

CAN HUMOR HELP SELL A TOURIST DESTINATION ONLINE?



The authors used a scenario-based experimental design to explore the effects of humor on destination websites.

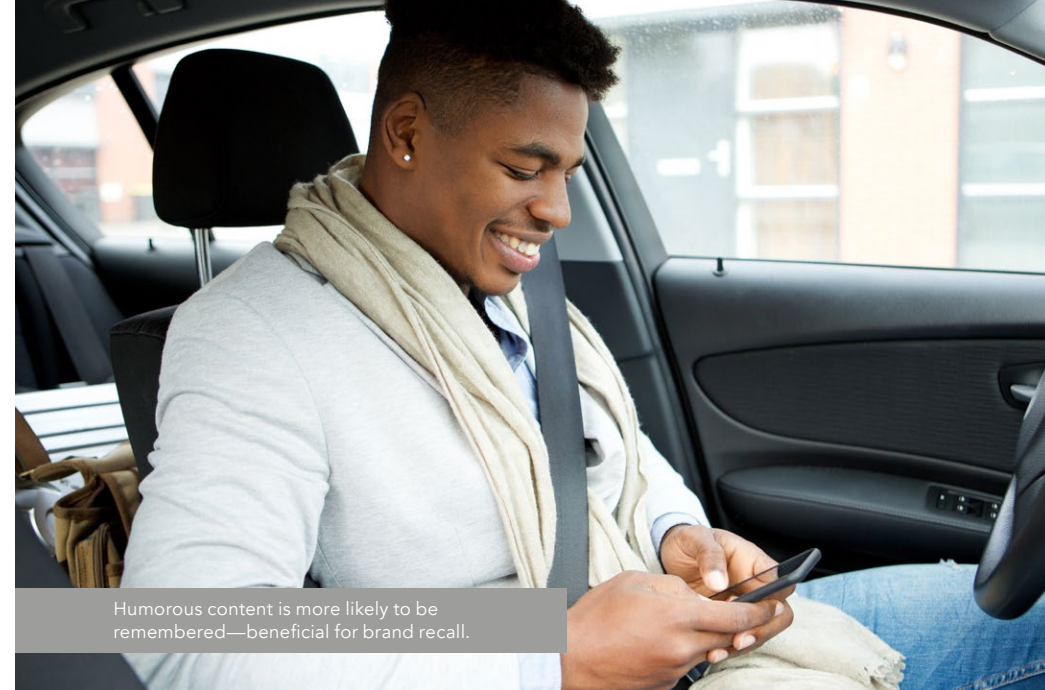
Destination marketers pack a lot into their websites, assuming potential visitors want detailed information. But perhaps they're missing a simple trick to attracting the attention of potential travelers and getting them to connect with what's on offer: a dash of humor. But humor is a double-edged sword; experimenting with it can be potentially damaging. However, research by Dr. Maksim Godovykh and Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu at UCF's Rosen College of Hospitality Management has shown that even making light of a crisis can help boost attitudes and intentions.

For most people considering a new holiday destination, the internet is the first port of call; only the fearless or foolish head off to the unknown without doing some background research. While a wealth of information now sits online, a dizzying array of competing websites awaits those doing even a simple search. How, then, can destination marketing companies help their products or those of their clients attract the attention of potential travelers and connect them with what's on offer? A tempting tool is using humor—it is, after all, a key component to addictive social media. However, humor is no laughing matter if you ignore its possible pitfalls, and destination marketers face an added challenge in using humor in website design.

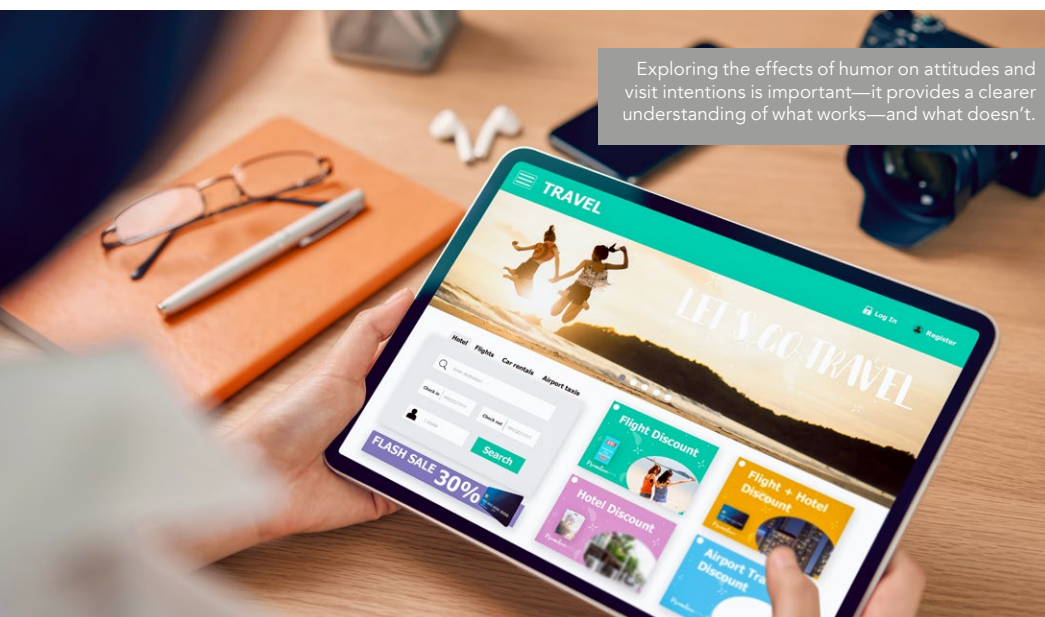
Two researchers from UCF Rosen College are providing some much-needed guidance.

It's fair to say that most people go on holiday to enjoy themselves, so there's some logic to linking humor with destination marketing. Humor sells, and in online marketing, it has multiple benefits. Firstly, it helps capture attention—crucial in a digital landscape where users are bombarded with information. It also breaks down perceptible barriers people can build against being sold to. Humorous content is more likely to be remembered—beneficial for brand recall.

In an age when sharing social media can give a marketing campaign exponential clout, humor commands significant currency



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Exploring the effects of humor on attitudes and visit intentions is important—it provides a clearer understanding of what works—and what doesn't.

TOURISTS' BEHAVIOR IS INFLUENCED HEAVILY BY THE INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM DESTINATION WEBSITES, SO THERE'S A LOT AT STAKE, PERHAPS TOO MUCH TO EXPERIMENT WITH HUMOR.

because it boosts viral potential; link this with long-term trust, and it's possible to create a community around a brand. Beyond increasing sales and loyalty, humor can also be a valuable tool in mitigating negative public relations or customer service issues. However, this needs to be handled carefully to avoid appearing insensitive.

Humor, then, sounds like it should be a destination marketer's go-to tool. However, in the wrong hands or misapplied, any tool can cause damage, and humor is no exception. This is why their research into the effects of humor on attitudes and visit intentions is so important in providing a clearer understanding of what works and what doesn't.

FRAUGHT WITH CHALLENGES

Dr. Maskim Godovykh and Dr. Xiaoxiao Fu make a good team in this regard. Godovykh is an expert in tourism's economic, social, environmental, and psychological impacts; Fu's research focus includes place marketing and branding, consumer experience and well-being in tourism and hospitality. Working with Dr. Xi Yu Leung of the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management at the University of North Texas, they explored the effects of humor on tourism destination websites. Because, nowadays, a traveler's experience of a new destination probably starts when they discover it online, the marketing component in the website design is vital.

However, 'selling' a destination online is already fraught with challenges. As Godovykh and colleagues point out, tourism products are unique due to their intangible, perishable, and experiential natures—characteristics that cannot be sampled beforehand. Furthermore, tourists' behavior is influenced heavily by the information obtained from destination websites, so there's a lot at stake, perhaps too much to experiment with humor.

The researchers also know that humor carries with it serious challenges for destination marketers. Using a cartoon to sell a product in a local newspaper is relatively straightforward. But when your website is reaching across the world, you need to be aware that humor varies widely across cultures, and what is funny in one culture may be offensive in another.

Humor is also open to misinterpretation, increasing the risk it will be inefficient at best; at worst, it could backfire and expose a brand to legal problems. Furthermore, erratic or overuse of humor to connect with a potential customer could make a marketing campaign seem inauthentic and dilute a brand. There's also the issue of timing and context. For example, using humor during a crisis or sensitive situation could be seen as insensitive and harm the destination's reputation. For Godovykh, Fu, and Leung, this last point provided an opportunity.

TAKING YOUR VITAMIN SEA

There's little to laugh about in death, so when the COVID-19 pandemic put a stranglehold on the global tourism industry, it seemed highly unlikely to be used to help sell holidays. In hypothesizing that websites with humorous content would generate better attitudes and

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higher visit intentions than those without humor, the researchers added an extra layer to their study: to see if making light of COVID-19 would work.

They conducted an online experiment aimed at individuals from the U.S. with previous travel and destination website experiences who were considering either a future or near-future getaway. The data were collected in January 2021, at the height of the pandemic. There was a reason: they wanted COVID-19 to be a key component in a scenario-based experiment.

Using a website mock-up of an idyllic, tropical beach destination, the researchers randomly assigned participants to examine a different version of the website mock-up. There was one with a cartoon of a man in a swimming costume and the slogan 'Escape your everyday life—take your vitamin sea', one with the same cartoon and the slogan 'Escape COVID-19—take your vitamin sea', and one with no cartoon. In each case, there were two variations: one asking the participant to imagine they were traveling that same month,

and the other to imagine they were traveling the following summer. So, in total, there were six scenarios to test respondents' attitudes, visit intentions and, importantly, the perceived trustworthiness of the site.

To measure destination attitudes, the researchers asked respondents in the accompanying survey to evaluate statements like 'I think that this destination is appealing to me' and 'This destination matches my expectations'. To measure visit intentions, the researchers used statements like 'I would think about spending my holiday in this destination' and 'I would intend to visit this destination if I plan to travel in the near future'. To measure trustworthiness, they asked respondents to evaluate statements such as 'I believe this website is reliable' and 'My intuition tells me I can trust this website'.

Given the risks of using humor, this trust component was critical. The researchers were looking for possible mediating influences of humor on the perceived trustworthiness of the site. They also hypothesized that those

sites designed for near-future travel plans would generate better attitudes and higher visit intentions; the versions with humorous content would encourage better attitudes and higher visit intentions compared to those without humor; and those poking fun about escaping from COVID-19 would have a more positive impact on attitudes and intentions than unrelated humor. That was an intriguing call—remember: at the time, the media were carrying stories of those dying from the disease.

TIME TO RECONSIDER WEBSITE DESIGN

The researchers' insights into tourism consumer behavior meant they were essentially spot on with their hypotheses. Respondents planning a short-term getaway showed better attitudes and stronger intentions than those considering a trip sometime in the future. These findings are consistent with studies in psychology showing people tend to weigh the consequences of their decisions more heavily when making a near-future choice.

On the impact of humor, the results also showed that humor related to COVID-19 increased participants' intentions to visit the destination compared to unrelated humor or no humor at all, especially when they found a website trustworthy. The type of humor didn't affect participants' attitudes towards a destination. The study also found that participants more familiar with travel websites had higher intentions to visit the destination on the website that included COVID-19 humor. Overall, the study suggests that using humor related to current events—even a severe crisis like COVID-19—can positively influence peoples' intentions to visit a destination.

This study has given not only destination marketers cause to reconsider the issue of website design but also different services in hospitality and tourism. If all destination sites traditionally provide detailed information about attractions, accommodation facilities, and events on their websites, how can they differentiate? How can they reach across the online divide, grab and hold the attention of a potential customer, encourage them to like a destination on offer and increase the likelihood they will book a visit? Godovykh, Fu, and Leung have shown that providing special deals for people looking for a last-minute holiday can close a deal, but when it comes to connecting consumers with a tourism brand, making them smile can make all the difference.



RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The authors used a scenario-based experimental design to explore the effects of humor on destination websites.

REFERENCES

Godovykh, M., Fu, X., Leung, X.Y. (2023). Humor on destination websites: Effects of humor on attitudes and visit intentions. *Tourism Analysis*, 28, 371–386. [dx.doi.org/10.3727/108354223X16837426437308](https://doi.org/10.3727/108354223X16837426437308)

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

Your research suggests using humor can help to sell a destination online, but you also acknowledge that humor should be used carefully; so, what is a line that should never be crossed?

// In addition to its positive effects, there are several negative impacts associated with the use of humor in advertisements. Sometimes, people tend to focus on humor more than on the advertised product or service. Moreover, the effects of humor in advertising have been found to be complex, selective, and short-lived. Therefore, it is necessary to thoroughly evaluate the impact of humor on advertising effectiveness and pre-test each marketing strategy to avoid potential negative outcomes. It is also a good idea to segment propositions to customers based on their socio-demographic, personal, and travel characteristics. //

Dr. Maksim Godovykh



Dr. Maksim Godovykh leads international research projects on the economic, social, environmental, and psychological impacts of tourism. His research results were published in premium academic journals, as well as disseminated in books, encyclopedias, industry magazines, and news media. He has developed several government programs and organized more than a hundred conferences and workshops.

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