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Humour Matters in Service Design Workshops

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Abstract: Humour is present in our everyday life, as well as in companies' boardrooms, but it could be used more strategically in business innovation. Although there is an ample amount of research on humour in advertising, and there is increasing interest in emotions in business research, there is a gap in how to use humour in order to advance business innovation: creating new products and services. Service design thinking processes offer an opportunity to study humour in innovation workshops. The present paper discusses how humour could be studied in service design workshops of nine companies involved in a Tekes-funded humour-related research project in 2016. The purpose of the paper is to suggest a research framework in order to get more understanding of the role of humour in service design processes, particularly in workshops and their outcomes. The main research question is whether humour advances the process and the outcome of service design workshops and if yes, how. Humour and playfulness will be defined, and how to measure them discussed. The paper will accomplish the following: firstly, theoretical foundations are laid for humour, playfulness, humour in group work and humour in workshops' outcomes. Secondly, we propose a research agenda for empirical studies. Expected results from the empirical studies will provide new insight into the importance of humour in service design workshop processes and outcomes. The contribution of the present paper will be twofold: theoretical – a research framework for analysing humour in service design processes (process and outcome) and managerial – how humour can be used to improve the service design workshops in companies, e.g. to improve the quality of the process, as well as the results. We are particularly interested in the possibility of integrating humour in business models and value propositions of companies and the present paper may contribute to this aim.

Keywords: business innovation, humour, playfulness, service design, workshops

1. Introduction

Research on the role of emotions in business has shown that merely referring to standard logical thinking (see e.g. Tähtinen and Blois, 2011) and only using 'serious' approaches no longer suffice in business. There is a strong need for more imagination, exchanges of experiences and changes of points of view. The objective of the paper is to discuss the research framework needed for creating new business opportunities through a strategic use of humour in business innovation and corporate communication in the context of a research project funded by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation (Tekes) during 2015-2017. The project attempts to increase the awareness of humour as a strategic tool and the competence of how to use humour and utilize it in Finnish companies – with the aim of creating new business opportunities and business development practices and thus developing companies' growth and internationalization. There are nine Finnish companies involved in the research project, which will also explore the potential and the limitations of the use of humour in international business and corporate communication.

Service design has changed the landscape of service innovation (creating new services) and development (developing existing services) by placing customer experience, thus also customers' emotions and feelings in the core of services (see e.g. Stickdorn and Schneider, 2011; Vuorela, Ahola, and Aro, 2012). Key issues in the service design approach involve service experience, value creation, service innovation and innovation management. Creativity, creative climate and working atmosphere are also important features that cannot be overlooked when planning collaborative service design activities. Hence, it is becoming more demanding to create and maintain successful service-based business models.

The main research question in this paper is whether humour advances the process and the outcome of service design workshops and if yes, how. The relevant sub-questions are:

- How to define, measure and tangibilize humour and playfulness?
- How is humour demonstrated and how does it emerge in workshops?
- How is humour embedded in the outcome of the workshops?

To answer these research questions, we review relevant literature on humour, playfulness and service design thinking. For the purpose of the review, journals related to human resource management, employee relations, creativity and innovation management, design and service design thinking have been chosen with 'humour' and 'service design' as the first search terms. Search terms such as innovation management, service development, business models, value propositions, humorous design, design thinking, service innovation and workshops were also used. It was noticed that humour is seldom a keyword, even in full-length international scientific articles and e-books which discuss humour and service design, so finally relatively few sources were found which combined the two foci (humour and service design). 'Playful' as a search term is often connected with games, and an ample number of articles can be found in this context. Many scholarly articles on service design, which also discuss humour, are related to nursing, and especially discuss mental health services and e.g. stress at work.

2. Humour and playfulness defined, measured and tangibilized

Humour and playfulness can be defined, measured and tangibilized in many ways and from multiple perspectives. Humour or rather a sense of humour can be defined as a tendency to think that everyday happenings are funny, or such an ability can mean that you say funny things (Longman, 2003). Humour can be defined as a state of mind, but it also involves the quality of causing amusement and making people laugh (Longman, 1998). Commonly, in humour we expect one thing, but another is said, and the surprise this involves makes us laugh (Critchley, 2002; Vuorela, 2005). Thus, the effects of humour are observable in body language. This may be of relevance in innovation workshops. Vuorela (*ibid*) is of the opinion that disregarding humour in business meetings would leave a participant on the 'outside', because in light of her research results, humour may be an important strategic tool in attaining goals in meetings. Humour can unite people across occupations, but it may also divide them. E.g. within emergency services, police officers and ambulance staff were found to draw from a mutually acceptable set of jokes, while working together (Charman, 2013). Humour appeared to enhance the interoperability between two organisations, but this seemed to happen at the expense of other agencies involved within the field of emergency services (*ibid*).

Emotions are at the core of human existence, as 'our thoughts, motivations and behaviours are enriched and influenced by our emotions' (Desmet, 2013, p. 3). Whether humour is the cause or the effect of emotions, different types of emotions are related to it (Desmet, 2012). There are differences in what people perceive as humorous, funny, and scholars call for a pluralistic concept of fun, an activity or experience that is exiting and enjoyable (Longman, 2003). Fun may or may not be related to humour; if an activity is funny, it is likely to be fun as well, but a fun activity is not necessarily funny. Workplace fun, as any type of fun, is a multifaceted, paradoxical concept, which can be analysed e.g. by using the following three categories: organic (naturally occurring fun), managed (formal fun activities, e.g. events) and task fun (fun experienced within workplace tasks) (Plester, Cooper-Thomas and Winqvist, 2015). Workplace fun may play a role in enhancing employee embeddedness, i.e. commitment, but, nevertheless, organisations should not lose sight of other human resource management practices (Tews, Michel, Xu and Drost, 2015), even if they decide to opt for fun at work.

Humour has been found to be a specific, verbal variant of play. Important functions of organizational play involve e.g. play as creation, play as meaning-making and enactment, and play as orientation (Tökkäri, 2015). Playfulness as the predisposition to frame situations in order to provide amusement, entertainment and humour applies also to adult behaviour in the workplace. Although there is no general agreement on the composition of playfulness, some scholars have identified spontaneity, sense of humour and manifested joy as basic components. Important functions of organisational play involve e.g. play as creation, play as meaning-making and enactment, and play as orientation. Playfulness is clearly significant in contemporary organisations in the form of 'serious play', the intention of which is to achieve work-related ends (see Heracleous and Jacobs, 2005). Play in organisations can be related to fun and humour, creativity, collaborative learning and identity formation. Generally, it does not require clear rules, but rather subtle management. In organisations, play can provide a psychologically and strategically safe environment for introducing new ideas about market opportunities, for generating debate about important issues, for challenging assumptions and for generally building a sense of joint purpose. Using play for beneficial impact requires getting employees and managers to step outside their normal roles to examine the organisation and its challenges. Play in a business setting is seldom totally spontaneous. It needs to be organised so that it allows creative playfulness to emerge about real strategic issues (*ibid*).

3. Humour in group work and workshops

There are differing views on how humour can be demonstrated and how it can emerge in group work and workshops. The Group Humour Effectiveness Model (GHEM) was created to act as a starting point for testing the role of humour in group work (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008). GHEM is relevant for business innovation – certainly in the context of service design thinking, which is conducted co-creatively through workshops where people act as groups. The scholars propose that positive humour improves groups' effectiveness, because it improves communication and according to GHEM, if individuals share humour, they are more likely to agree on more serious issues as well (*ibid*). Humour can also be a significant element of leadership; as it brings about emotions, it can help in making issues meaningful to group members. Effective leaders can also redefine emotions and emotional responses; this can be especially effective e.g. through shared joking (*ibid*). Humour helps to create a group culture which furthers the acceptance of joint goals by the participants and thus makes them more committed to the work at hand. Romero and Pescosolido (2008) also propose that humour creates an atmosphere of psychological safety, which is essential for the group members to be able to put forth new ideas. Thus the use of positive humour may improve groups' productivity and group members' individual development, as they are learning from each other in this atmosphere of psychological safety. The scholars also claim that the successful use of positive humour brings about a general positive working atmosphere, which enhances group cohesion and hence reduces staff turnover. This makes groups more viable – such groups are likely to continue working together (*ibid*). However, excessive use of humour may have an opposite influence on the effectiveness of a work group and its goal-orientation (*ibid*). When studying the phenomenon of emotional contagion in service encounters, scholars have found that harmonious interaction among service employees promotes congruence in service efforts toward collective goals, which, in turn, increases positive affective delivery of services (Lin and Lin, 2011). Thus managers can create a work culture with an emphasis on play and humour that contributes to a rich sense of community (*ibid*).

While some scholars (Romero and Pescosolido, 2008) propose that humour may have a positive impact on group processes through e.g. improved communication, management of emotions, joint development of goals and thus outcomes of groups working together, other researchers have differing views. In their experimental account of the influence of humour on creativity in brainstorming sessions, Wodehouse, Maclachlan and Gray (2014) found that even though there appear to be similarities between the cognitive processes of joking and creativity, applying humorous stimuli (if applied through e.g. videoed material) during a group brainstorming session did not influence positively the end results of such group work. However, while Romero and Pescosolido (2008) put forth propositions regarding the positive effects of humour in long-term group processes, Wodehouse et al., (2014) experimented with single instances of brainstorming sessions. There are studies suggesting that humour may promote a creative work climate (e.g. Avolio et al., 1999; Isaksen and Akkermans, 2011; Lang and Lee, 2010; Priest and Swain, 2002). In companies, a positive and relaxed R&D&I work environment may diminish the fear of failure, and thus ease the emergence of unconventional ideas (Danneels, 2008). Ideas can be first presented as jokes, and they can thus be accepted for further development. However, the relationship between humour and creativity is a controversial issue (see e.g. Wodehouse, Maclachlan and Gray, 2014). Also, negative correlations between aggressive humour and creativity have been identified (Cayirdag and Acar, 2010). When analyzing humour in business meetings, Vuorela (2005) discovered that negative use of humour was plentiful within 'in-groups' – especially if it was self-directed. Negative uses of humour (irony, sarcasm) were more carefully used in 'out-groups' – where participants from other companies were present.

Classifications of humour, such as liberating and controlling humour (Lang and Lee, 2010) shed more light on the role of humour in enhancing creative performance in the workplace. The scholars (*ibid*) suggest that liberating humour and controlling humour relate significantly to organizational creativity, the former positively and the latter negatively, while stress relieving humour was not found to relate significantly to organisational creativity. Although the issue is not simple, it can be stated that good-natured joking and thus a relaxed atmosphere have been found to be indicators of higher levels of playfulness (Isaksen and Ekvall, 2010; Isaksen and Akkermans, 2011). An important part of managing for innovation is creating an appropriate climate, so that people can share and build upon each other's ideas and suggestions.

4. Humour in the outcome of service design workshops

Besides being present in workshop processes, humour can also be embedded in the outcome of workshops. Through a service design approach and related methodology, a service can be viewed as a product or a user interface, and through the use of the service, the designer can 'experience' the user's thinking and feelings (see

Sanders, 2002; Mager, 2004). Humour brings about feelings or arises from them; customers' feelings are at the core of service experience, so the link between humour and service design seems natural. An illuminating example of how humour and playfulness enable effective innovation workshops is given by the Extreme Design project of Aalto University, in Finland, in which service design methods were used and developed through e.g. drama, narratives and games. The description of the project process clearly illustrates its link to humour and fun: 'Laughter and enthused voices fill the big lecture room when four groups around the room play' (Vaajakallio et al, 2010, p. 1). In the project, two games were developed to bring user perspectives into design and to facilitate creative collaboration among different practitioners. The idea was to facilitate emphatic understanding of users, and service design games helped to introduce humour and fun into user-orientation and co-creation in the service design process. It seems that fun and humorous elements can be important in the holistic experience of the service, as well as its evidencing and even in sequencing the service (e.g. the use of symbols such as smileys, icons, emoticons, emojis in service blueprints). If a product or a service is well-designed as a process and outcome, we believe, that this may bring about both organic and task-based fun (Plester, Cooper-Thomas and Winquist, 2015) for service staff and end-users.

Some scholars claim (Cao and Shi, 2013) that more humorous products are appearing on the market, as urban consumers crave for humorously designed products to brighten up city life. Customers are looking for entertaining features and this applies not only to conventionally humorous offerings (e.g. comedies), but also to offerings that serve practical purposes and are pleasant to use (see task-based fun in Plester et al, 2015). Humorous products (Yu and Nam, 2014) can be designed via the following principles: visualization of taboos, bizarre consequences, destructive play, zoomorphism, self-depreciation, abused products, shape incongruity, unconventional uses, and unexpected functions. Humorous products can induce positive emotions and cause amusement due to their appearances, the contexts and the functions of the products (ibid). The principles of humorous product design can be classified into cognitive incongruity, emotional superiority and relief from social violation (ibid). However, care should perhaps be taken not to reduce humorous products to mere 'quirky oddities'. Other scholars emphasize Positive Design, i.e. 'designing for emotion', which means creating products, services, technologies or systems that evoke desirable emotional responses directly, due to design, or indirectly, through activities that are facilitated by the design (Desmet, 2012; 2013). Such products bring about joy; as users find them pleasurable to use, they are pleased about the products (ibid). This is the case if a product fulfils its function well or facilitates activities (ibid).

5. Research framework: humour and playfulness in service design workshops

Prior to creating new business opportunities for the companies involved in the project, through combining service design thinking and emotions (e.g. joy) via humour and fun, reviewing different theoretical approaches on emotions is vital. Having done so, we discovered that there is a gap in research on humour and service design. We are applying previous research on humour, fun and playfulness in attempting to understand their role in advancing the process and the outcome of service design workshops. In addition, we will combine the principles of service design thinking (user-centredness, co-creation, evidencing, sequencing, holistic) in the empirical research suggested (Figure 1).

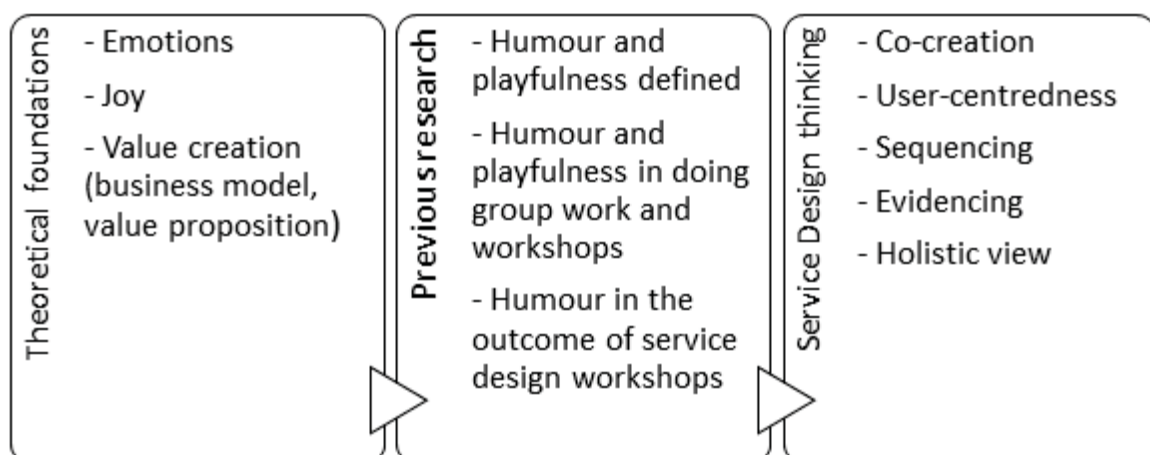


Figure 1: Research framework for studying humour and playfulness in service design workshops

Based on the relevant literature we summarize the following related to the role of humour and playfulness in advancing the process and the outcome of service design workshops.

Firstly, defining, measuring and tangibilizing humour and playfulness is complex but vital for the focal research on service design workshops. Humour and playfulness can be defined, measured and tangibilized from multiple perspectives. The effects of humour are observable in body language, e.g. laughter and smiling. Workplace fun, as any type of fun, is a paradoxical concept, which can be analysed e.g. by using these categories: naturally occurring fun, managed or formal fun activities and fun experienced within workplace tasks. Playfulness, can be identified as spontaneity, sense of humour and joy. Positive humour, which offers psychological safety and allows putting forth new ideas, will help create a positive work climate, while negative humour (e.g. irony, sarcasm), if addressed towards others, pollutes it.

Secondly, humour can have a role in the process of service design and in workshops. The type of humour input may play an important role in the utility of humour in enhancing creative performance in workshops; humour is contagious and hence the atmosphere changes accordingly. Humour can have a role in service design workshops, which are goal-oriented and where different individuals put forth ideas in order to pursue a common (business) goal. It is a challenge to find a common ground for inclusive humour in service workshops where participants represent different professions, and to avoid exclusive humour, i.e. humour which excludes other workshop participants. Playfulness, games and humour are elements of a creative atmosphere and they may improve participants' level of inspiration in business workshops. Company culture may also have a bearing on the successfulness of innovation workshops.

Finally, humour is embedded in the outcome of the workshops, the results of which relate to customer understanding and the ideas and prototypes of the developed concepts and products. Humour may facilitate the process of obtaining customer understanding via service design tools, but excessive use of humour can decrease the effectiveness of workshops. The choice of the types of approaches and methodological tools (what, how, where, by whom?) for workshops is of utmost importance, when creating humour-based products and services. Hence, planning the workshops together with the partner companies is vitally important.

It can be concluded that there is a research gap in how humour advances the process and the outcome of service design workshops, and therefore, more understanding is needed on the matter. We believe that humorous and positive design principles have a role in service design thinking processes: user-centredness, co-creation, evidencing, sequencing and the holistic approach.

6. Research agenda and discussion

The aim of the current paper has been to suggest a research framework in order to get more understanding on the role of humour in service design processes, particularly in workshops and their outcomes. We will now discuss issues related to the actual research, the workshops of the project and related research considerations and will summarise the tasks, methods and expected results in Figure 2.

A workshop-based service design approach has been studied by e.g. Jevnaker et al (2015), who developed their approach for front-end service innovation. In this workshop tool, customer focus, creativity and design-based multi-lens approaches were important, as they attempted to make vague and abstract service innovation projects more tangible. According to Jevnaker et al (2015), when preparing the workshops, it is important to keep the participants informed in order to motivate them. Successful workshops are collaborative and multidisciplinary; also limiting the dedicated time is critical, as employees cannot stay away from their work for several days (ibid). The scholars report that, generally, the company participants preferred short workshops for efficiency reasons, and external facilitation was important (ibid). The company representatives appreciated customer orientation, creativity-based elements, design assistance, personas and service journey mapping; also, visualization was a successful approach as it enabled group communication (ibid). The researchers and designers had a crucial role in systematizing the discovered ideas and insights, so it is important to consider carefully who should be involved in workshops (ibid). A myriad of service design tools have been developed (see e.g. Stickdorn and Schneider, 2011), but few are critically reviewed. The information provided by Jevnaker et al (2015) is important for us in the project, as we will need to carefully consider which tools are feasible when developing humour-based services. Regarding humour-based approaches, organic, task-based and managed humour (Plester et al, 2015) may all play a role in managing innovation in workshops, similarly to e.g. liberating humour

(Lang and Lee, 2010). Successful humour produces pleasurable effects in communication, whether this is due to feelings of superiority, relief or incongruity (Szymanska-Waczynska, 2013). Some researchers have found humour to work better in some business contexts than in others, which is a further consideration in workshops (ibid).

For the business innovation workshops of the project, the methods and principles of service design thinking will be used: co-creation, user-centeredness, sequencing, evidencing and a holistic view of the customers' service journey, with emotions at the core (for more information, see Stickdorn and Schneider, 2011). Visual tools, such as customer journey maps, storyboards, service blueprint, business model canvas and other service design tools add an element of playfulness to business development (Miettinen and Koivisto, 2009); this ties in with the strategic use of humour in workshops. Case study approach will be adopted, and qualitative methods applied. For our research purposes nine companies have been chosen based on their interest in developing a strategic way to use of humour in their business. The study is an extensive case study, as it focuses on mapping common patterns, mechanisms and properties in a chosen context for the purpose of developing, elaborating or testing theory. Cases are seen as instruments that can be used in exploring specific business-related phenomena (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008). In this study positivist and deductive approaches provide a firmer foundation for understanding and managing issues such as validity and reliability, and for structuring data collection and analysis. The study's unit of analysis is the company-specific workshop: its planning, implementation, social interactions as well as the artefacts produced as outcomes.

Data will be collected in the workshops, where ideas for humour-based new services and products are co-created. The methods of data gathering are observation, aided by voice- and video-recording and photography, meeting documents, and artefacts produced during the workshops. This qualitative data will subsequently be analysed with the help of NVivo software with the aim of transferring best practices from one industry to another. To establish the quality of our empirical research, its validity and reliability, we will use different tactics (see Rowley 2002) in different phases of the research (e.g. review of case reports by informants). In addition, we use theory triangulation, researcher triangulation, and triangulation of data sources.

Business-related case study is often practical, similarly to ours. Case study methodology will allow research and development in confidential business contexts and the dissemination of research results in a way that will safeguard that confidentiality. A more detailed research agenda for creating new business opportunities using humour and service design is suggested in Figure 2.

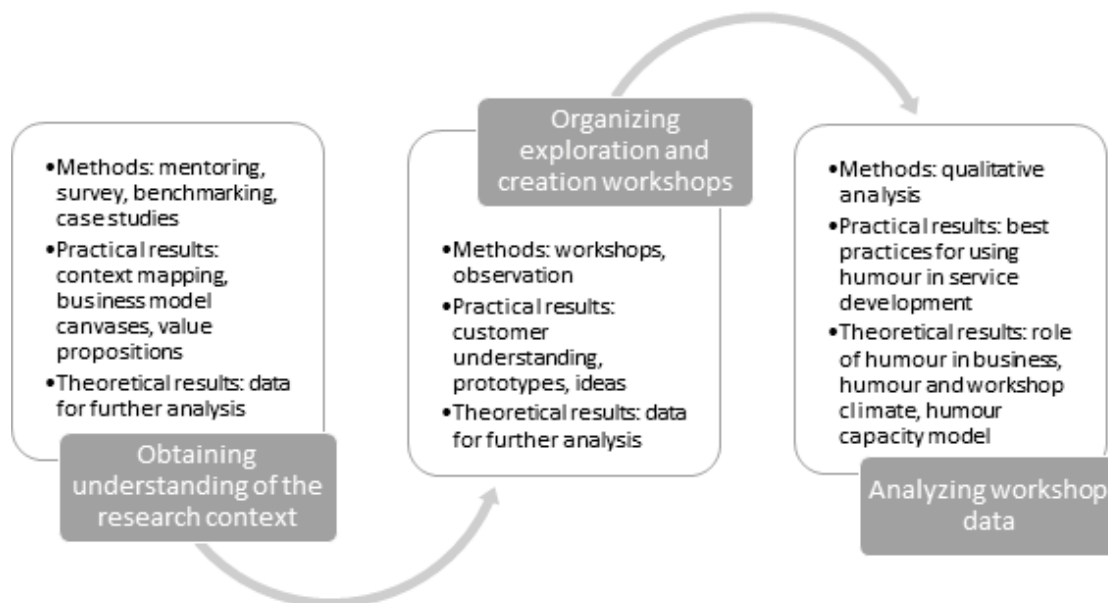


Figure 2: Research agenda for creating new business opportunities through humour and service design

Service design has brought new hands-on tools into the collaborative, interactive co-creation work with customers, where their needs, aspirations and even dreams – thus certainly emotions - are at the centre of

interest. This will involve designing customer profiles on the basis of background interviews – including information on values, way of life, professional activity, even hobbies. By strategically combining the use of humour and play with service design thinking, we may be able to contribute to bringing joy and fun to ‘serious business’.

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