RESEARCH NOTE

HUMOROUS SITES: AN EXPLORATION OF TOURISM AT COMEDIC TV AND FILM LOCATIONS

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The article discusses humor and the tourist experience, with a particular focus on formal humorous experiences when tourists visit comedy festivals or comedic TV and film locations. The article describes the three phases of the tourist experience in relation to humor (i.e., before travel, during travel, and after travel). The article reflects on the importance of understanding the role of humor in the tourist experience, particularly in relation to the management of humorous sites such as comedic TV and film locations.

Key words: Humor; Film locations; Sitcoms; Comedy festivals; Motivation; Satisfaction

Introduction

Recent research has shown that tourists are interested in visiting the locations featured on their favorite TV shows and films (see, e.g., Beeton, 2001; Busby & Klug, 2001; Grihault, 2003). However, there has been little research into tourists who travel specifically to visit comedic TV and film locations and the associated role of humor and the tourist experience.

The impact of humor in society has been studied for generations in such disciplines as medicine (Fry, 1992), social psychology (Mahoney, Burroughs, Lippman, 2002), philosophy (Critchley, 2002), and management (Barsoux, 1993). Humor has also been considered in the realm of hospitality (Ball & Johnson, 2000) and in leisure settings (Katovich, 1993; Stebbins, 1990, 1996). From a sociological perspective, humor has been found to assume different forms and “has different functions in various structural settings” (Martineau, 1972, p. 114). For example, humor has been shown to have many positive social outcomes such as enhancing interpersonal relationships, acting as a social lubricant, and enhancing communication (Sultanoff, 2003). In particular, Freud (1928) suggested that humor can help individuals cope in difficult emotional situations.

In the leisure arena, Stebbins (1996) described humor as providing social and theatrical comic relief. He described social comic relief as happening spontaneously as a means of reviving oneself and/
or dissipating situational awkwardness, whereas he described theatrical comic relief as preplanned and involving humorous theatrical experiences (Stebbins, 1996). This article extends Stebbins' conceptualization of theatrical comic relief to include formal humorous experiences in tourism, when tourists purposely travel to visit "humorous events" such as comedy festivals and to visit "humorous places" such as comedic TV and film locations. The strategic provision of formal humorous travel experiences, either in the form of humorous events or humorous places, has the potential to enhance a region economically and socially and to create high levels of posttrip satisfaction, repeat visits, and positive word-of-mouth recommendation.

Therefore, humor and the tourist experience can be summarized as existing in two main areas:

- **As informal humor in the form of sharing jokes during difficult or awkward travel situations** (i.e., social comic relief) (Stebbins, 1996).
- **As formal humor in the form of attendance at comedy festivals and/or at comedic TV and film locations** (i.e., theatrical comic relief) (Stebbins, 1996). It is noted that when tourists visit such humorous places the site itself is not intrinsically amusing but it is closely associated with humor, which makes it appealing to visitors.

The principal objective of this article, therefore, was to begin the process of addressing this gap in the literature by conceptualizing humor and the tourist experience during the three phases of the tourist experience: before travel, during travel, and after travel.

**Conceptualization**

The three phases below extend Stebbins' (1996) leisure-related research by conceptualizing the link between humor and the tourist in terms of travel motivations, experiences, satisfaction levels, and potential for repeat visits. In the development of the conceptual framework the following questions were considered:

- What is the function of humor in the tourist experience?
- Is humor a motivator for travel?
- Can humor help individuals cope with difficult travel experiences?
- Can "humor tourists" be identified?
- Does the existence of humor during the tourist experience influence posttrip satisfaction levels?

**Pretravel**

In the pretravel phase, humor may be a strong motivator for travel for the tourist. The individual tourist may be motivated to travel to have fun and to laugh; to share humorous experiences with family and/or friends; to visit a site featured in a comedic TV show or movie, and/or to attend a comedy festival or event. It is suggested here that the existence of formal humorous events and places around the world may provide a motivational travel push for those tourists who want to guarantee their travel will generate laughter and fun.

**During Travel**

During the travel phase, a tourist may experience informal humor (social comic relief) when sharing a joke with a friend and may benefit from the use of proactive humor, which is the ability to produce humor in stressful situations (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983) (e.g., during difficult travel situations). "The tourist may also use consensual humor where humor is used to create and reinforce solidarity and intimacy in groups or interactive settings” (Stebbins, 1996, p. 4).

Tourists may also actively seek formal humorous experiences in the form of attending "humorous events" such as comedy festivals and/or "humorous places" such as the sites featured in TV sitcoms and/or comedic movies.

There are many examples of formal humor-related products in the US and UK and include the following illustrative examples:

- The City of New York-endorsed "Kramer's Reality Tours" has been operating since 1996 and features many sites made famous on the TV sitcom *Seinfeld* (Kramer, 2004).
- A company named On Location Tours has been conducting tours of Manhattan since 1999 of sites associated with US sitcoms such as *Friends, The Cosby's, Will and Grace*, and sites related to comedic movies such as *When Harry*...
Met Sally, You’ve Got Mail, Home Alone II, and Ghostbusters (On Location Tours, 2004).

In the UK, Monty Python fans make the pilgrimage to Doune Castle in Scotland where the film Monty Python and the Holy Grail was filmed. In 2004 the owners of the building, Historic Scotland, hosted an informal event at Doune Castle when actors re-created scenes from the film and other Monty Python sketches (Rampant Scotland, 2004).

Largely as a result of the sitcom Last of the Summer Wine, the town of Holmfirth, West Yorkshire, has developed a thriving tourist industry. Several companies provide organized tours of “Summer Wine Country,” where tourists visit the cafe and house featured in the show (TV Comedy Resources, 2005).

**Posttravel**

In the posttravel phase, the tourist may experience benefits from the humor experienced during their travel such as reduced stress and increased well-being—that is, improved mental and physical health; enhanced ability to cope with difficult travel situations (due to their use of proactive and consensual humor) (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Stebbins, 1996); and/or, enhanced social relationships during and after travel (Martineau, 1972) (e.g., by recounting humorous holiday tales with friends, family, and work colleagues).

In addition to these physical and mental benefits, the tourist destinations may receive long-term benefits due to positive word-of-mouth recommendation and the possibility of repeat visitation because of high levels of visitor satisfaction. Two illustrative examples of customers who had high satisfaction levels are revealed in the unsolicited feedback reported on the Kramer Reality Tour website:

Hi Kenny! We had a blast on your tour on Saturday. We are back home in Mississippi now and still smiling as we tell our kids about it.

I really enjoyed the tour! I can now annoy my friends with all my Seinfeld knowledge. That was one of the most fun things I have ever done. Thanks for the great time. It was awesome to meet you. (Kramer, 2004)

**Implications**

The recognition of humor as an important factor in the tourist experience has implications for the tourist industry, particularly in relation to the management of “humorous events” such as comedy festivals and “humorous places” such as comedic TV and film locations.

If humor were to be shown to have a pivotal role in the satisfaction levels of tourists then managers at tourist destinations would be wise to encourage the development of local humorous events, such as the establishment or support of comedy festivals, stand-alone comedy events, fun, light-hearted tourist activities, and the development and promotion of humorous places such as comedic TV and film sites.

Comedy festivals, such as the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and Montreal’s Just of Laughs Festival, have become important cultural tourist events and have the potential to generate many visitors to the city or region. The popularity of these comedy festivals may reflect the motivation of tourists to find humor, fun, and laughter in their travel experiences. As humor is at the core of any comedy festival and is pivotal in its survival, by attending such events the tourists are guaranteed humorous experiences. Similarly, based on the range and type of new tourism services provided at humorous places, there appears to be an increase in demand for more formal humorous experiences at the sites of comedic TV and film locations. It is therefore important to more fully understand those tourists’ motivations and experiences.

This article has conceptualized the link between humor and the tourist experience. Future empirical research into the role of humor and the tourist experience could investigate each of the three stages of the humor-related tourist experience (i.e., pretravel, during travel, and posttravel), as stand-alone projects or as a three-stage project. Clearly the field is worthy of further research and study, with the objective of advancing the understanding of humor in the tourist setting.

**References**