

# We're So Bad It's Funny – Effects of Using Humour in the Marketing Communication of Low-Quality Service Providers

By Ilias Danatzis\*, Jana Möller, and Christine Mathies

Low-quality service providers who are unable or unwilling to compete through superior performance increasingly use humour in their marketing communication to generate positive service outcomes. Yet it remains unclear whether using humour to communicate poor service quality is indeed effective. Based on an online experiment in the context of budget hotels, this study finds that using humour to deliberately communicate poor service quality leads to higher purchase intentions and service quality evaluations by reducing both technical and functional service quality expectations. Theoretically, this study extends humour and service research by providing first empirical evidence for the viability of using humour as an effective tool for leveraging customer expectations of service quality rather than improving service performance. Managerially, these insights highlight how reducing customer expectations is an alternative strategy for attracting new customers and for achieving superior quality evaluations.

## 1. Introduction

The use of humour has become integral to business practice. Many organisations use humour as an effective com-

munication tool in advertising (e.g., Beard 2005; Eisend 2009, 2011), social media (e.g., McGraw et al. 2015; van Dolen et al. 2008), the workplace (Wijewardena et al. 2016), and during service delivery (e.g., Chiew et al. 2019; Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2015). Service firms, in particular, actively encourage their staff to use humour in service encounters as an effective way to foster interpersonal relationships (Bippus et al. 2012), create memorable experiences (Curtin 2012), establish rapport with service staff (Marín and de Maya 2012), or soften customer complaints (McGraw et al. 2015). While previous research has offered valuable insights on the use of humour *during* service delivery, it remains unknown whether the use of humour can likewise lead to positive service outcomes by effectively changing customer expectations *prior* to the delivery of the service itself.

Using humour to change customer expectations becomes especially relevant in the marketing communication of low-quality service providers, which we define as those service providers who are either unable or unwilling to compete through superior service quality. Inability to provide superior service quality may result from scarce financial resources (Rust et al. 1995; Soteriou and Chase 2000), as it is often the case for public service providers (Andreassen 1995). For example, the German *Berliner Verkehrsbetriebe* (BVG), the main public transport company of Berlin, deliberately uses humour in response to continuously



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poor service performance. The BVG regularly launches humorous campaigns that explicitly deal with the tardiness of their trains, the unfriendliness of their bus drivers, or their customers' complaints (BVG 2016, 2017). Unwillingness to compete through service quality, in turn, reflects a low-cost strategy in which firms achieve a competitive advantage by "sell[ing] a standard, or no-frills, product and [by] plac[ing] considerable emphasis on reaping scale or absolute cost advantages" (Porter 1985, p. 13). To do so, low-cost service providers deliberately offer limited service and often charge fees for complementary services or better performance (Button 2012; Curry and Gao 2012; García-Fernández et al. 2018). Increasingly, low-cost service providers, such as the Singaporean low-cost airline Scoot or the Dutch Hans Brinker budget hotel chain, proactively use humorous customer communications to explicitly highlight the shortcomings of their provided service (Hans Brinker 2018; Scoot 2019). In both cases, humour is used as a strategic communication tool to improve customer satisfaction by *reducing* customer expectations of service quality. This strategy contrasts markedly with traditional services marketing literature and practice, which univocally focuses on achieving customer satisfaction by meeting or exceeding customer expectations of service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1985; Golder et al. 2012).

Yet besides initial anecdotal evidence (Kessels Kramer 2009), it remains unclear whether humour can be used as an expectation management tool. Likewise it is unknown whether its use in marketing communication can indeed generate positive service outcomes (i.e., customer satisfaction, purchase and behavioural intentions) by shifting customers' service quality expectations rather than improving service performance; something that is particularly relevant for low-quality providers.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to answer the following two research questions:

1. Does the use of humour in marketing communication influence customer expectations of service quality?
2. Does communicating low service quality in a humorous fashion shift customer expectations more effectively, as opposed to non-humorous communication?

To answer these questions, we conducted an online experiment in the context of budget hotels to examine the effects of humorous communication on service quality expectations and experiences, intentions to purchase the service, customer satisfaction, and post-consumption behavioural intentions. Specifically, we examine the moderating role of the use of humour – humorous message vs. non-humorous message – on the effect of marketing communication that does or does not explicitly highlight the low service quality of the offering. The findings provide empirical support for the use of humour in generating positive ser-

vice outcomes (i.e., higher service quality evaluations and purchase intentions) by reducing customer service quality expectations, and show that communicating low service quality in a humorous fashion strengthens the effectiveness of this mechanism. This study complements existing research on the use of humour during service encounters (Chiew et al. 2019; Mathies et al. 2016; McGraw et al. 2015; van Dolen et al. 2008) as it is the first to provide empirical evidence on how humour can effectively be used to *reduce* service quality expectations prior to the delivery of the service. We also make a small but important contribution to theorising about expectation formation and management, which is a critical, yet under-researched domain (Krishnamurthy and Kumar 2015). From a managerial perspective, our findings support service providers in their efforts to decrease costs, yet increase positive customer experiences. Specifically, we provide managerial guidance when service providers should use humorous messages in marketing communication to mitigate the effects of negative service quality performance or to successfully strengthen their budget or low-cost market position.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Service quality

Service quality can generally be defined as a customer's evaluation of the overall excellence or superiority of a product or a service (Cronin and Taylor 1992; Zeithaml 1988). Often described as the difference between a customer's expected and actual perceived service performance (Grönroos 1984; Parasuraman et al. 1985), service quality refers to a customer's 'ideal' expectations in relation to a service offering's perceived attribute performance (Golder et al. 2012). More specifically, customer expectations are "attribute performance reference levels a customer uses when perceiving and evaluating individual attributes" (ibid, p. 4) of a service offering. The aggregated gap between the perceived performance of individual service attributes and a customer's 'ideal' expectations thereof ultimately forms a customer's aggregate service quality evaluations (ibid). 'Ideal' expectations describe a customer's ideal preferences regarding the service attribute performance levels across all offerings in a specific service category. These 'ideal' expectations, in turn, are formed by a customer's 'will' expectations, that is, "the attribute performance levels a customer predicts or believes an offering is going to deliver" (Golder et al. 2012, p. 4).

The service literature distinguishes between different types of service attributes that form the basis of service quality evaluations (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Dagger et al. 2007; Grönroos 1984). Representing one of the most accepted conceptualisation of service attributes in the marketing literature, Grönroos (1984) suggests two prima-

ry components of service quality, namely technical and functional service quality. *Technical quality* refers to the evaluation of the “core element” of the service act or “what” the customer gets during the service process. In line with extant service research (Brady and Cronin 2001; Dagger and Sweeney 2007; Parasuraman et al. 1985), we define technical quality as the customer’s evaluation of the service outcome (i.e., what is accomplished as a result of the service provision), the technical expertise of the service provider, and the tangible cues of the physical service environment. *Functional quality* describes “how” the service is delivered, that is, the manner in which the service provider delivers the service (Grönroos 1984). We define functional quality as the customer’s evaluation of the interpersonal interactions with the service staff during service delivery. This includes evaluations of staff behaviour and attitudes during service encounters (Brady and Cronin 2001; Rust and Oliver 1994).

Traditionally, firms compete by improving the performance of technical and/or functional quality attributes of their service offering (e.g., Brady and Cronin 2001; Cronin and Taylor 1992; Dagger et al. 2007). Striving for high service quality performance is typically hailed as a winning strategy for a firm’s commercial success and competitive advantage (e.g., Berry et al. 1994). However, quality improvement efforts do not always have direct profit implications (Aaker and Jacobson 1994). They are often costly to implement and require considerable financial investment to create an appropriate “return on quality” (Rust et al. 1995). Competing through service quality performance might be especially difficult for service providers who either lack the financial resources or are unwilling to compete through continuous investments in quality improvement efforts to meet increasing customer demands for technical or functional quality performance.

Hence, an alternative strategy to compete through service quality might be to leverage *expectations* rather than performance, and manage customer expectations instead. Representing the other side of the service quality equation (Grönroos 1984; Parasuraman et al. 1985), proactively managing quality expectations might increase service quality evaluations and generate positive service outcomes, yet require less financial resources than quality improvements. Indeed, holding service quality performance constant, decreasing ‘will’ expectations is theorised to decrease ‘ideal’ expectations which, in turn, is expected to *increase* service quality evaluations (Golder et al. 2012). While previous empirical research shows how implementing expectation management strategies – such as clarifying fuzzy, revealing implicit, and calibrating unrealistic expectations – can enhance service quality and customer satisfaction (Ojasalo 2001; Pitt and Jeantrout 1994), the underlying assumption that decreasing customer expectations might indeed provide an effective strategy to increase ser-

vice quality evaluations remains untested. In addition, it remains unclear *how* marketing communication should best be designed to reduce quality expectations and whether using humour – as an effective communication tool – can amplify the effectiveness of marketing communication in generating higher service quality evaluations.

## 2.2. Humour in services

While service research focuses on improvement strategies for quality performance (e.g., Rust et al. 1995; Ostrom et al. 2015), an alternative approach is to use humour to manage customers’ expectations where the quality of the service is low. Making light of poor service performance could yield substantial benefits because humour establishes rapport, which in turn dampens the negative effects of service failures (DeWitt and Brady 2003), of which low service quality is an example. Humour research presents humorous communication as a means to accept fault (Grugulis 2002), make light of a difficult situation and negative feelings (Kuiper et al. 1995; Meyer 2000), and increase likability (Treger et al. 2013).

Humour has been studied extensively in many different disciplines ranging from psychology to management (Kong et al. 2019; Kuipers 2008; Martin 2010; Ruch 2008), and more recently service researchers have turned their attention to the effects of humour use in service encounters (Chiew et al. 2019; Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2015). Humour in services is therefore typically defined around the customer-employee interaction during a service encounter (Mathies et al. 2016) and relates predominantly to Grönroos’ (1984) functional dimension of service quality. We extend this definition of humour in services to also include the service provider’s communication efforts *prior* to the service encounter, as a tool to manage customers’ expectations, given the prevalence and effectiveness of humorous advertising to influence consumer attitudes (Eisend and Tarrahi 2016).

Three basic theories explain why humans use humour: incongruity, relief, and superiority theory (Lynch 2002). Superiority theory argues that humour ensues from looking down at the weaknesses or errors of others. It is less relevant to understand why a service firm might use humour to communicate poor service quality than incongruity and relief theories, because the firm’s own weakness is the source of humour. Incongruity theory posits that humour occurs if a message is incongruent with the ideal or expected situation, leading to absurdity (Ruch 2008). In our research context, a service provider deliberately highlighting their quality shortcomings rather than their strengths is rather unusual and unexpected. Relief theory posits humour as a release valve for negative emotions related to social taboos and misfortunes (Freud 1970). Humour thus emerges in unpleasant situations accompanied by nega-

tive feelings, i.e., in our context a poor-quality service offering that the service provider is unable or unwilling to change. Instead of camouflaging low service quality, a provider can embrace their shortcomings and explicitly communicate them to customers with humorous messaging.

Irrespective of its theoretical origins, humour fulfils two distinct social functions. It can be a means of identification with or differentiation from a social group (e.g., Lynch, 2002). Identification refers to humour use as a way to belong to a group and gain the approval of others. It allows the sender of a humorous message to create shared meaning with the recipient (Meyer 2000). As such, humorous references to poor service quality might allow a service provider to connect to customers that would otherwise distance themselves from a low-quality offering. On the other hand, quipping about poor service may also allow differentiation. Differentiation typically occurs via socially acceptable demeaning of others or via rejecting norms. In our research context, humorous differentiation may stem from expressing opposition (e.g., Collinson 1988; Mulkey 1988) to the norm of 'good customer service'.

Given the psychological origins and social importance of humour, it is not surprising that it is omnipresent in marketing communication. Approximately two thirds of all advertising use some form of humour (Weinberger et al. 2015). Humorous advertising may promote brand awareness and attitude, improve source liking, and/or increase purchase intentions (Eisend 2008; Fugate 1998; Nabi et al. 2007; Spotts et al. 1997). However, it may also reduce the credibility of the sender (Fugate 1998; Norrick and Spitz 2008). This effect could be problematic for services high in experience or credence quality, because humorous advertising is only effective where the product or service is suited to a light-hearted approach, and the humour relates to the core message of the advertisement (Scott et al. 1990).

### 2.3. Hypotheses

As summarised in our conceptual model (Fig. 1), we draw on the literature in humour research and services marketing, to hypothesise how humorous communication of low service quality may impact customers' technical and functional service quality expectations, and the subsequent effect on service quality evaluations, purchase intentions, customer satisfaction, and post-consumption behavioural intentions such as word-of-mouth (WOM) and loyalty intentions.

Expectations take centre stage for customers' purchase decisions and subsequent service performance evaluation, as they provide a clear reference point (Sweeney et al. 2016). However, service quality expectations are not static; instead they are subject to customer learning and adapt over time as customers gain experience with a service (Erdem and Keane 1996). This learning is facilitated through the active or passive acquisition of information about the quality of technical or functional service attributes; either through a customer's past experience with the service provider (Zeithaml et al. 1993) or with other companies providing similar services (Robledo 2001). Information can likewise stem from external sources such as competing service offerings and recommendations (e.g., WOM communication) by third parties or the service provider itself. Provider-related information involves service-related cues that customers could use to make inferences about the expected service quality such as price, market share or firm reputation (Helloffs and Jacobson 1999; Kirmani and Rao 2000). It also involves explicit service promises that are primarily conveyed through advertising (Zeithaml et al. 1993). That is, explicit statements about the quality of service attributes that the customer can expect to receive when engaging with the service provider. Previous research has shown that explicit service promises influence

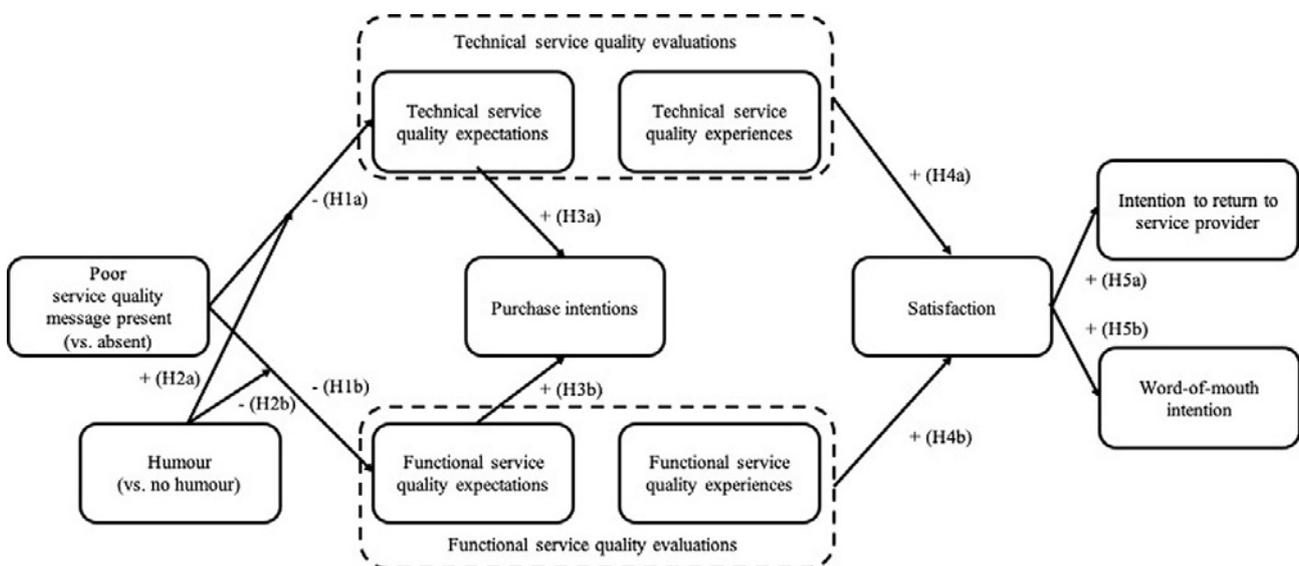


Fig. 1: Conceptual model

customer expectations about service quality (e.g., Krishnamurthy and Kumar 2015; Robledo 2001; Teboul 1991). Accordingly, we expect that explicit statements about poor performing technical or functional service attributes will negatively impact customer expectations. Hence, we posit:

*H1: Explicit communication of low quality of service attributes reduces a) technical service quality expectations and b) functional service quality expectations.*

The poor quality of technical and functional service attributes can be communicated to customers in a humorous or non-humorous way. Whether humour is effective in influencing customer expectations depends on the type of product, and on how pertinent the humour is to the message about the product (Eisend 2009). In particular, we expect a moderating influence of humour on the effect of service quality communication on customer expectations. For functional products such as budget hotels, which are nonetheless high involvement and high risk, it is particularly important that humour explicitly relates to quality claims if it intends to influence technical service quality expectations (ibid).

Specifically, we expect that a generic humorous message that is unrelated to low quality of service attributes will have no effect on technical quality expectations. Prior humour research in advertising confirms that for a humorous message to be effective, it needs to be related to specific product attributes (Eisend 2009). Similarly, service quality research suggests that a firm's communication efforts need to entail explicit or implicit statements about the quality of the offering's attributes to effectively serve as a source of information that influences customer expectations (Golder et al. 2002; Zeithaml et al. 1993). Thus, if the humorous message is related to explicit statements about the quality of the core offering attributes (technical quality), it is expected to strengthen the negative effect of communicating low service quality on customers' technical service quality expectations.

However, we expect humorous messages to positively shift customers' expectations about the quality of service interaction attributes (functional quality). This is because using humour in marketing communication can generally be perceived as an implicit service promise (Zeithaml et al. 1993). That is, an informational cue or signal that customers can use to make inferences about what to expect in social interactions with the service provider. Humorous service interactions are generally more enjoyable and lead to higher customer satisfaction (Chiew et al. 2019), and customers might expect a more pleasant interaction (i.e., higher functional quality expectations) if the pre-encounter marketing communication is humorous. Accordingly, we expect that the use of humour will reduce the negative effect of communicating low service quality on customers' functional service quality expectations. Overall, we posit:

*H2: Where low quality of service attributes is communicated in a humorous, compared to non-humorous, manner, the negative effect on a) technical quality expectations will be stronger, yet the negative effect on b) functional quality expectations will be weaker.*

Customer quality expectations generally serve a dual function. First they build a reference standard for customers when judging the actual performance of technical and functional attributes of service offerings to build aggregate service quality evaluations (Golder et al. 2012; Parasuraman et al. 1985). Second, they also represent the fundamental reason for formulating purchase intentions (Kurtz and Clow 1992), that is, customer intentions to buy and use a service provider. Indeed, prior research across different service categories shows that higher levels of customer expectations regarding the benefits of the service do lead to stronger purchase intentions (Dorsch et al. 2000). Hence, we propose:

*H3: The higher the a) technical and b) functional service quality expectations, the higher the intentions to purchase the service.*

Customer satisfaction refers to a post-consumption evaluation that can be defined as a customer's "judgement that a product/service [...] provides a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfillment, including levels of under- or over-fulfillment" (Oliver 2010, p. 8). Extant service research suggests that service quality evaluations positively influence customer satisfaction (e.g., Cronin and Taylor 1992; Golder et al. 2012; Zeithaml et al. 2006). Extensive prior empirical evidence demonstrates that customer satisfaction has direct positive effects on post-consumption behavioural intentions (Cronin et al. 2000; Parasuraman and Grewal 2000). Behavioural intentions commonly associated with satisfaction are customer intentions to recommend the service provider to other customers and spread positive WOM, or to remain loyal to them (Cronin et al. 2000; Zeithaml et al. 1996). Accordingly, we posit in accordance with existing research:

*H4: The higher the a) technical and b) functional service quality evaluations, the higher the customer's satisfaction.*

*H5: The higher the customer satisfaction, the higher a) the intention to return to the service provider, and b) the WOM intentions.*

### 3. Methodology

The present study was designed to test whether the combination of explicit information about poor service quality in service advertisements and humour use in those messages impacts customers' service quality expectations, evaluations, purchase intentions, satisfaction and post-consumption behavioural intentions.

We conducted a scenario-based experiment in which participants first saw advertisements of a fictitious service provider (budget hotel chain) before rating their technical and functional service quality expectations and intention to visit the hotel (i.e., purchase intentions). Participants then read a scenario about their experiences as a guest at the hotel, and rated their service quality experiences, satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

We used a set of two-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) followed by planned contrasts, regression analysis, and moderated mediation analysis to determine if there were differences in service quality expectations, evaluations, purchase intentions, and customer satisfaction depending on whether marketing communications include poor service claims and/or humour.

### 3.1. Procedure

After providing consent to participate in the online survey, respondents were informed that they will see three advertisements of a small fictional European budget hotel chain called "Pete Walker Budget Hotel" that is about to enter

the U.S. market. Respondents were asked to imagine what it would be like to stay at the hotel based on the advertisements. Next, respondents saw three print advertisements.

Respondents were randomly assigned to a 2 x 2 between-subjects design (poor service quality message present vs. absent; humorous vs. non-humorous message). All advertisements were specifically created for the purpose of the study (see Appendix Fig. A1-A4). The set of advertisements combining a poor-service quality message with humour were inspired by the Dutch provider "Hans Brinker Budget Hostel".

After viewing the advertisements, respondents indicated their expectations of the hotel service quality in terms of technical (six items adapted from Dagger et al. 2007, e.g., "The quality of the service that will be provided by the hotel will be of a high standard") and functional service quality (six items adapted from Dagger et al. 2007, e.g., "The interaction I will have at the hotel will be excellent"), and also rated their purchase intentions with regards to whether they would stay at the hotel or not (all items are listed in Tab. 1).

Indicators	Factor Loadings	AVE	CR	Mean (SD)
<b>Technical service quality expectations</b>		.86	.97	4.31 (1.75)
The quality of the service I will receive at the hotel will be excellent.	.94			
The quality of the service that will be provided by the hotel will be of a high standard.	.94			
I will like the layout of the hotel room.	.89			
The hotel facilities will be visually appealing.	.93			
The check-in and check-out procedures at the hotel will be efficient.	.91			
I believe the hotel will be well-managed.	.93			
<b>Functional service quality expectations</b>		.84	.97	4.34 (1.75)
The interaction I will have with the staff at the hotel will be excellent.	.95			
The staff at the hotel will interact with me in a humorous fashion.	.87			
Staying at this hotel will be fun.	.89			
I will get personalised attention from the hotel staff.	.93			
The hotel staff will respond quickly to my needs.	.94			
The hotel staff will be concerned about my well-being.	.91			
<b>Technical service quality experiences</b>		.69	.93	4.81 (1.26)
The quality of the service I received at the hotel was excellent.	.90			
The quality of the service that was provided by the hotel was of a high standard.	.89			
I liked the layout of the hotel room.	.78			
The hotel facilities were visually appealing.	.84			
The check-in and check-out procedures at the hotel were efficient.	.65			
I believe the hotel was well-managed.	.89			
<b>Functional service quality experiences</b>		.64	.91	5.26 (1.09)
The interaction I had with the staff at the hotel was excellent.	.83			
The staff at the hotel interacted with me in a humorous fashion.	.68			
Staying at this hotel was fun.	.74			
I got personalised attention from the hotel staff.	.86			
The hotel staff responded quickly to my needs.	.81			
The hotel staff was concerned about my well-being.	.88			
<b>Satisfaction</b>		.92	.97	4.75 (1.61)
My feelings toward the hotel would be very positive.	.95			
I would feel good about coming to this hotel for my stay.	.93			
Overall, I would be satisfied with the hotel and the service it provides.	.91			
<b>WOM</b>		.93	.97	4.63 (1.69)
I would highly recommend the hotel to other customers.	.97			
I would say positive things about the hotel to my family and friends.	.97			

Notes: AVE = average variance extracted, CR = composite reliability, SD = Standard deviation

Tab. 1: Reliability and factorial validity of multi-item dependent variables

Next, respondents read a scenario describing a visit at the hotel for a city break, which was identical for all respondents to ensure that experiences with the service provider were consistent across conditions (see Appendix Fig. A5). Respondents then rated their experiences in terms of technical (six items corresponding to the expectation items, e.g., “The quality of the service that was provided by the hotel was of a high standard”) and functional service quality (six corresponding items, e.g., “I got personalised attention from the hotel staff”). These ratings were used to compute technical and functional service quality evaluations as the difference between experiences and expectations (e.g., Golder et al. 2012; Parasuraman et al. 1988, 1991). Respondents further rated service satisfaction (three items adapted from Dagger et al. 2007), intention to revisit the hotel (single item: “If I needed a hotel again, I would want to come to this hotel”), and WOM-intentions (two items adapted from Dagger et al. 2007). All items were measured on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 – strongly disagree to 7 – strongly agree.

We also measured a range of manipulation checks and control variables. These include respondents’ perceptions of the advertisements (e.g., “How would you describe the ads? – Funny, ordinary, sophisticated”, prior experiences with a “Pete Walker Budget Hotel”, and the following control variables: need for humour (six items on a 7-point scale, Cline et al. 2003), gender, age, first language, experiences with hotels (frequency of staying at a hotel during the last 12 months).

### 3.2. Participants

197 respondents from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) participated in the online study in exchange for monetary compensation. To check for careless and/or invalid responses, we included a screening question of whether the respondent has previously stayed at this hotel chain (see Curran 2016). Subjects who indicated that they have previously stayed at a Pete Walker hotel were hence excluded from further analysis ( $n = 49$ ), leading to a final sample of 148 participants (52.7 % female, mean age = 37.1 [SD = 10.8], 98.1 % English as first language, mean number of stays at a hotel during the last 12 months = 3.6 [SD = 3.5], mean need for humour = 5.49 [SD = .91]). The relatively high number of subjects who failed our screening question is likely due to two main reasons: First, participants mixed up our scenario example with an actual similar hotel chain that they had visited before. Alternatively, participants felt the demand to appear experienced with the hotel chain to protect their right for full compensation. Both explanations imply response behaviour that potentially bias the results.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Manipulation check

Respondents’ perceptions of the presence of a poor service-quality message and humour respectively were checked by one item; each on a seven-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 7 – strongly agree): “According to the ads the hotel’s service quality is poor”, and “How would you describe the ads? – funny”. A one-way ANOVA indicated that there was significant variation between the poor service quality message present vs. absent conditions ( $F(1,146) = 91.146, p < .001$ ), and between the humorous vs. non-humorous conditions ( $F(1,146) = 10.985, p < .01$ ). As expected, respondents in the poor service-quality message condition had a higher mean ( $M = 5.84$ ) than those exposed to advertisements that did not refer to service quality ( $M = 3.23$ ). Respondents in the humorous conditions perceived advertisements as funnier ( $M = 5.16$ ) compared to respondents in the non-humorous conditions ( $M = 4.14$ ). Next, ratings of technical and functional quality experiences did not differ between the experimental conditions, confirming that respondents evaluated the scenario in a similar way.

### 4.2. Expectations

We computed a mean value of the six items for technical service quality expectations (Cronbach’s alpha = .97) and functional service quality expectations (Cronbach’s alpha = .96), respectively. Analysis of expectations was conducted using two-way ANOVAs, which included poor service quality message and use of humour as between-subjects factors, and the aforementioned control variables. In order to test the assumed moderating effect of humour, we were particularly interested in the interaction effect of the between-subjects factors.

For technical service quality expectations (H1a and H2a), the results of the ANOVA revealed significant negative main effects for both poor service quality message (H1a:  $\beta = -.694, t(138) = 5.59, p < .001$ ) and the use of humour ( $\beta = -.259, t(138) = 2.05, p < .05$ ). Consistent with our predictions, this main effect was qualified by a significant interaction between a poor service quality message and the use of humour (H2a:  $\beta = .342, t(138) = 2.68, p < .01$ ). Planned follow-up contrasts revealed that in the poor service quality message condition, respondents assigned significantly lower technical quality expectations to the service provider that used humorous advertisements ( $M = 2.98$ ) than to the service provider who did not ( $M = 4.19$ ). Though significantly higher than the other two conditions, technical service quality expectations did not differ by the presence ( $M = 5.06$ ) or absence of humour ( $M = 4.89$ ) if the advertisement did not make reference to poor

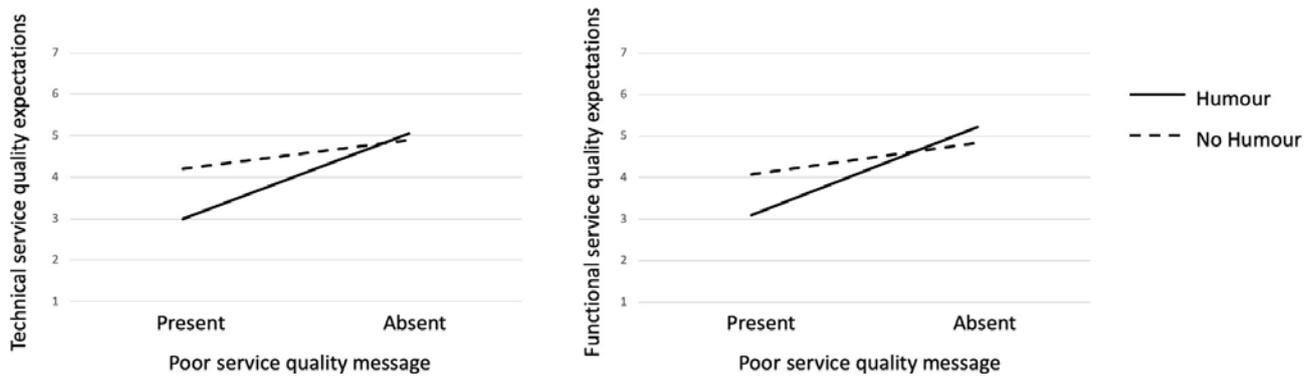


Fig. 2: Interaction effect of poor service quality message and humour on technical and functional service quality expectations

service quality (see Fig. 2 and Tab. 2 for all ANOVA results). H1a and H2a are thus supported.

The ANOVA results for functional service quality expectations (H1b and H2b) show a significant negative main effect of poor service quality message (H1b:  $\beta = -.720$ ,  $t(138) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ), but no significant main effect for humour use. Again, the interaction between a poor service quality message and the use of humour was significant (H2b:  $\beta = .343$ ,  $t(138) = 2.69$ ,  $p < .01$ ). H2b is nonetheless not supported because humorous messaging resulted in functional service quality expectations ( $M = 3.08$ ) that were significantly lower than those in the non-humorous conditions ( $M = 4.07$ ). These results were significantly lower compared to the conditions in which advertisements did not make reference to low service quality claims (with humour:  $M = 5.21$ , without humour:  $M = 4.83$ ).

### 4.3. Purchase intentions

We conducted a linear regression analysis with purchase intentions as the dependent variable, controls, and technical service quality expectations and functional service quality expectations as the independent variables to test for any effects of service quality expectations on purchase intentions (H3a and H3b). In line with our hypotheses, both technical service quality expectations (H3a:  $\beta = .417$ ,  $t(139) = 3.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and functional service quality expectations (H3b:  $\beta = .480$ ,  $t(139) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ) increased intentions to purchase the service.

We also explored in how far purchase intentions differ for the experimental conditions with a two-way ANOVA on purchase intentions, including control variables. The interaction of poor service quality message and use of humour was significant ( $\beta = .347$ ,  $t(138) = 2.24$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as was the main effect of poor service quality message use ( $\beta = -.748$ ,  $t(138) = 4.96$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Explicit poor service quality claims reduced purchase intentions, particularly when combined with humour ( $M = 2.95$  vs.  $M = 3.98$  without humour). However, humour further increased purchase intentions in the absence of a poor service quality claim ( $M = 5.13$  vs.  $M = 4.78$ ).

To further examine the role of our experimental factors in determining purchase intentions, we conducted a moderated mediation analysis, using bootstrapping with repeated extraction of 5,000 samples (Hayes 2013, model 7). The mediation analysis included poor service quality message (0 = absent, 1 = present), use of humour as the moderator (0 = no humour, 1 = humour), both technical service quality expectations and functional service quality expectations as mediators, and purchase intentions as the dependent variable. Results showed that the presence of a poor service quality message did not directly influence purchase intentions ( $B = 1.19$ ,  $SE = .387$ , 95 % Confidence interval (CI): .51, 2.0), but the effect of poor service quality messages on purchase intentions was qualified by a moderated mediation. Results indicated positive and significant indirect pathways to purchase intentions through both technical service quality expectations ( $B = 1.19$ ,  $SE = .387$ , 95 % CI: .51, 2.0) and functional service quality expectations ( $B = .93$ ,  $SE = .401$ , 95 % CI: .23, 1.8), but only when humour was used in the advertisements. In particular, analysis of conditional indirect effects revealed that the effect of poor service quality messages through both technical and functional service quality expectations disappeared for advertisements that did not use humour in their message (technical service quality expectations:  $B = .40$ ,  $SE = .244$ , 95 % CI: -.01, .95; functional service quality expectations:  $B = .31$ ,  $SE = .197$ , 95 % CI: -.00, .75).

### 4.4. Service quality

In order to test our hypotheses about the effects of service quality evaluations (H4a and H4b), we calculated a service quality score for both the technical and the functional dimension for every respondent. First, we computed a mean score for technical experiences and functional experiences, respectively. Second, we subtracted the mean score of technical expectations from the mean score of technical experiences to compute technical quality evaluations for every respondent and repeated the process for functional quality evaluations (cf. Golder et al. 2012; Parasuraman et al. 1988, 1991).

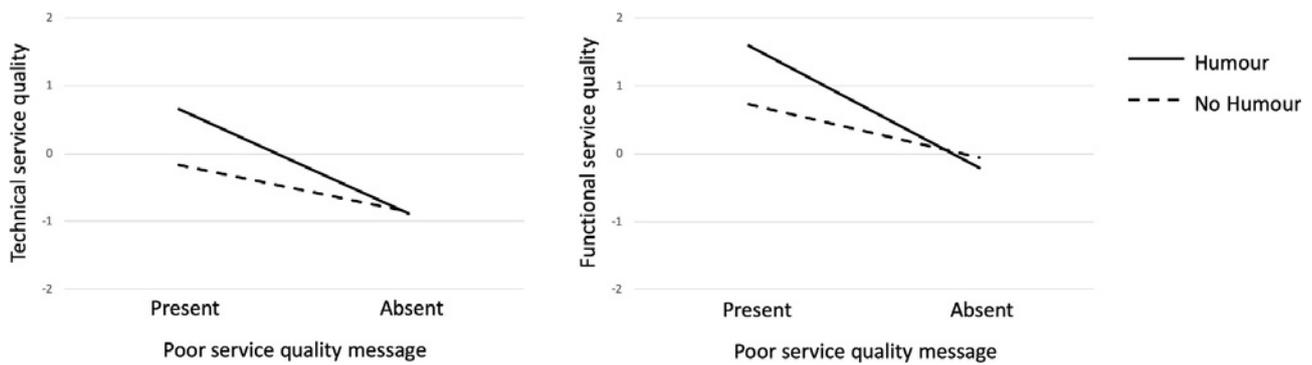


Fig. 3: Interaction effect of poor service quality message and humour on technical and functional service quality evaluations

As for purchase intentions, we were interested in further exploring the role of our experimental factors in determining service quality. A two-way ANOVA with *technical service quality* as the dependent variable, control variables, and poor service quality message and use of humour as between-subjects factors revealed a significant interaction ( $\beta = -.213$ ,  $t(138) = 2.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and a significant main effect of poor service quality message use ( $\beta = .558$ ,  $t(138) = 5.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Service quality was rated highest for messages with a poor service quality claim that were humorous ( $M = .660$ ), significantly higher than non-humorous messages with a poor service quality claim ( $M = -.173$ ). Messages that did not communicate poor service quality led to significantly lower quality evaluations (with humour  $M = -.882$ ; without humour  $M = -.862$ ).

With respect to *functional service quality*, we found the same pattern of results. A significant main effect of poor service quality messages ( $\beta = .646$ ,  $t(138) = 5.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was qualified by a significant interaction of messages and humour use ( $\beta = -.256$ ,  $t(138) = -2.09$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Humorous messages with a poor service quality claim yielded the highest functional service quality ratings ( $M = 1.60$ ), significantly higher than non-humorous poor-quality messages ( $M = .727$ ). The latter were significantly higher than non-humorous messages without a quality claim ( $M = -.052$ ) and humorous messages without a quality claim ( $M = -.209$ ) that both did not differ significantly.

#### 4.5. Satisfaction, behavioural intentions, WOM

We then tested the effects of service quality evaluations on satisfaction (H4a and H4b), and effects of satisfaction on intentions to return to the service provider and intentions to engage in positive WOM (H5a and H5b). We performed a linear regression analysis with satisfaction as the dependent variable, technical and functional service quality evaluations as independent variables, and our standard control variables. Against our prediction, the analysis ( $R^2 = .17$ ,  $F(8,139) = 4.782$ ,  $p < .001$ ) did not reveal any significant relationship between service quality evaluations and satisfaction (neither technical,  $\beta = .280$ , n.s., nor functional,  $\beta = -.245$ , n.s.). Finally, we found support for H5a

and H5b with a linear regression analysis that showed significant positive effects of satisfaction on intentions to visit the hotel again ( $\beta = .953$ ,  $t(138) = 28.40$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and positive WOM intentions ( $\beta = .954$ ,  $t(138) = 29.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

### 5. Discussion and Implications

In summary, we were able to show that deliberately communicating poor service quality does lower service expectations for both technical and functional quality attributes, and when combined with humour particularly shifts technical quality expectations. Lower service expectations, in turn, translate into higher service quality evaluations, though the hypothesised link between service quality evaluations and customer satisfaction was not supported. In keeping with the service literature, satisfaction translates into loyalty intentions such as repeat purchase and positive WOM. Overall, the results contribute to service research and practice in several respects and offer low-quality service providers guidelines when to explicitly include poor service quality claims in their marketing communication, and when to use humour, depending on their desired outcome.

First, in contrast to the majority of prior studies that examine the use of humour in either organisational contexts (e.g., Wijewardena et al. 2016; Holmes 2007) or during service delivery (e.g., Chiew et al. 2019; van Dolen et al. 2008; Mathies et al. 2016), this study is the first to provide empirical evidence on whether the use of humour can lead to positive service outcomes by effectively changing customer expectations of service quality prior to service delivery.

Indeed, our findings support the notion that using humour when communicating poor service quality leads to the lowest *technical* quality expectations as compared to messages of poor service quality without humour. However, poor service quality messages that used humour also resulted in the lowest *functional* quality expectations, which is contrary to our predictions. One explanation for this unexpected result might be that in our operationalisa-

Dependent	F	Mean (SE)			
	t	Poor service quality message present, use of humour	Poor service quality message absent, use of humour	Poor service quality message present, no use of humour	Poor service quality message absent, no use of humour
Technical service quality expectations	F (9,138) = 7.51*** t = 2.28***	2.99 (.49)	5.06 (.48)	4.19 (.50)	4.89 (.49)
Functional service quality expectations	F (9,138) = 7.13*** t = 2.69***	3.08 (.49)	5.21 (.48)	4.07 (.50)	4.83 (.49)
Intention to use the service provider	F (9,138) = 6.04*** t = 2.24*	2.95 (.59)	5.13 (.58)	3.98 (.61)	4.78 (.60)
Technical service quality experiences	F (9,138) = 5.84*** t = 1.35	3.65 (.36)	4.18 (.36)	4.01 (.38)	4.03 (.37)
Functional service quality experiences	F (9,138) = 4.22*** t = 1.02	4.68 (.33)	5.00 (.32)	4.80 (.34)	4.78 (.33)
Technical service quality evaluations	F (9,138) = 5.34*** t = 2.01*	.66 (.40)	-.88 (.40)	-.17 (.42)	-.86 (.41)
Functional service quality evaluations	F (9,138) = 4.78*** t = 2.09*	1.60 (.47)	-.21 (.46)	.73 (.48)	-.05 (.47)
Satisfaction	F (9,138) = 4.71*** t = 1.50	3.73 (.48)	4.59 (.47)	4.22 (.49)	4.32 (.48)
Intention to return to service provider	F (9,138) = 5.13*** t = 1.69	3.33 (.49)	4.22 (.49)	3.96 (.51)	3.97 (.49)
WOM intention	F (9,138) = 5.37*** t = 1.88	3.34 (.49)	4.27 (.48)	3.98 (.51)	3.94 (.50)

**Notes:** F = F-value of ANOVA model with controls and service quality message and use of humor as IVs, t = t-value of the interaction of service quality message x use of humor, SE = Standard error, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001, every ANOVA includes the following control variables: need for humour, gender, age, first language, experiences with hotels

Tab. 2: ANOVA results

tion of a humorous, low-quality message, the use of humour still primarily related to technical aspects of the service (i.e., layout of the room, noise level). Consistent with prior service quality (e.g., Golder et al. 2012) and humour research (e.g., Eisend 2009; Scott et al. 1990), this humorous message might thus have conveyed predominantly explicit statements about the service offering that subsequently reinforced the negative effects of a poor service quality claim on functional quality expectations. Future research could consequently explore whether deliberate anchoring of the humorous message on technical vs. functional aspects of the service experience has distinct effects on resulting expectations. However, recall that generic humorous messages unrelated to service attributes led to the highest functional quality expectations. Service providers unable or unwilling to provide superior service quality can thus use the most suitable combination of poor service quality claims and humour, depending on their relative

strengths and weaknesses of technical vs. functional service attributes.

Second, our findings show that openly communicating poor service quality alone is insufficient to influence customers' purchase intentions. Instead, we find that it is beneficial for a service provider to use humour if they communicate low service quality, both in terms of increasing purchase intentions and favourable service quality evaluations despite offering a low-quality service. This is because both functional as well as technical quality expectations positively mediate the effect of poor service claims on purchase intentions, but only if the low service quality message is packaged with humour. Poor service quality claims that did not use humour, on the other hand, have no indirect effect on customers' purchase intentions. This confirms Eisend's (2009) findings that humour in advertising significantly increases purchase intentions.

Similarly, we find that humorous messages with a poor-quality claim do ultimately lead to higher technical and functional quality evaluations as compared to non-humorous messages with a poor service claim. These findings have several implications. To the best of the authors' knowledge, they present the first empirical evidence for the theoretical possibility that service providers can indeed generate high service quality evaluations by proactively reducing quality expectations while keeping actual service performance constant, thus critically complementing prior research on service quality (Golder et al. 2012; Grönroos 1984; Parasuraman et al. 1985) and customer expectation management (Ojasalo 2001, Pitt and Jeantrout 1994). In addition, they outline how using humour can significantly strengthen these effects and additionally lead to higher purchase intentions. These insights are of high managerial relevance as they highlight how low-performing or low-budget service providers can strategically incorporate humour in their communication efforts to attract new customers and improve overall service quality evaluations.

However, in contrast to our predictions and extensive prior service literature (e.g., Golder et al. 2012, Cronin and Taylor 1992, Zeithaml et al. 2006), our study finds no effect of service quality evaluations (neither functional nor technical) on customer satisfaction. Hence, while humorous messages with poor service quality claims might lead to higher service quality evaluations, they do *not* seem to translate to higher customer satisfaction. This is a surprising result. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that service quality *experiences* (both technical and functional) do have a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction. A possible explanation may lie in the way we conducted our study. That is, irrespective of the type of advertising stimuli/experimental condition, all respondents received the same scenario of the hotel stay, which included references to functional and technical service attributes, as well as humorous staff behaviour. However, depending on the experimental condition, these attributes were not explicitly covered in all conditions. Thus, our empirical study may have elicited predictive rather than normative expectations, meaning that experienced performance of quality attributes rather than the difference between experience and expectations could have been the better explanatory construct (Lee et al. 2000). An alternative explanation could be that service quality and customer satisfaction are joint predictors of behavioural intentions (Taylor and Baker 1994). This should be explored in further research.

In addition, humour as an affective communication tool can alter how customers process and use quality-related information, which might offer an additional explanation for our findings. Humour use typically evokes emotions, which crowd out cognitive resources customers would typically use to evaluate service performance (Habel et al.

2016) and interfere with absorption of key brand information (Fugate 1998). Customers exposed to humorous marketing communication might thus rely on broad heuristics rather than systematic information processing and draw on global quality judgements based on the service category to form their judgements. Hence, the label "budget hotel" is likely to be associated with a basic offering and low service quality.

Reducing customer expectations as a strategy to generate positive service outcomes might thus be promising, but also has its limits. It seems most suited to service providers who need to attract first-time customers, or public service providers whose services customers have no choice but to show repeat purchase behaviour. Humorous marketing communication, especially complaints, are commonly and widely shared (McGraw et al. 2015), and can work in favour for monopolistic public service companies such as the BVG referred to in the introduction.

## 6. Limitations and Future Research

Like any academic study, we acknowledge several limitations that can encourage future research. First, our study was conducted in the context of a fictional low-budget hotel chain that might limit the generalisability of our study results. Future research could aim to replicate our results in a field experiment or in different service contexts across different service categories. For example, it would be interesting to investigate whether reducing service quality expectations through humorous marketing communication might also be a viable way to compete in the market for full-service, or premium service providers or for service offerings with varying proportions of technical and functional service attributes (e.g., repair services vs. professional services).

Second, the effectiveness of humorous service communication in managing quality expectations might also be dependent upon the hedonic or functional nature of the service setting (Eisend 2009). Given that humour represents an affective communication tool, its deployment might be more successful in rather hedonic settings (e.g., restaurant visits, hotel stays, airline travel) than in functional environments (e.g., financial services) or in settings that are already infused with a high degree of (negative) emotions (e.g., health care). Existing service taxonomies (e.g., Bowen 1990) can provide a starting point for future research across service settings.

Third, our study sample is relatively small, and data were collected using Amazon Mechanical Turk. In addition, MTurk respondents were all from the United States. While several studies confirm the high quality of MTurk data (Buhrmester et al. 2011; Germine et al. 2012), the sample of our study nevertheless represents a convenience sample

that further limits the generalisability of our results. Random sampling procedures coupled with a bigger and culturally more diverse sample could further corroborate our study results.

Lastly, we did not find a link between service quality and satisfaction in our study. However, as the service experience was simulated with a written scenario, the satisfaction judgment might be somewhat contrived, as it requires actual experience with the service (Taylor and Baker 1994). Alternatively, the measurement of service quality as the difference between quality expectations and perfor-

mance could be revisited, as it is not without its critics (e.g., Cronin and Taylor 1992).

Overall, our study provides initial experimental evidence on the effectiveness of quality expectation management and the use of humour in service communication. Specifically, it is the first to provide empirical evidence that using humorous marketing communication can effectively generate positive service outcomes by proactively reducing customer expectations about service quality. However, numerous research avenues remain that offer exciting opportunities for future research.

Appendix



Fig. A1: Poor service quality message present & use of humour



Fig. A2: Poor service quality message absent & use of humour

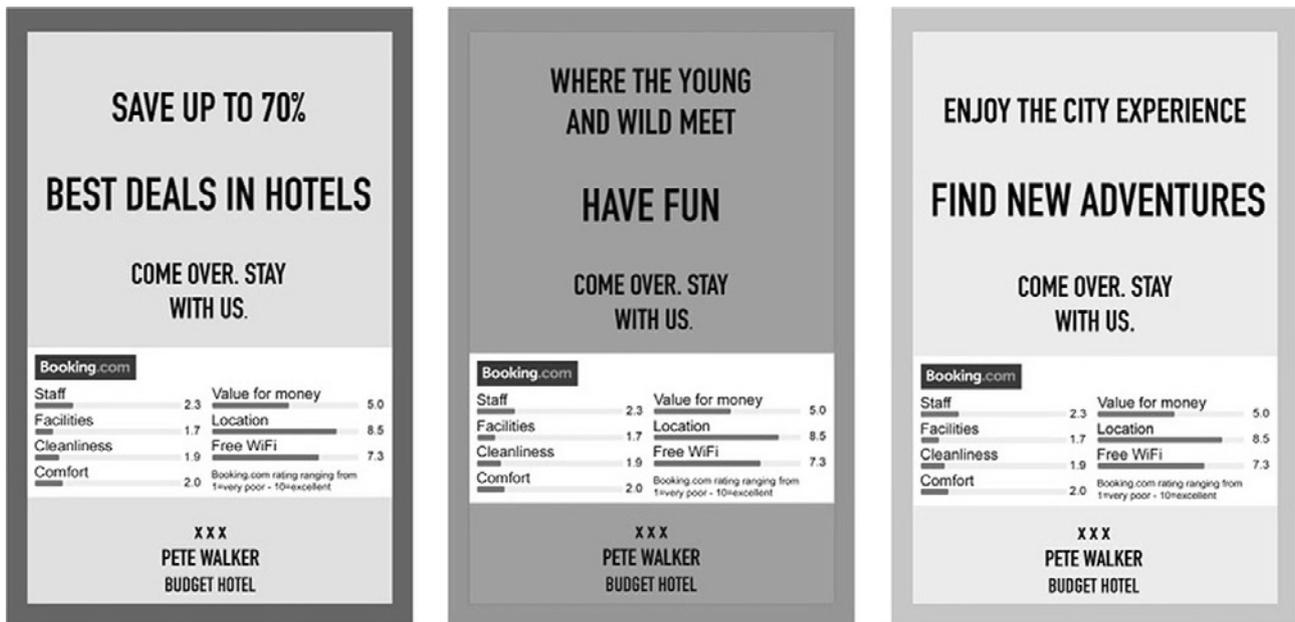


Fig. A3: Poor service quality message present & no use of humour



Fig. A4: Poor service quality message absent & no use of humour

**Please read the following scenario in an attentive manner!**

Imagine you visit a PWBH for a city break.

On arrival, you quickly find the reception desk in the small entrance area. Check-in is straight forward and the staff member friendly and efficient. There is only one narrow lift, which takes you to your room on the 5th floor. The room is small but clean and comfortable with a compact bathroom; the furniture is dated but functional: bed, chair, basic shelving, tired carpet.

As advertised, the location of the hotel is in the heart of the city. Before you venture out, you ask the staff member at the reception desk for recommendations for dinner nearby, and the closest metro station. They seem very knowledgeable and cheerful, and say: "Hey, how many tourists does it take to change a light bulb? 5 – one to hold the bulb, and 4 to ask directions! Don't worry I love helping out and I'm really glad you asked. I sometimes worry when Google will put me out of my job" and provide you with great information.

When you return from dinner at a local restaurant, you decide to have a quick shower. There is no hot water. When you call reception, the after-hour attendant is very helpful and quickly fixes the problem.

The next morning on your way to breakfast you see a sign for a gym on the first floor, which you decide to check out. The door is locked, though through the glass you see a windowless space with some cardio equipment and a couple of weights and decide to give it a miss.

When you check-out after 3 nights, a friendly staff member serves you. As they joke that they at least don't have to charge you for any extras as they don't offer any, they efficiently process your payment and thank you for staying with them.

Fig. A5: Scenario about service quality experiences

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### Keywords

Humour, Service Quality, Low-Quality Service Providers, Experiments, Expectation Management