

AI-GENERATED HUMOR IN HOSPITALITY SERVICES: EMERGING INSIGHTS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN TOURISM MARKETING RESEARCH

Abstract

DIAMANTIS ANGELOPOULOS, PhD

Candidate

Department of Organisational Management, Marketing
& Tourism, International Hellenic University
17th km Thessaloniki – Sindos, 57400 Thessaloniki
Phone: +306980498774
E-mail: angelopoulos.diamantis@gmail.com

ANTONIOS GIANNOPOULOS, PhD, Assistant

Professor

Department of Organisational Management, Marketing
& Tourism, International Hellenic University
17th km Thessaloniki – Sindos, 57400 Thessaloniki
E-mail: agiannopoulos@ihu.gr

EVANGELOS CHRISTOU, PhD, Professor

Department of Organisational Management, Marketing
& Tourism, International Hellenic University
17th km Thessaloniki – Sindos, 57400 Thessaloniki
E-mail: echristou@ihu.gr

IOANNIS ASSIOURAS, PhD, Associate

Professor

Institute of Sustainable Business and Organizations -
Sciences and Humanities Confluence Research Center
- UCLY, ESDS
10 place des archives, 69002 Lyon, France
E-mail: iassiouras@univ-catholyon.fr

Purpose – This study explores the emerging relationship between artificial intelligence (AI), humor, and service experiences, focusing on how AI-generated humor influences customer perceptions in service encounters. Despite the increasing use of AI agents in hospitality and tourism, little is known about the effectiveness and limitations of humor as a communicative strategy in these interactions.

Methodology – A structured narrative review was conducted, including peer-reviewed journal articles that specifically examine humor in human–AI service interactions. Only studies from credible academic journals were considered to ensure relevance and conceptual quality. Thematic synthesis was employed to identify conceptual patterns across study designs.

Findings – Three key themes were identified: (1) humor as a communication style influencing customer perceptions, (2) humor as an emotional recovery strategy, and (3) humor as a moderated effect. While humor can increase perceived warmth, trust, and satisfaction, its effectiveness is highly dependent on contextual factors, user familiarity with AI, and the type of humor employed. Cultural sensitivity, emotional state, and the level of anthropomorphism also play a critical role. Gaps in the literature include the limited number of tourism-focused studies, lack of humor theory integration, and limited differentiation across travel stages or service settings.

Contribution – By bringing together separate findings and pointing out gaps in current knowledge, this paper provides a starting point for future research on AI-generated humor in tourism and hospitality. It suggests theory-based research directions to help both researchers and professionals design AI-driven service experiences that are emotionally engaging and suitable for different contexts.

Keywords AI-Generated Humor, Customer Experience, Human-AI Interactions, Tourism and Hospitality

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INTRODUCTION

The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in service delivery gains significant growth in recent years (Huang & Rust, 2018). Within the tourism industry, AI technologies support businesses in enhancing service personalization by tailoring interactions to individual customer needs (Samala, 2020). Despite these developments, research highlights the need to further explore how AI applications, such as ChatGPT, influence tourism and hospitality (Sigala et al., 2024). The evolution of AI technologies increasingly enables artificial agents to undertake responsibilities traditionally held by human service employees, particularly in customer care interactions (Huang & Rust, 2024). Recent research increasingly focuses on comparing the capabilities of AI agents to those of human employees, particularly in relation to emotional intelligence and communication, while also examining how anthropomorphic features influence user perceptions of AI-driven interactions (Liu-Thompkins, Okazaki, & Li, 2022).

In this context, humor plays a significant role in human communication, often fostering rapport, trust, and emotional connection in service encounters (Gremler & Gwinner, 2008). Building on this, humor increasingly emerges as a relevant element in Human-AI service interactions, while the communicative capabilities of AI agents in generating humor advance rapidly. Supporting this, a recent study shows that AI can effectively predict how individuals will respond to humorous content, indicating that humor appreciation is not random but can be modelled based on user preferences and content characteristics (Rosenbusch & Visser, 2023).

Based on this, the aim of this paper is to examine the limited but emerging body of literature that investigates the role of humor in customer service interactions involving AI agents in hospitality and tourism. By reviewing and analyzing existing studies, the paper seeks to identify key themes, conceptual gaps, and future research opportunities within this novel intersection of service research and AI-generated humor.

1. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON AI-GENERATED HUMOR IN SERVICE INTERACTIONS

The articles included in this review were identified through a targeted search using Google Scholar. Keywords included combinations such as “AI-generated humor,” “AI chatbot humor,” “AI humor in services” as well as tourism-specific terms such as “humor in tourism services,” “AI chatbots in hospitality,” and “AI in travel experience.”. Given the novelty of the research topic, the narrative review focuses exclusively on peer-reviewed articles from high-quality journals, as suggested in prior work (Snyder, 2019), emerging areas may require more selective and integrative approaches to enable conceptual development.

Given the limited attention humor receives in hospitality research, where it is still considered an understudied topic (Liu & Xu, 2023), this review shifts the focus to the even less explored domain of humor in human–AI service interactions. To structure this exploration, the section adopts a thematic synthesis approach (Thomas & Harden, 2008), which enables the identification of recurring patterns and conceptual themes across studies with heterogeneous designs. Following the approach suggested in prior work (Tranfield et al., 2003), we structured the reviewed literature through a conceptual grouping strategy. Each study was analyzed in terms of how humor was conceptualized and studied in AI-mediated service settings. Based on recurring themes in the treatment of humor, we developed three broad categories:

1. Humor as a communication style influencing customer perceptions,
2. Humor as an emotional recovery strategy, and
3. Humor as a moderated effect in AI-based service interactions.

Table 1 provides an overview of the selected studies included in this review. Only seven peer-reviewed articles were identified that explicitly examine humor in human–AI service interactions. The table outlines the key characteristics of each study, including context, methodological approach, and the conceptual role of humor.

Tables 1. Summary of Included Studies

A/A	Author	Journal	Theoretical Framework	Method	Independent Variable	Moderators	Mediators	Dependent Variable	Findings
1	Xu, X. A., & Liu, J. (2022)	Annals of Tourism Research	Social Exchange theory	scenario-based experiments	Humorous response (Present vs. absent)	Customer inoculation, Time pressure	perceived warmth, perceived competence.	customer tolerance.	Humorous AI responses increased customer tolerance via warmth and competence, but under high time pressure, their effectiveness declined.
2	Liu, J., & Xu, X. A. (2023)	Annals of Tourism Research	Benign Violation Theory	scenario-based experiments	Humor type (Self-deprecating humor, Self-enhancing humor). Service context (Hedonic-dominant context, Utilitarian-dominant context)	Anthropomorphism (Low / High)	Positive emotion / Inferred negative motives	Continuous usage intention	Self-deprecating humor increased usage intention in utilitarian contexts; anthropomorphism amplified effects of appropriate or inappropriate humor.
3	Kim, J. H., Kim, J., Baek, T. H., & Kim, C. (2025).	Annals of Tourism Research	Expectation-Confirmation Theory / Need for Cognition	scenario-based experiments	Recommendation Response Type / [Personalized vs. Humorous]	Agents [ChatGPT vs. Human] ChatGPT Usage Experience Need for Cognition (NFC) Preference-based Personalization [Matched vs. Mismatched]	-	Visit Intention for Recommendation Satisfaction	Personalized responses increased acceptance and satisfaction; humor was less effective, especially for inexperienced users.
4	Park, J. E., Fan, A., & Wu, L. (2025)	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Justice Theory	scenario-based experiments	Perceived control / Social presence	Humor	Satisfaction	Revisit Intention	Humor reduced the effect of perceived control but enhanced the effect of social presence on revisit intention.
5	Zhai, C., Wibowo, S., & Li, L. D. (2024).	Computers and Education: Artificial Intelligence	Sociocultural theory, Constructivist theory, Situated learning theory	Case study, semi-structured interviews	Use of culturally sensitive humor, empathy, and intercultural elements via the MACHE-Bot	-	-	Learner engagement, trust, motivation, enjoyment, anxiety reduction	Culturally relevant humor reduced anxiety, built trust, and enhanced motivation in AI-mediated learning.
6	Shin, H., Bunosso, I., & Levine, L. R. (2023).	International Journal of Consumer Studies	-	scenario-based experiments	Humor / Type of humor (Affiliate / Aggressive)	Type of service agent	Perceived anthropomorphism / Perceived interestingness	Service satisfaction	Humor improved satisfaction only for chatbots, via anthropomorphism and interestingness; affiliative humor was most effective.
7	Zhang, M., Gursoy, D., Zhu, Z., & Shi, S. (2021)	International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management	Cognitive Appraisal Theory / Artificially Intelligent Device Use Acceptance	scenario-based experiments	Robot Appearance Type (Humanlike, Mascot-like, Machine-like)	Sense of Humor	Performance Expectancy / Effort Expectancy / Positive Emotions	Consumer Acceptance (Willingness to Accept Use of Service Robots)	Humor increased acceptance when combined with humanlike or mascot-like robots; no effect on machine-like appearances

A critical look at the reviewed studies shows that most use scenario-based experiments in online settings (Table 1, Method). While these methods offer control, they may not reflect how humor works in real-life hospitality situations. The studies often rely on imagined, one-time interactions, which limits our understanding of humor in ongoing service experiences. In terms of theory, there is little consistency. Although some studies use humor-related theories like Benign Violation Theory (Liu, J., & Xu, X. A. 2023), many rely on general frameworks such as Social Exchange or Expectation-Confirmation (Xu, X. A., & Liu, J. 2022, Kim, J. H., Kim, J., Baek, T. H., & Kim, C. 2025), which were not designed to explain humor in AI service interactions. Key humor theories like Incongruity or Relief Theory are mostly missing. Finally, while some studies compare different types of humor (e.g., affiliative or aggressive) (Shin, H., Bunosso, I., & Levine, L. R. 2023), few look at multiple styles in the same study. This makes it hard to know which type of humor works best in different situations.

1.1. Humor as a Communication Style Influencing Customer Perceptions

An emerging theme in the literature concerns the use of humor as a communicative style within AI-mediated service interactions. In these contexts, humor is employed to shape how customers perceive the AI agent and the overall service experience. Studies have explored how humorous language can affect users' acceptance, trust, satisfaction, and perceived human-likeness of conversational AI agents. (Shin, Bunosso, & Levine, 2023). The findings in this category reflect both the potential benefits and possible challenges of AI-generated humor as a tool for enhancing customer – AI Agent rapport.

Kim et al. (2025) investigated how personalized and humorous responses by ChatGPT affect users' acceptance and satisfaction with travel recommendations. Their experimental design compared message types and revealed that personalized responses consistently outperformed humorous ones in terms of both acceptance and satisfaction. Notably, humor was not only less effective but occasionally detrimental—particularly among users with no prior experience with ChatGPT. This suggests that while humor may be perceived as engaging, it can have negative effects when trust or familiarity with the system is low. These findings highlight how important user characteristics are. People who had used ChatGPT before reacted more positively to humor, while those with a high need for thinking (need for cognition) responded more to personalized messages, but not to humor. This difference raises questions about how people experience AI-generated humor. Future research could explore whether humor should be used more carefully or be adjusted based on who the users are and how familiar they are with the system.

Shin et al. (2023) explored how humor used by chatbots affects customer evaluations compared to humor used by human agents. They found that humor improved service satisfaction only when it came from a chatbot, not a human. This effect happened because humor made the chatbot seem more human (anthropomorphic) and made the conversation more interesting, which led to higher satisfaction. However, only friendly (affiliative) humor had this positive effect. Aggressive humor made the interaction more interesting but did not improve satisfaction. These results suggest that humor could help make AI agents feel more engaging, but only when the humor style is appropriate. It also shows that catching the customer's attention is not enough; humor must fit the emotional tone of the service. Future studies could examine whether customers judge AI-generated humor differently from human humor, and whether certain humor types are better suited to AI interactions.

Although a study by Zhai et al. (2024) was done in an educational context, it offers useful insights for service interactions involving AI. The authors found that when an AI system used culturally appropriate humor, it reduced learners' anxiety, built emotional trust, and improved motivation (Zhai et al. 2024). These effects were especially strong when the humor matched the users' cultural background. While the setting was not commercial, the emotional and relational benefits suggest that humor could work in a similar way in service industries like tourism and hospitality. This raises the question of whether humor in AI should be customized not only to the service context but also to the user's culture. Future research could explore this idea in non-educational environments.

1.2. Humor as an Emotional Recovery Strategy

One prominent theme in the literature is the use of AI-generated humor as a strategy for emotional recovery in service encounters. This approach positions humor as a communicative tool that can mitigate the negative effects of service failures, enhance customer tolerance, and support service continuity (Xu & Liu, 2022) and (Liu & Xu, 2023).

Xu and Liu (2022) explored how humorous responses by AI agents during service recovery influence customer perceptions. Across six scenario-based experiments, they found that humor positively affected customer tolerance, mediated by increased perceptions of warmth and competence. Notably, the study also revealed limitations: under high time pressure, humor reduced warmth, competence, and ultimately tolerance. This suggests that AI-generated humor does not always work and that its effect depends on the situation. It is reasonable to assume that in time-sensitive interactions, humor may be perceived as inappropriate, particularly when users expect efficiency.

Similarly, Liu and Xu (2023) examined how the type of humor used by AI agents (self-deprecating vs. self-enhancing) interacts with the service context (hedonic vs. utilitarian) to shape customer responses. Their results indicated that in utilitarian contexts, self-deprecating humor was more effective than self-enhancing humor in producing positive emotions and reducing negative attributions, while both humor types performed similarly well in hedonic settings. These effects were mediated by customers' emotional responses and shaped their intention to continue using the AI service. The study also showed that anthropomorphism

plays an important role. When AI agents seemed more humanlike, humor had a stronger effect depending on how appropriate it was for the situation. This finding shows an important challenge: the more humanlike the AI agent is, the more customers expect it to behave in a socially appropriate way. If the humor style does not match the service context, it may lead to stronger negative reactions. These insights highlight key challenges for service designers, who need to balance the type of humor, the agent's appearance, and the context to avoid unwanted effects.

1.3. Humor as a Moderated Effect

A third theme identified in the literature concerns the role of humor as a moderated effect within AI-based service interactions. In these studies, humor is not treated as a direct driver of outcomes such as satisfaction or acceptance. Instead, it acts as a condition that alters the strength or direction of other relationships, such as the effect of perceived control, anthropomorphism, or agent design on customer responses (Park et al., 2025, Zhang et al., 2021). This perspective highlights the non-uniform impact of AI-generated humor, showing that its effectiveness depends significantly on how, when, and in what context it is used.

Park et al. (2025) explored how humor functions as a moderating factor in chatbot-based complaint handling, focusing on two key dimensions: customers' perceived control and perceived social presence. Their findings revealed that humor had contrasting effects depending on the user's psychological needs. When customers experienced a stronger sense of social connection with the chatbot, humor enhanced satisfaction and revisit intention. However, in situations where customers valued control over the interaction, humor reduced this sense of control and negatively influenced their evaluations. These results underscore that humor in AI-mediated services is not universally effective. Instead, its impact is dependent on the emotional or cognitive orientation of the customer during the interaction. This invites future studies to investigate how AI systems might dynamically adjust their use of humor based on real-time cues or user profiles to enhance relevance and avoid undesired negative effects.

While most studies in this review focus on verbal humor in AI communication, Zhang et al. (2021) offer a different perspective by examining humor as a personality trait of service robots. In their study, "sense of humor" acts as a moderator, as it changes how the robot's physical appearance (humanlike, mascot-like, or machine-like) influences consumer acceptance. The results show that humor strengthens acceptance when the robot looks humanlike or mascot-like but has no effect when the robot has a machine-like appearance. This suggests that humor alone is not enough; it needs to be supported by visual cues that help users relate to robots in a social way. The study highlights the importance of matching personality and appearance in AI design. Future research could explore whether humor expressed through behavior (e.g., gestures, tone) has a similar moderating role, or if users respond differently to visual versus verbal forms of humor.

2. CONDITIONS SHAPING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AI GENERATED HUMOR

Building on the thematic synthesis presented above, Tables 2 summarizes the conditions under which AI-generated humor has been found to either enhance or undermine service interactions. This overview integrates key findings from the reviewed studies and highlights the contextual, perceptual, and individual-level factors that shape humor's effectiveness. Humor in AI-mediated service encounters does not always work in the same way. Its value depends on how well it fits the service context (e.g., hedonic vs. utilitarian), the agent's characteristics (such as how humanlike it seems), and the user's background or expectations (such as prior experience or cultural sensitivity). By mapping the enabling and challenging conditions side by side, the table offers a concise synthesis that informs both theoretical understanding and practical application of humor in AI-driven service delivery.

Tables 2. **Summary of Included Studies**

AI-generated humor is effective	AI-generated humor is ineffective
When used in service recovery situations to mitigate negative emotions (Xu & Liu, 2022)	Under high time pressure, humor decreases perceived warmth, competence, and tolerance (Xu & Liu, 2022)
When self-deprecating humor is used in utilitarian service contexts (Liu & Xu, 2023)	When self-enhancing humor is used in utilitarian contexts (Liu & Xu, 2023)
When either humor style is used in hedonic service contexts (Liu & Xu, 2023)	When humor is delivered by machine-like robots lacking human-like cues (Zhang et al., 2021)
When AI Agents are perceived as anthropomorphic (Liu & Xu, 2023)	When aggressive humor is used, it increases perceived interest but does not improve satisfaction (Shin, Bunosso, & Levine, 2023)
When affiliative (friendly) humor is used by chatbots (Shin, Bunosso, & Levine, 2023)	Among users with no prior ChatGPT experience, humor decreases recommendation satisfaction (Kim et al., 2025)

AI-generated humor is effective	AI-generated humor is ineffective
When users have prior experience with ChatGPT and are familiar with the system (Kim et al., 2025)	When users seek control during complaint handling, humor can reduce perceived control (Park et al., 2025)
When users feel socially connected to the chatbot (Park et al., 2025)	When humor lacks cultural sensitivity, it may fail to foster engagement (Zhai et al., 2024)
When humor is culturally appropriate and relevant (Zhai et al., 2024)	

While the reviewed studies do not directly conflict, they reveal differences that highlight how humor works in more complex and situation-dependent ways in AI-mediated service interactions. For instance, while humor generally enhances customer satisfaction when delivered by chatbots (Shin, Bunosso, & Levine, 2023), it has been found to reduce satisfaction among users with no prior experience with AI systems such as ChatGPT (Kim et al., 2025). Similarly, Liu and Xu (2023) demonstrate that self-deprecating humor is effective in utilitarian service contexts, yet self-enhancing humor in the same setting produces adverse effects. Furthermore, although aggressive humor may increase perceived interaction interest, it does not lead to higher satisfaction (Shin et al., 2023). These findings do not oppose each other but instead highlight the importance of contextual alignment, user familiarity, humor style, and agent design. In this light, the impact of AI-generated humor appears to be highly situational, with outcomes contingent on how and where it is deployed.

3. RESEARCH AGENDA FOR TOURISM MARKETING: FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN AI-GENERATED HUMOR

While research on AI-generated Humor in human–AI interaction remains limited across domains, including tourism (Xu & Liu, 2022; Liu & Xu, 2023; Kim et al., 2025), Humor itself continues to be an evolving topic of investigation even in traditional human-to-human service contexts (e.g., Lin et al., 2022; Kong, 2023; Pabel & Pearce, 2016; Li et al., 2022; Su, Gong 2024). Exploring AI-mediated Humor in tourism could therefore contribute not only to filling a gap in the literature, but also to enhancing our understanding of user behaviour, emotional response, and service experience within AI-supported hospitality environments (RQ1 Table3). Additionally, none of the studies consider the role of humor across different phases of travel experience, while the influence of AI and applications such as ChatGPT at each stage of the journey is emerging as a key area for future research (Sigala et al., 2024) (RQ2 Table3). Another important limitation concerns the lack of theoretical grounding in humor studies; while humor is treated as a variable, few studies draw on established humor theories to explain its effects or mechanisms, even though humor theory has been studied for centuries (Perks, 2012) and could offer valuable insights into the forces and relationships among variables (RQ3 Table3). Similarly, and given that Liu and Xu (2023) found humor to be more or less effective depending on whether the service context was hedonic or utilitarian, future research could examine whether similar patterns emerge across different travel types, such as leisure versus business travel. (RQ4 Table3). Additionally, the relationship between humor and anthropomorphism remains theoretically underdeveloped. While some studies suggest that humor enhances perceived human-likeness (Shin et al., 2023), others indicate that a certain level of anthropomorphism is necessary for humor to be perceived as appropriate or effective (Liu & Xu, 2023). This bidirectional link invites further exploration into how these two constructs interact (RQ5 Table3). While one study (Kim et al., 2025) considered prior ChatGPT usage and need for cognition, no research systematically examined user information-processing ability as a moderating factor in humor effectiveness. Given the emphasis placed on this dimension in the Humor as Social Information (HASI) model (Kong, 2023), future studies should investigate whether AI-generated humor is interpreted differently depending on users' cognitive traits and motivation (RQ6 in Table 3). Previous research in human-to-human service settings has shown that humor can enhance relationship energy and pro-social behavior (Lin et al., 2022). However, the reviewed studies on AI-mediated humor do not examine whether similar effects occur when the humorous agent is artificial rather than human. This opens a gap in understanding how users evaluate and emotionally respond to humor depending on its source (RQ7 in Table 3). Tables 3 summarizes the emerging research questions derived from the reviewed studies. Each question corresponds to a conceptual or methodological gap identified in the literature and aims to guide future research in understanding the nuanced role of AI-generated humor in service interactions.

Table 3. Research Question Emerging from the Review

No.	Thematic Area	Emerging Research Question
RQ1	Application in Tourism	How does AI-generated humor function in tourism-specific service interactions?
RQ2	Phases of Travel Experience	Does the effectiveness of AI humor differ across pre-travel, during-travel, and post-travel phases?
RQ3	Theoretical Foundation	How can established humor theories be used to explain mechanisms behind humor's effects in AI-mediated services?
RQ4	Travel Types	Do users respond differently to AI humor depending on travel type (e.g., leisure vs. business)?
RQ5	Humor and Anthropomorphism	Does humor enhance anthropomorphism, or is anthropomorphism required for humor to be effective?

No.	Thematic Area	Emerging Research Question
RQ6	User characteristics and AI experience	Should humor be adapted to user profiles, including prior experience with AI or cognitive traits?
RQ7	AI vs. human Humor	Do users evaluate AI-generated humor differently than humor from human agents?

CONCLUSION

This review aimed to bring together the emerging literature on AI-generated humor in service interactions, with a particular focus on its potential use in tourism and hospitality. Although the number of studies is still limited, the existing research shows that humor, when designed and used appropriately, can improve user perceptions, support emotional recovery, and strengthen the relationship between customer and AI agent. However, the findings also suggest that the impact of humor depends on the context, and is influenced by user traits, the type of service, and how humanlike the AI agent seems. The analysis identified three main themes: humor as a strategy for emotional recovery, humor as a way of shaping customer perceptions, and humor as something whose effects depend on the context or are influenced by other factors. Despite encouraging initial findings, several gaps remain. These include the lack of studies focused specifically on tourism, limited attention to the different stages or types of travel, weak theoretical foundations in humor research, and unclear understanding of how humor and anthropomorphism are connected. By pointing out these gaps, this paper helps clarify where future research could focus. The proposed research questions offer a starting point for developing a more structured and theory-based approach to studying humor in AI-mediated service interactions. As AI systems become more advanced, it will be important to understand more clearly how and when humor should be used to create service experiences that are not only efficient but also emotionally meaningful.

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