted, humorous comment could be used at the start and towards the end of a presentation. Likewise, amusing audience interaction routines could be created during the tourism experience. While the pre-planning of appropriate humour content is important, there should also be room for spontaneity (Shaw & Ivens 2002). Lugosi (2008) recognised that many memorable experiences appear to be spontaneous because they are more like stand-up comedy than formal play.

Several participants voiced concern that the use of humour would depend on the situation, i.e., they realised that some service recovery situations would not call for a humorous approach. The existing literature recognises humour as a double-edged sword, because what is perceived as humorous is highly subjective (Beard 2014). There are clear differences in customer service situations. For example, friendly introductory banter with a customer differs from a service recovery situation, where humour may be considered as inappropriate, impolite and unprofessional (McCull-Kennedy & Sparks 2003; Norrick & Spitz 2008). The use of jokes or analogies when trying to provide an apology after major service failure is likely to be perceived as inappropriate by people from most nationalities. Major service failures should instead be solved in a timely and efficient manner.

Participants also indicated that they had a better idea of how to incorporate more humour into their business operations, i.e., making customers pay more attention to safety briefings and other interpretation information, cultivating stronger bonds, and creating lasting memories. The development of strategies that outline appropriate humour use in service training programmes should focus on developing strategies to increase affiliative humour as well as to reduce any negative occurrences associated with failed humour (Mathies et al. 2016).

While the delivery of humour depends on the performance of the tourism presenters, there is also much potential for humorous co-creation to take place through audience participation. In this instance, the sense of humour of both parties (the sender and the receiver) are involved in the exchange of humorous messages. What triggers people to laugh can be rather elusive. Tourism presenters need to be adept in gauging their performance by reading the audience's reaction to jokes and stories. Martin et al.'s (2003) affiliative and self-enhancing humour types

are the most appropriate for customer service settings since both types are aiming to achieve positive outcomes. The content of the humour, such as stories, puns or analogies, should entertain as well as help the audience concentrate on the messages that need to be presented. Aggressive forms of humour including inappropriate jokes and sarcasm are rarely appropriate due to increasingly strict rules about political correctness (Franzini 2012).

In a similar fashion, there is a growing perception that making fun of cultural stereotypes is poor practice. Nevertheless, there are several tourist attractions where this seems to work with some success. What worked in these instances was that the humour was not based on negative stereotypes but rather on stereotypes that most people would consider as positive or neutral, i.e., the photo-taking behaviour of the Japanese, the shopping behaviour of the Chinese, the punctuality of Germans (Wiseman 2007). This links to the advice by Franzini (2012: 51) who states that stereotypical humour should be delivered “in a context of fun and not one of mean-spiritedness.” If a tourist audience perceives such humour as offensive, they are likely to voice their criticism via social media on platforms such as TripAdvisor, Google Reviews or Facebook. If this is the case, tourism operators should take note of negative word-of-mouth comments and make improvements to the humour used.

It is important to note that it is not necessary for tourism presenters to become stand-up comedians or clowns. Indeed, the use of too much humour can distract from the messages being presented (Chan 2010; Blackmore 2011). It is therefore important to find the right balance between illustrating important educational points and using relevant humorous fillers to make the commentary come alive. Humour needs to be carefully designed to relate to important messages that need to be conveyed, i.e., safety briefings, welcome messages and sales pitches. In providing a comprehensive overview of the impact of humour on customer service outcomes, Mathies et al. (2016) argue that future research is needed to uncover the situational variables such as service type, service encounter duration, high vs low contact services, and the degree of customer involvement.

The limitations of this study stem from the relatively small sample of tourism businesses who participated in the humour workshops. Responses from a broader audience are needed, notably more tourism providers from more areas of Australia and indeed from other countries. A more detailed survey of tourism operators may be needed to uncover the various ways in which they are using humour and realising its advantages and disadvantages when interacting with customers. A well-known proverb describes humour as *the spice of life*. When using humour in a customer service context, it is recommended that *any seasoning* is mixed well into the other material that is to be presented. Using too much humour may ruin the flavour of a presentation, not enough humour makes for a dull fare.

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