Experiencing Englishness: humour and guided tours

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Carol X. Zhang
School of Hospitality and Tourism Management
University of Surrey
Guildford, UK
carol.zhang@surrey.ac.uk

Philip L. Pearce
College of Business, Law & Governance
James Cook University
Townsville Australia
Philip.pearce@jcu.edu.au
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Abstract

This study develops a small but growing cadre of work seeking to reveal how humour is used in tourism. It focuses on the presentation of three sites in southern England where guides use humour to embellish the presentation of the country’s distinctive history. The study has two aims: to understand how tourists react to the guides’ humour, and secondly to identify how the humour works to portray a sense of Englishness. Using multiple sources of information, including an analysis of promotional materials, the text of the narratives, TripAdvisor comments from tourists, and direct on site observation, it was established that the humour was carefully framed and successful. It was revealed that the guides employ their jokes and jibes to manage the flow of the visitors and control the atmosphere of the tour. Guides also employ interactive and direct routines where tourists are effectively co-actors and participants in the experience. A sense of Englishness is pivotal to the character of the settings studied and was communicated through direct contrasts between these English locations and other countries and cities. Additionally, much of the humour used exaggerated and reinforced the eccentricities and distinctiveness of the local places and people through highlighting amusing historical facts and recounting tales at each site. Research opportunities for considering the role of tourism–linked humour lie in portraying the distinctiveness of destinations. Further work can capture new facets of the tourist experience and offer a fresh route to appraise tourism marketing and interpretation.

Keywords: humour, guided tours, superiority, incongruity, relief, Englishness, co-production

Introduction

The most generic academic term for research interests revolving around enjoyment, fun, and being amused is that of humour studies. Scholarly interest concerning humour exists in several disciplines. Recent contributions have come from anthropology, linguistics, psychology and sociology (Fry, 1992; Weisfeld, 1993; Kotthoff, 2006; Dubinsky & Holcomb, 2011). Enjoyment, fun and being amused are also terms associated with the tourist experience, but it is only recently that tourism researchers have started to explore the topic of humour (Cohen, 2010; 2011; Frew, 2006; Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Although these recent studies illustrate some of the benefits that are derived from enjoying a humorous tourism experience, many questions remain. Some of these queries include what are the advantages for businesses of using humour, what kinds of humorous content work well, what tricks do presenters use to engage their audience, and what roles do cultural and nationality differences play in humour appreciation? (Cohen, 2010; Pabel & Pearce, 2015). Additionally, researchers who study the topic of humour in tourism have yet to link their developing interests with the role of humour in branding the character of destinations or sites although some destination marketers have taken this route to attract tourists.

The topic of humour in tourism is typically approached with an everyday awareness that context and nationality are variables that matter in determining the outcomes of the attempts to amuse. For example, the acceptability of sexually oriented jokes and laughter varies dramatically across religious and nationality boundaries - what is acceptable in India may not be at all appropriate in Iran or Indonesia. Wiseman (2007) confirmed some clear nationality preferences among citizens of different countries in responding to jokes. In that study
Canadians were amused less often than others. American respondents often failed to appreciate subtle sarcasm and taunts, a finding leading to the view that they have an “irony deficiency.” Robertson (2013) argued that Australians and Englishmen are united by a shared sense of humour. In their own cultural settings, Asian tourists and particularly the Japanese and Chinese are amused by quirks and distorted interpretations of phrases and words in their language (Davis, 2006). Thai culture has a penchant for slapstick humour (Pearce & Kanlyanasukho, 2012).

The present study recognises the importance of context and nationality differences in the construction and appreciation of humour. It explores the way humour is constructed and projected within guided tours in three key settings in southern England. In developing a specific study of humour and tourism, it is argued that empirical studies and site specific analyses of cases are potentially valuable additions to the knowledge base. The work addresses the topic of humour provided for tourists rather than the other tourism–humour links which include tourists providing humour for themselves or within a group (Pearce, 2009). The current study focuses on how tourists respond to the planned and intentional humour of guides who represent their settings through amusing anecdotes and brief jokes. The work is conceived as having two objectives; firstly to understand how tourists react to the guides’ humour, and secondly to identify how the humour works to portray a sense of Englishness to the mixed international audiences who participate in the tours.

**Defining humour and three theories of humour**

The term humour is inclusive, complex, and dynamic. In everyday use humour tends to mean everything that provokes laughter and provides amusement. Jokes, amusement, laughter, fun, enjoyment and positive feelings are commonly tied to or used as synonyms for humour (Critchly, 2002; Martin, 2007; Pearce & Pabel, 2013). The etymology of the word lies in the approach to medicine of the ancient Greeks, who emphasised that the balance of fluids or humours in the human body controlled health and emotion (Wiseman 2007). Humour can be connected to a number of affective responses, notably enjoyment, but also mild surprise (Martin, 2007). Critchly (2002:1) offers the view that “humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality.” Berger (1976) thinks humour is a form of communication which is defined by its outcome; that is, it causes laughter. A more refined variant of this approach is offered by Ruch (1993). In his view, humour includes both the production and perception of a communication or act which induces an emotional state of mirth or exhilaration. This definition implies that actual laughter may not be required in the appreciation of humour; an individual may simply be wryly amused and not necessarily laugh or smile at the jokes or situation. All importantly, the compass of humour captured in Ruch’s approach is to stress that humour has a production or creation component and a reception and perception dimension. This distinction is captured in our everyday understanding when individuals report that they like humour and “having a laugh”, but are not good at telling jokes or recounting funny stories. Ruch’s approach to understanding the two aspects of humour is important for the present interest in guides producing humour for tourists in key English settings. The interaction involved in these settings involves presenters who are fluent in the English language and knowledgeable about their local setting. Often they are communicating with international tourists who have limited understanding of local places and events. Some of the guide’s audience may also be unaccustomed to listening to presentations in English and unfamiliar with the nuances of the English language. In the sense described by Bourdieu (1986), they may have limited cultural capital.
There are many explanations of humour and three fundamental theories are regarded as important: the superiority theory, the relief theory and the incongruity theory (Critchley, 2002; Chapman & Foot, 1996; Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Martin, 2007). An understanding of the application of these insights to tourism situations forms a necessary background to considering the way guides present and tourists react to humour in the present study.

Superiority theory draws attention to people laughing due to implicit or explicit feelings of superiority over other people (Critchley, 2002). Superiority theory specifies that people laugh at others’ weaknesses, stupidity or misfortunes because they feel some sort of triumph over them (Morreall, 1983). Laughter itself can therefore be a potentially dangerous and uncontrolled communication. It may signal otherwise carefully concealed views connoting felt superiority (Carty & Musharbash, 2008). The kinds of humour underpinned by superiority theory include situations where one party uses their privileged position to effectively denigrate others (Cohen, 2010). Ethnic humour, in particular, is related to superiority theory. In this kind of humour laughing at others can strengthen in-group identity but this solidarity comes at the expense of criticising the behaviours, customs and skills of outgroups (Critchley, 2002). In contemporary tourism settings, strong jokes and stories built around expressing a sense of superiority are likely to be undesirable and offensive. Nevertheless it may be possible to work with this style of humour if the guide can do so in a way that is clearly gentle and subtle in the teasing and assumed superiority.

Incongruity theory recognises that humour can be produced by the felt disjunction between what we know or expect to be the case, and what actually takes place in the joke or incident (Critchley, 2002). This theory presumes that people laugh at what surprises them; it is unexpected or novel in a nonthreatening way (McGhee, 1979). The use of incongruity in a tourist setting can deliver a humorous experience. It is possible for presenters to be in a grand setting, redolent in historical incidents and the scene of significant events. They can then offer remarks of a banal and pedestrian nature. A sense of this style of presentation is when a guide suggests that their immediate location is one of monumental historical importance and an excellent place for (pause) “having a cup of tea.” Here bathos determines the humour. Through careful planning, the remarks in the setting offer a little amusing and incongruous shock to the tourists.

Relief theory can simply be understood as laughter which releases built-up nervous tension (Freud, 1928; Martin, 2007). Critchley (2002:3) observes “the energy that is relieved and discharged in laughter provides pleasure because it allegedly economises upon energy that would ordinarily be used to contain or repress psychic activity.” An apposite tourist example is that of a mildly dark and somewhat threatening tourism setting, such as a prison. Here the guide may provide a string of puns to manage the tension during the tour. Examples include suggesting this a good place to spend time with your “in-mates”, you should make sure you have “your cell phone” with you, and if you want to talk you can always “finish your sentence” in here.

The complexity of understanding humour is due to its various forms and its different functions in various structural settings (Martineau, 1972). One implication of this complexity is that studying humour and the results from that work can be context specific. As empirical studies of humour are developed in tourism settings, in time it may be possible to explore commonalities across situations. At this stage in the development of the topic of humour and tourism it appears there are preliminary suggestions that benefits for presenters and the industry do exist (Pabel & Pearce, 2015). Some of these benefits include consequences for
the tourists such as reducing anxiety, enhancing social relations, and building positive moods, while giving the tourism business a distinctive identity (Critchly, 2002; Pearce, 2009; Sultanoff, 2003; Szabo, 2003). Further studies of the different aspects of tourism and humour could potentially contribute to improving both tourists’ psychological satisfaction and business success for the operators (Pabel & Pearce, 2015). Such a broad agenda offers much scope for future work. The present study selects one facet of the tourism-humour link and explores the perspectives of tourists towards their guides in select sites in southern England.

Humour and guided tours

“A fun holiday” is a common expression to promote a tourist experience, a travel package and a guided tour. Many would be tourists are assured that they will be amused and entertained by their guides and the novelty of their experiences (Cohen, 1972; McKercher & du Cros, 2002). Nevertheless, the study of the relationships among fun, good times and the guided presentation of tourism places and sites remains underdeveloped. Smith (1978:1) defines a tourist as “a temporarily leisured person who visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing change.” Many scholars have linked the notion of change to a positive goal; the tourism experience must be created in a way that it can be consumed easily and is enjoyed by the public (Filep & Pearce, 2014). Humour can create this positive tourism agenda (Ball & Johnson, 2000; Frew, 2006; Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Williams, 2006). Such positive agendas can be understood by briefly noting the presence of humour in tourism promotion and studying the role of humour in the on-site experience, particularly through the efforts of the tourist guide.

Tourism marketing and promotional efforts typically outline for the potential tourist the nature of the experience. From the marketing perspective, a tourism product is whatever can be promoted (Sharma, 2007). Tourism marketing uses its own terms, effectively the language of tourism, to arouse interest, set expectations and convert tourists from potential into actual customers (Dann, 1996). Importantly, humour may play a role in promotion and the promise of humorous times may be pivotal to a good marketing campaign (Badli & Dzulkifli, 2013). It will be necessary in this study to consider the ways in which the guided tours of interest are promoted and the emphasis placed on any anticipated humour.

The staging of the tourism experience itself plays a crucial role in the tourism industry. The on-site experience has been increasing understood through the concept of the experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Further, the design of positive tourist experiences through staff-tourist contacts has a timeline and trajectory (Stickdorn, 2010; Stickdorn & Schwarzenberger, 2016). Humour can be employed at any time during the duration of the tourist experience; it may be useful at the start, at key points along the way and at the end of the journey. It may involve one or multiple presenters and the tourists themselves may be entangled or co-opted in the production of the humour (Xu 2014). Interactions among tourism employees and tourists appear to play an integral role in delivering a fun and humorous travelling experience through co-creation (Pearce & Pabel, 2015; Williams, 2006). Engagement and participation also allow tourists to connect to the setting, to the tourism employees and to others who are present on the tour (cf. Walls et al, 2011).

The tour guide plays a crucial role in fostering any engaging experience. Importantly, in order to deliver a positive and fun experience, tour guides also need to be entertainers who can provide a warm atmosphere, establish their style of humour, deliver personal experience and encourage engaging and authentic tourism moments (Ballantyne et al., 2000; Yvette & Steiner, 2006). Moss (2009) suggests guides can use humour not only to engage the tourists...
and convey information but also to control the group. Thus, the role of humour has increasingly been recognised as a key factor in making the guided tour experience a success (Ap & Wong, 2001; Zhang & Chow, 2004). The types of humour vary among tour guides, and tourism settings. Some of the factors modifying the use of humour by the guides include the types of tourists, the nature of the attraction or resource, the medium of delivery, the objective of using humour and when to be amusing (Pearce, 2009, Pearce & Kanlayanasukho, 2012).

Most humour-tourism studies have focused on the potential benefits for tourists. This business orientation to the topic lies in satisfying customers’ needs which in turn can generate economic benefits for tourism operations (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Further, according to Pearce (2009), the use of humour in tourism can establish visitor comfort levels, assist visitor concentration and establish connections to tourism presenters. Enhancing visitor comfort levels through humour links well with the relief theory in humour studies, especially in terms of managing anxiety and uncertainty (Critchly, 2002; Schouten, 1995). Making tourists more comfortable is largely due to humour’s connection with emotion (Martin, 2007). Many psychological studies illustrate close relationships between exhilaration and humour. Exhilaration as a type of positive affective response includes “pleasant”, “excited”, and “relaxed”, all foundation expressions in the study of humour (Ruch, 1993; Köhler & Ruch, 1996).

The benefits of concentration can also be allied to the use of humour for tourists. Within the guided tour setting, tourists seeking to understand the jokes or humour are more likely to pay attention to new and interesting tourism content. Research suggests that humour often improves people’s attention and therefore generates long-lasting memories (Chapman & Foot, 1996). In particular, Fredrickson (2001) states that when a person is experiencing positive emotions such as being joyful and amused, they are more willing and ready to engage with others and build their understanding of the world. Humour is also useful in reducing the boredom of dull moments such as waiting for tickets, being in traffic and dealing with delays (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). As positive tourism experiences often generate repeat visits and willingness to make recommendations (Reid & Reid, 1994), it is probable that the use of humour could facilitate tourists’ repeat visits and boost positive word-of-mouth messages.

**The sense of being English**

As already suggested, the appreciation and production of humour is context specific and is underpinned by culture and local styles (Chiaro, 1992). Both the appreciation and production of humour rely heavily on cultural knowledge and the ability to recognise connotations and intertextual references (Cappelli, 2008). Several authors have noted that the success or failure of humour depends on cultural assumptions and stereotypes (Francesconi, 2011; Holmes & Hay, 1997). Culturally rooted stereotypes are often used in humour, including in tourism settings as they are simple, vivid, memorable, and widely recognised (Francesconi, 2011).

In England, it can be suggested that a sense of humour is a fundamental part of English culture. It often involves the use of irony and exaggeration, as well as an offering an incisive commentary on the foibles of people and other societies (Easthorpe, 2004). Comparisons both within Britain and to countries abroad help locate the character of being English. For example, the idea of England and being English is often referenced with respect to being separate from Scottish compatriots (Daiches, 1981). Additionally, long standing jokes about two European nations - Germany and France - also act as anchors in the social representations of English culture (Moscovici, 1988). It has been argued that the “superiority” sometimes associated
with English humour lies in part in the global spread of the language as the preferred communication tool across the planet (Bryson, 1991; Roura, 1995). For example, Bryson reports that “more than 300 million people in the world speak English and the rest, it sometimes seems, try to...” (1991:1). Understanding the linguistic subtleties of the joke and be able to laugh together identifies the superiority of English culture (Friedman, 2011). If the tourist does not understand the allusions within those jokes, humour fails (Dolitsky, 1983; Holmes & Hay, 1997; Yus, 2003). Historical achievements, popular songs, movies, music, heroes, sport and slang have reinforced and perpetuated an imagination and fantasy of privilege; a special place in the world as a once pre-eminent power which is perhaps now rather faded (Easthorpe, 2004). Due to the dangers inherent in building humour on superiority, some English tourist guide jokes and tales with a national or ethnic orientation could potentially provide conflicts with other groups (Critchly, 2002; Holmes & Marra, 2002).

The conceptual framework of this study is presented in Figure 1. It identifies the interaction between the offering of a humorous experience to tourists and the contexts for their appreciation of that form of communication. Building on these contextual considerations, the objective of this study is to understand how tourists react to the guides’ humour in select cases of guided tours in southern England. The work also seeks to identify how the humour works to portray a sense of Englishness to the mixed international audiences who participate in the tours.

**Figure 1: Humour construction and the tourist response**

**Method**  
The study examined a mix of themes and styles of guided tours involving humour in England. Web-based phenomenon sampling was used to identify guided tours that were already using...
humour as a major feature to attract tourists. A web-based search with the key words “fun”, “funny”, “amusement” and “humour” were used. Together with reading through comments on TripAdvisor, three sites in England were carefully selected due to their acknowledged role as being “funny and humorous”. The three guided tours share the common feature of directly using English humour. First, the “Only in Brighton” tour, which was started in 2007, has successfully maintained its place in the market and won a TripAdvisor “certificate of excellence” in 2015. Second, the London dungeon is a well promoted man-made attraction in the centre of London. It uses the promotional line “fear is a funny thing”. Third, the Tower of London is one of the iconic attractions in London and its Yeoman Warder tour is consistently recognised as “funny and brilliant”. This selection of sites thus represented examples of well-established, humorous English guided tours. There was a differentiation of the types of tour by choosing one city tour (the Only in Brighton tour), one man-made attraction tour (the London dungeon) and one cultural heritage guided tour (Yeoman Warder tour).

The material available to assess the pattern of humour in these tours came from multiple sources. Each tour was visited by both researchers. The longest and more complex tours (the London Dungeon and the Yeoman Warder tour) were visited multiple times during the summer of 2015. The narratives provided by the tour guides were recorded during the visits. As well as considering and reviewing these narratives, participant observation was carried out to record tourists’ reactions, including what kind of jokes made the audience laugh and not laugh; tourists’ interactions and conversations; and tourists’ general emotional response to the presentations. Tour promotional materials online and onsite were collected during the visits. Both authors fitted easily into the settings as tourists. One author, who is Chinese, has lived in England for over three years, but still considers herself an international tourist. The second author, an Australian, has previously lived in England but is sufficiently unfamiliar with the settings to pass easily as simply another international tourist. It is of some value, however, to note that these joint insider-outsider roles occupied by the researchers assisted in understanding both the presenters and the experiences of those new to the English settings and humour. To widen the understanding of tourists’ responses and to be able to illustrate both positive and negative reactions to the humour, all TripAdvisor commentaries on the selected tours were collected up to August 2015.

By considering the promotional material and its visual images, the styles of the tour guides, the tourism settings, and the delivery formats for providing the humour, a rich assembly of material was available to review the tours (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). A thematic approach to analysing these sources of data was adopted. As a first step, thematic analysis was used to identify the patterns of humour that were used in these three tours. The researchers followed the three steps of thematic analysis suggested by Boyatzis (1998), namely, attending to sampling and design issues, developing themes and codes, and then validating and using the code. Codes used in previous research on humour and tourism were helpful in constructing categories for this study (Critchley, 2002; Frew, 2006; Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Pabel, 2015). In attending to the issue of sampling, codes were developed through identifying themes within subsamples of the materials collected. Themes across subsamples were then compared. Cross checking of the key codes between the two authors acted as a form of validation and confirmed a common and acceptable set of main outcomes. Lastly, in order to provide a comprehensive storyline of constructing the English sense of humour in tourism, the relationships between every theme were considered.
The three tours as humour settings

The three tours studied are all examples of tourism employees providing humour. The Only in Brighton city tour is led by one tour guide. He highlights his life and experience of being a long standing citizen and devotee of the city. The tour targets local residents, domestic travellers and western tourists. Most of the time, the tour has around 10 people and lasts for 90 minutes. The majority of the participants are female and between 35 to 40 years old. The tour guide uses a folder which contains many quotations and pictures to support his story. The online promotional materials enthuses: “For the visitor, it is an insider’s introduction; for the hardened Brightonian, a revelation and celebration. This personal tribute cuts to the heart of a unique city in all its glory, shame and muesli.” (Only in Brighton, 2015). Together with its symbol (see Figure 1A), the tour illustrates its target, its source and the content. The logo gives people an idea of the attractions and content involved. The image of the Royal Pavilion is in the background with a quaintly dressed and presumably amused, smiling man holding the name of the tour. The rainbow, a symbol of homosexuality, sea gulls and the old pier are presented as unique symbols of Brighton and the tour. A pink shading offers a bright and possibly feminine touch to the pages and might subtly explain why the majority of participants are female. The design of the website and logo combine to indicate that the tour will include the glory and shame of the city, in brief a fun experience. The Only in Brighton tour contains a basic introduction to the city’s history and attractions, but it goes beyond a normal idea of a city tour as it focuses on what makes Brighton different in both positive and negative ways. During the tour Brighton’s orientation to being green and favouring organic foods, its many small local shops and its famous people past and present all become sources of jokes. Humour is generated by poking fun at the eccentricities and foibles of the characters who have risen to prominence or who created scandals in the city.

Unlike the Only in Brighton tour, the London Dungeon has multiple presenters and communicators at sub-sites within the larger attraction. The tour is structured and groups of visitors are pulsed along an organised path through a set of staged recreations of events depicting “London’s murky past” (see Figure 1B). The multiple actor-guides work to pre-existing scripts and the humour is clearly designed rather than spontaneously recreated for each passing group. All staff are in costume, with most of them wearing considerable make-up. The expressed aim of the London dungeon is to have fun through building a sense of threat and offering a scary experience (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Strong London accents, a fast speaking pace and exaggerated actor-guide emotional displays accompany the narratives. As a man-made attraction, the multisensory opportunities of using sound, light, temperature controls, animation and moving objects are frequently employed. The Dungeon promises that “fear is a funny thing” and describes the tour as follows:

_The dungeons bring together an amazing cast of theatrical actors, special effects, stages, scenes and rides in a truly unique and exciting walkthrough experience that you see, hear, touch, smell and feel. It’s hilarious fun and it’s sometimes a bit scary._ (The London Dungeon, 2015)

Most of the promotional material for the Dungeon employs a black background, adorned with red (see Figure 1B). Hints of blood and danger are communicated through this assembly of colours. The Dungeon is one of the most popular attractions in London with long lines and a year round appeal to many who visit the city. Each tour has around 20 to 30 people and the majority of the participants are below 20 and most below 30 years of age. On-site promotional materials use three languages, English, French and German. Again domestic and western tourists constitute the main cohort of visitors. Most people come in couples or with a
small group to encourage others to try the scary attraction. The content of the tour components includes traitors’ gate, black jack, the sewer, execution rooms and an ever increasing emphasis that the tour group is heading towards their own bloody end and death! The Dungeon is consistently dark; a feature which matches the humour. Many jokes mock the audience and their fears, though there is a strong element of farce to offset any embarrassing, sexual, or cruel moments.

The Yeoman Warder tour runs every day inside the Tower of London. The tour involves a small amount of walking inside the grounds of the Tower with each tour being led by one warder. These individuals are dressed in uniform and each tour lasts around 60 minutes. It was observed that more people were in the morning sessions compared with the tours in the afternoon. Generally speaking, around 60 people are on any one tour. Most visitors are domestic travellers, with many Europeans and Americans, and some Asians. Children, teenagers, young adults, and senior people are all present on these tours. Each of the warders seems to have a slightly different collection of jokes but the researchers were able to participate in multiple tours and much commonality existed in the stories told at each staging point. Inside the tower, there are six locations where the warders stand and deliver the talk. With the large number of visitors, the wardens speak very loudly and they tend to follow a slightly formal speaking style. The expression “Ladies and gentlemen” for example, was repeatedly used to capture the attention of group members. Attentive observation by the research team revealed that this expression was sometimes employed with a mildly forceful, even sarcastic intonation if a tourist was being particularly inattentive. The promotional materials describe the tour as following:

A Yeoman Warder tour is one of the most popular attractions for visitors to the Tower. Join one of these famous tours where Yeoman Warders (popularly known as ‘Beefeaters’) will entertain you with tales of intrigue, imprisonment, execution, torture and much more… (The Tower of London, 2015).

The Warders are dressed in an original and distinctive costume complete with a bonnet with its colours similar to that of the British Flag. They are relatively older men who must have served in the army for at least 22 years before becoming a warder. Their formal role is to guard the royal palace and the site. They are both soldiers and residents of the tower, enacting a historically respected role. Figure 1C illustrates a representative figure. The Yeoman Warder Tour thus not only aims to provide an authentic Tower of London experience but also uses the incongruity well. The contradiction between the formal dress, the traditional setting and the everyday humorous jokes of the Yeoman Warders can surprise tourists and strengthen the unexpected fun element of the experience (Critchly, 2002; Pine & Gilmore, 1999).
Figure 1: promotional image of the tour (Only in Brighton, 2015; The London Dungeon, 2015; Yeoman Warden tour, 2015).

The tourists’ response
Using humour in guided tours has many benefits for tourists. As noted previously, the tour guide’s delivery of humour is influenced by the tourism setting, the tourists they seek to entertain content, and their objective of using humour (Frew, 2006; Pearce, 2009; Pearce & Pabel, 2015) (see Figure 1). In this section, the actual on-site humour is introduced and supported by on-site observations of the tourists’ responses as well as off-site TripAdvisor commentary. Through this process, the section not only shows how these long running successful tours employ humour to entertain tourists, but also reveals tourists’ responses towards those planned and sometimes spontaneous jokes.

Opening jokes are very important. They cue tourists into the style of the tour and frame the experience (cf. Goffman, 1974). All three cases were observed to have many jokes at the
beginning. For example, just before the Yeoman Warder tour stated, the following interaction was observed:

Warder: Come closer, You stay back! (Points to one western male and the tourist smiles).
Warder (smiled): That was a test of English. Do you speak English?
Tourist: Yes
Warder: You do? (Tourist laughs)
Warder (laughs): Get closer

The opening jokes not only attract people’s attention, but also increase people’s willingness to stay. At the Tower of London many in the crowd are deciding how long to stay or whether to join the free tour. Many might perceive that the Yeoman Warden tour to be formal and even dull. The unexpected, but interesting jokes at the beginning involve some form of co-creation and potentially add value to this free tour (Williams, 2006). As in the above example, the warder involves an audience member and jokes with him in an offensive and engaging way. Others observe the interaction and vicariously identify with the chosen tourist and perceive the humorous potential of the tour. The frame is set for all who are watching. A similar example occurs at the London Dungeon:

Do not trust me? Why would I lie? We are going to take you on a journey through the history of London.....Here we are. Some of you are more educated than others. You! Your name. Gentleman, an easy question, what's your name (Tourist replies) ..... Everyone point at him. Point your fingers. All, well done, and now shout traitor. “Traitor!” (Audience participates and laughs).

The minor embarrassment is played out in an interactive way. Performers are in control but frame and create a scary and fun experience. The interactive jokes accentuate the unexpected (Critchly, 2002). Interestingly, male western participants often seem to be the target for co-creation in delivering the sense of English humour. Perhaps the guides find that they are more willing than international tourists or women to participate in the framing and interactive processes.

In addition, local circumstances and the immediacy of the day can be incorporated into the tour. Relevant day to day observations are sometimes placed in the middle of the narrative to support the message. Recordings of the narrative from the Only in Brighton tour provides an example: “Over the road, we have a statue of Queen Victoria, she is looking in this direction and at George and appears to be very disapproving. No wonder maybe because... (pause) the lady boys of Bangkok are behind us. (The guide then refers to a marquee advertising a touring show from Thailand).” Clear phrases and relatively neutral facial expressions by the guide make the most of the contradictions of the conservatism of the past and the liberal nature of contemporary Brighton. The approach makes these jokes interesting and clear. Tourists report their interest as follows:

The tour included a nice variety of interesting stops and facts, some humour and a pleasant stroll through the lanes and alleys of Brighton (about 90 mins). As a Kemp Town resident, I was already aware of many of the facts but Ric delivered them in a fresh and interesting manner and added some details that were new and surprising! (TripAdvisor – Only in Brighton tour)
This commentary indicates how the guide’s personal views of Brighton were used to provide surprising but fun moments.

Both Only in Brighton tour and the Yeoman Warder tour tended to place the joke when the actual historical points or story were finished. This serves to release the tension and offers some relaxation to visitors (Pearce, 2009). Jokes in this sense are also treated as a sign for the transition to a new location or a new story. Both these tours involve introducing history and historical figures. The timing of the jokes in the London Dungeon is slightly different, with the humour being used in the middle of the narrative to build tension rather than concluding a scene or event with jokes. It is interesting to find out that humour is often employed to give instructions or to promote certain tourist behaviour. As shown below:

Example 1: Yeoman Warden Tour

*Now I warn you now.* (Referring to the last stop on the tour) *Some visitors feel darkness and mystery here. They still feel they are being tortured even in these present times... I am not surprised. It is where the gift shop is.*

(Referring to a location at the foot of a set of stairs) *Now ladies I am going to go there and wait for you there. If any of you ladies fall, I will catch you* (laughs) *in those old soldiers’ arms of mine.* (laughs). *Gentlemen, I will first take care of the ladies. I will warn you fellows now if any of you fall there.... it really hurts.* (laughs).

Example 2: London Dungeon

*Please make sure you are lined up with your loved ones. Please. Ok Traitors. Bye bye you won’t see me. You are all about to die ok? Please do not stand up on the way. You might get wet. Does not matter, you all going to die anyway* (laughs). *Alright have a nice ....death*

Both examples show how humour can be used to increase concentration (Pearce, 2009), and also provide instructions to tourists. By using humour, instructions become clearer and more powerful. Interestingly, the bad consequences of inappropriate behaviours are emphasised through laughing. Gender related jokes are used in Example 1 to relate to all members of the audience but in effect the message to be careful and not fall is emphasised twice. It was observed that there was no single instance of a tourist violating instructions, thus providing evidence that the guides have multiple purposes for their humour use.

The nature of the tour influences the use of humour (Pearce & Pabel, 2015). Among these three tours, only the Yeoman Warder Tour in Tower of London is a government owned heritage site. This ownership and the attendant stewardship of an icon of English history means that the warders introduce and promote other attractions. Arguably, the role of humour plays a significant role to facilitate these off site objectives as follows:

*In the year 1685 James, crowned James II, Monmouth landed to the south of England. He raised an army of farmers and labourers. It was known later as the Monmouth Rebellion. Sadly he was defeated. Monmouth was brought back to the tower and after 3 days he was brought to trial for high treason and sentenced to death......They took his body to London Bridge. Back at the Tower somebody realised “hang on a minute. This is the son of a king, we just executed. He has never had his portrait painted.” One of the beefeaters carried him back to the tower. Another was sent down to London Bridge in*
order to collect his head and bring it straight back here. And then the tower surgeon sewed it to his body. Sadly, ladies and gents it was too late to save him (laughs). The portrait was somewhat detached (laughs). I have not seen it myself but it now hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. Go and have a look for yourself. Now we are going to be heading *off (laughs)*. . . .

In the above example, the brief history of the Monmouth Rebellion is introduced together with the history of the Tower. The major use of the Tower as an execution place for noble figures in the past is illustrated in a memorable way. Compared with the Tower of London, a must-see historical heritage site in the city, the National Portrait Gallery has a lower profile. It is probable that that some tourists are effectively encouraged to go to this art gallery due to the story they have just heard.

**The sense of being English**

In this section, tourist responses on TripAdvisor are featured to explore key factors shaping successful or failed humour on these guided tours. Humour requires cultural knowledge and understanding, it often emphasise common knowledge within a group, while providing distinctions with outgroups (Holmes & Hay, 1997). In particular, the role of culture plays an important role in delivering the sense of English humour.

All of the three tours are conducted in England with different speaking speeds and British accents. Cappelli (2008) argues that the ability and fluency of language use directly draws boundaries between groups through a sense of underlying superiority. It was observed that only the Yeoman Warden Tour has relatively more non-western tourists, but some of them left in the very early stage of the tours. It is reasonable to surmise that they might be leaving due to the language issues. Language problems are also mentioned in the comments of London Dungeon.

*The actors did an excellent job, and I applaud their efforts. However, the students with me had a difficult time understanding them because they portrayed the lower level of English society with incredibly thick accents... If you are visiting the London Dungeon, you need to find out exactly what topics are being covered and review your history a bit. Only then can you really appreciate what's happening inside.*

*I really enjoyed my visit to London dungeon. Very interactive with the public and funny at times! The only observation is that actors and actresses speak very quickly which I think is not suitable for the millions of non-native English speakers that visit London everyday. They would not understand 65% of what is going on.*

(TripAdvisor – London Dungeon)

It is interesting that among all the comments, language barriers are often mentioned by native speakers rather than non-native speakers. In addition, the first comment also suggests that some knowledge of the sites is required. All of these three tours require certain levels of English fluency and familiarity with British or European history. Many famous people in the past such as Henry VIII and his wives, Guy Fawkes, and Cromwell are mentioned through the tour, and jokes attendant on their life stories may be lost on those with little historical knowledge.
Remarks and jokes about nationalities and regions are often used. These place based jokes draw boundaries between the England and other countries and between Brighton or London and other regions. Examples from each tour are as follows:

Example 1: Only in Brighton tour

*Next street herbs, later the original Body Shop, then a vegetarian shoe shop, the only animal free shoe company in Brighton! There are not too many American style shops on the high street*

Example 2: The Yeoman Warder tour

*Warder: Where do you come from?*
*Visitor: Australia.*
*Warder: Stay at the back please. How dare you stand in the front?*

Example 3: The London Dungeon

*Performer: Tell the judge your name.*
*Visitor: Anna.*
*Performer: Where do you come from?*
*Visitors: Ipswich*
*Performer: Ipswich? Guilty! I found you all guilty by association with this criminal from Ipswich.*

Example 4: The London Dungeon

*Now listen even the sheep said you are guilty of stealing. What are we going to do with you? (Laughs) Hanging it is. Or are we going to send you to a distant land where you could see more sheep? Off to New Zealand it is.*

In the first example, the uniqueness of Brighton as a city emphasising sustainability practices with local shops is constructed through comparison with American urban landscapes. Here, stereotypes are used (Mellinger, 1994) and an underlying comparison between England and the United States is highlighted. In the third example the mention of any town or city elicits the reaction that the tourist and associates are guilty. Jokes associated with regional origins are often then developed and usually imply the superiority of London. Both the second and the fourth example above implicitly use stereotypes of nations and subtly echo the historical roots and former power of the English over New Zealand and Australia.

Through the jokes and the jibes, the historical links and tales of important people are enlivened and become memorable. A taste of English culture is projected through the delivery of the sense of English humour, its irony, self-deception and ability to create fantasy (Easthorpe, 2004). The Tower of London promotional materials describes the Yeoman Warder tour as “symbols of London and Britain” (Tower of London, 2015). There are no jokes about the current queen and the palace through the journey. Indeed the Yeoman Warders reveal a passion for queen and country. Through humour they represents the idea of service and a respect for the buildings they interpret. As one visitor comments “the Yeoman Warders are funny, informative and central to the overall feel of being in England.” (TripAdvisor comments – Tower of London). Nevertheless, humour remains a personal phenomenon. One negative commentator about the Yeoman Warder tour observes “not worth joining. It consist of a stand-up comic in costume, making cheap jokes about a variety of subjects, including ridiculing members of his audience.” (TripAdvisor comments – Tower of London). The negativity of this commentator reveals again that the sense of English humour
offers a compelling experience for some, but not for all. The possibility of further work investigating these individual differences and tourists’ repertoire for humour appreciation are research directions of the future. At minimum, guides should understand the importance of culture as an essential factor in influencing the success of humour while enduring the fact that not all are going to be pleased with their performances.

Conclusion
The surprising neglect of the role of humour in tourism appears to be at an end. Recent attentions to context and to nationality influences are shaping an agenda for the future (Pabel & Pearce, 2015). There is a need for empirical research on humour designed for tourists, including more work on humour and the guided tour which was the key focus for this study. Three different guided tours in England were chosen, namely Only in Brighton tour, the Yeoman Warder tour and the London dungeon. In order to understand the complex relationship between humour and guided tours, promotional materials, on-site narratives, on-site observation and TripAdvisor commentaries were analysed. This research has introduced the timeline of humour use and tourist response in the context of England. It was revealed that the English sense of humour, especially through play with international visitors and the careful construction of memorable stories, was used to deliver experiences of these well-known and quintessentially English locations. As further humour studies are developed, a special challenge lies in considering whether humour in other countries and continents serves the same purpose of revealing to tourists insights into the country, its citizens and its locations.

References


