

A Cross-Cultural Comparison of how Americans and the British use Humor as a Tool for Engagement and Effective Communication

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Abstract

This study explores examples of humor in communication and describes the similarities, differences in both cultures and its use as an effective tool for communication, interaction and engagement. The study uses secondary data collection methods, including blogs and television shows, which enhances comparing the use and efficacy of humor. It has been established from the study that the common misconception that Americans do not understand British irony and sarcasm is false. They understand irony, but while it is the foundation of British humor, the American culture does not need to use it frequently. Americans also need to make their jokes more obvious and may even highlight the jokes in their communication, likely resulting from fear of offending others. The American sense of humor is generally slapstick than that in Britain, which can be attributed to the difference in culture between the two countries. American humor is more obvious and forward, while British jokes tend to be more subtle but with a dark, sarcastic undertone. It usually contains a hidden meaning that may reflect the more reserved nature of British culture compared to American culture.

Key Words: *Humor; Self-Deprecating; Communication; Cross-Cultural.*

INTRODUCTION

Humor is a universal phenomenon, which is culturally linked in conceptualizing its impact on an individual's perceptions and use in communication and engagement. Humor entails the tendency to express or experience something amusing, accompanied by the expressive reaction, as well as vocal-behavioral displays like laughter or smiling Moalla (2015, p. 120). The inception of humor in communication discusses its crucial cultural influence in social contexts considered appropriate for laughter. Intercultural communications necessitate critical cognizance understanding how language and culture work and interact in a mutually beneficial relationship distinguishable environments (Farnia et al., 2020, p. 168). The purpose of this research inquiry is to understand the cross-cultural difference between American and British humor as an effective tool for interaction, engagement, and communication.

The research contextualizes the complex political history and broad cultural variations in enhancing and facilitating intercultural communications. Humor manifests as a significant speech act in cross-cultural communications, building relationships and breaking barriers Attardo (2014, p. 292). However, the concept and essence of humor in culture and communication studies remain under-developed, necessitating analyzing significant factors that influence the success and failure of humor in intercultural contexts. The central focus of this study involves answering how humor has been integrated within diverse social situations in facilitating discourse and interactions by

conducting a cross-cultural analysis between the British and American cultures Antonovich (2015, p. 423). This research further explores examples of humor in communication and describes the similarities and differences in both cultures.

Humor is a universal social phenomenon, which occurs in all cultures. Scholars conceptualize humor as a conceptual framework towards understanding and deconstructing cultural and social expectations Moalla (2015, p. 120). Humor functions as an effective social lubricant in resolving inter-ethnic tensions, helping people understand and adopt new characteristics of culture and communication Reimann (2010, p. 23). Theoretical and empirical literature from humor and its influence on intercultural communication investigates a possible positive relationship and interconnectedness between the two aspects. Therefore, it is appropriate research to answer the questions on humor's effectiveness towards intercultural communications and how it correlates to an individual's conceptualization and appreciation of humor. The current field of communication conceptualizes contexts further than just transmitting messages without recognizing the interpersonal and interpretive efforts that enhance interaction and engagement. Therefore, the study on the importance of humor in communication is increasingly becoming prevalent as an effective source for interaction serving diverse functions in communication beyond eliciting laughter and providing amusement Farnia et al (2020, p. 167). For effective conceptualization of this study in conducting a cross-cultural comparison of the uses and functionality of humor between the British and Americans, this research adopts historical, social, cultural, political, and theoretical concepts in explaining the interconnectedness of humor within verbal or written expressions of communication.

Historical Context of Humor

In conceptualizing the English etymology of humor, Davis and Chey (2013, p. 2) trace its root to Medieval Latin, which indicates humor determined a person's characteristic dispositions. An individual was considered sufficiently balanced when enjoying a moderate amount of humor rather than wallowing in sadness. The English humor morphed by the mid-nineteenth century to specifically indicate an individual's ability to see things lightly or in a funny way, possessing the ability to develop a sense of humor, more so, in developing a self-deprecating form of good humor Davis and Chey (2013, p. 2). The development and conceptualization of humor in early modern Europe have transitioned over the years through the performance of increasingly self-conscious cultural and literary activities associated with ridicule and laughter Attardo (2014, p. 293). Within the American historical conceptualization of culture, political and literary studies took precedent over theoretical discussions in reflecting such positive development in the diffusion of critical cultural studies, raising awareness on humor as a cultural phenomenon Lee (2011, p. 81). According to Feyaerts (2014, p. 1), early scholars such as Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Sigmund Freud contextualized humor within the tenets of basic duality either as a combination of funny and ugly or joy and pain. These early scholars elaborated on the intricate balance between humor and an individual's psychological behavior tackling emotional and cognitive feelings of superiority or addressing societal taboos without dealing with any consequences.

Cultural Context of Humor

Despite the fact that laughing is a universal neural experience, culture heavily influences perceptions of situations considered humorous. Humor is affected by a number of factors; thus,

challenging to quantify. It is important to note that always be a sign of amusement. This may be challenging to understand for some people, such as entertainers, psychologists, and linguists.

In conceptualizing the essence of humor in cultural contexts, it aids in theorizing ideas outside the framework of accepted norms in enhancing intercultural communications and understanding. Culture plays an effective role in shaping different communication styles, influencing how people react to how we speak. Moreover, it provides members with implicit knowledge on different situations and interpretations of other's behaviors in said situations Izadi (2015, p. 9). Humor is a universal phenomenon, present in all human cultures. However, it is culturally specific; thus, it actively assists in understanding and deconstructing cultural expectations Jiang et al (2019). American and British cultures differ in humor usage, perception, and the relationship between psychological well-being and humor. In American culture, humor is a socially desirable trait, with individuals possessing a good sense of humor perceived as charismatic, original, and appealing Reece (2014, p. 17). Conceptualizing the influences of culture on humor perception, usage, and its relationship with psychological well-being is meaningful due to its consequences on an individual's well-being Jiang et al. (2019). Therefore, within the American culture, humor increases engagement and communication with psychologically healthy individuals to create a positivity resonance and shared feelings of love. Appropriate cultural knowledge can aid in the recognition of humor.

Theoretical Context of Humor

The conceptualization of humor can be contextualized using its functionality within a social setting and its motivation. With a clear understanding of the functions and efficacy of humor, scholars can develop a significant theoretical framework, which helps clarify the role of humor in communications, interactions, and engagement among individuals Farnia et al (2020, p. 168). Many great writers, scientists, scholars, and famous people within Western culture continually formulate their opinions and ideas about what they believe in the essence of humor. The ancient scholars argue for the in-depth analysis and conceptualization of some of the humor's mechanisms, increasing people's interest in its complexity and omnipresence in culture, language, and communication Feyaerts (2014, p. 1). There is no universal theoretical framework for humor. However, researchers contextualize humor studies using three agreeable dominant perspectives: the Superiority theory, the Relief theory, and the Incongruity Resolutions theory. The three basic theories concerning humor highlight its social, psychological, and philosophical influences Antonovici (2015, p. 418). The theories of humor evolved from the mock-aggressive play of animals. Therefore, conceptualizing humor as play supports scholars in objecting to traditional objections, revealing some benefits of shared philosophy in conceptualizing its efficacy in enhancing intercultural communication engagement Morreall (2020). The experiences associated with humor are often linked to positive effects. Laughter and humor often occur in the presence of pain, therefore, closely linked to resilience and a successful coping mechanism through adversity Antonovici (2015, p. 418). It is essential to conceptualize how different theories of humor influence its relationship with the psychological aspect and behavior of individuals within different cultural settings in engaging in interactions and communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research seeks to conceptualize the role of humor in cultural and communication studies. The study adopts a methodological analysis and in-depth evaluation of previous literature

conceptualizing how American and British cultures use humor as a tool for enhancing communication and engagement Gervais (2011). Within language, the ability to possess effective communication skills facilitates attaining job promotions, acquiring sustainable social skills and building trustworthy and healthy relationships Punitha and Baskaran (2019, p. 28). Humor complements intercultural communication in creating a conducive and cooperative environment amongst individuals.

The Relief Theory

In understanding the role of humor plays in facilitating and enhancing communication and engagement using a cross-cultural analysis of American and British cultures, the Relief theory illustrates humor's influence on an individual's psychological behavior in relieving tension and allowing individuals to encounter, embrace and move past their inhibitions. According to Farnia et al. (2020, p. 168), the Relief theory proposed by Sigmund Freud can support individual interaction and engagement as a relief to human internal tensions, frustrations, and anxiety. Freud popularized the psychoanalytic relief theory as a collection of psychotherapeutic and psychological theories focused on presenting different aspects of human mental development, citing an intricate balance individuals have to achieve in defining their essence as humans Feyaerts (2014, p. 4). Furthermore, it views humor as a fundamental technique for releasing bad energy or suppressed feelings. As a result, it would generally include any form of light-hearted and frivolous humor, such as wordplay, which explains the old idiomatic saying "laughing is the greatest medicine." Campisano (2016, p. 27). Examining American comedian Hannibal Buress, he employs the classical relief theory to ease tension between the audiences and other comedians in actively engaging in conversations surrounding sociopolitical subject issues within the American culture Campisano (2016, p. 30). Within British cultures, the use of hyperboles and overemphasis in their engagement is often overlooked. However, sarcasm is often used in day-to-day interactions and communication; therefore, an easy tool that can be used to diffuse tension and uncomfortable situations Simon (2020). The more apprehension created within the context of communication results in individuals encountering more humor when the task turns out to be unthreatening and unexpected.

The Superiority Theory

According to Borgella (2016), the superiority theory was developed by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, alluding to the idea that humor is derived from the misfortunes of others, creating a euphoric feeling, where the individual feels ultimately superior to others. Superiority theory emphasizes the antagonistic feelings that fuel comicality and mainly involve sarcasm or satire. Thomas Hobbes added that humor manifests within any situation where there's a significant realization of how much better an individual is at their direct competition. Contemporary scholars such as Roger Scruton, who contextualizes the superiority theory of humor, argue that humor is an effective, attentive demolition of an individual or substance connected with a person, significantly devaluing its object in people's eyes Morreall (2020). The act of ridicule and derision serves to elevate the speaker's position while drawing weaknesses, drawbacks, and fallacies to a targeted opponent in highlighting the different parallels between individuals Campisano (2016, p. 27). Self-deprecating forms of humor also account for superiority theory in craftily targeting and deflating attention from their weakest points before another speaker targets them. However, in facilitating enhanced interaction and engagement in actively communicating with others, laughter is

contextualized as a mechanism for social control. Skepticism surrounds the effectiveness of using humour as a rhetorical technique, where humor might damage others or their ethos Perks (2012, p. 127). Hence, there should be ethical guidelines in supporting intercultural communications in using humor to analyze the rhetorical situations characterized by the superiority theory. Borrowing from the American comedy movie *"The Boss,"* the function of humor in communication and engagement illustrates that the Humor's inherent paradox is seen to have a bit of a bite to it. It supports the notion that individuals who feel superiority would be unlikely to engage in the violation. and contradiction Seli and Alfitri (2017, p. 54). Understanding the role of humor in communications within the British culture under the superiority theory covers their argument that they use humor to highlight their flaws, making fun of their failures as a means of appearing more approachable, relatable, and humble in their engagements Simon (2020). Within the British culture, the use of self-deprecating humor resolves egos and attitudes, making awkward encounters and embarrassing moments' well-established sources of self-deprecating humor.

The Incongruity- Resolutions Theory

According to Perks (2012, p. 122), Plato's existing body of work provides adequate measure in favor of incongruity theory, arguing that humor is evidence enough of intelligence, laughter and amusement require the ability to recognise inconsistencies. Humor, according to incongruity theory, is a response to ambiguity, logical impossibility, irrelevance, or inappropriateness. (Warren and MacGraw, 2016, p. 2). It is associated with philosophers such as Immanuel Kant. It relies on contradictions and incongruence in both the subject matter of the humorous message and content during communication, interaction, and engagement Campisano (2016, p. 27). This style of comedy follows the standard joke pattern of establishing a belief, providing supporting evidence, and then deviating from that train of thought by demonstrating that the initial assumption is wrong. using an excellent illustration of elaborate wordplay to replace the conventionalized meaning Feyaerts (2014, p. 9). In the American culture, appreciating humor, which manifests from the violation of accepted norms, necessitates individuals engaging in communication to have a specific mental capacity, which understands and categorizes expected mild deviations and norms from an implied standard Seli and Alfitri (2017, p. 53). Compared to American culture, the British culture finds humorous excitement in almost anything and everything within their society. According to Simon (2020), British culture seeks laughter to solve failure and misfortune, with the occasional witty, tongue-in-cheek comment, which is generally not meant to be mean-spirited or offensive statements. The creation and resolution of incongruity within conversations and engagement may easily be resolved by asking the joke and simply responding.

METHODOLOGY

The research uses secondary data sources to compare how Americans and the British use humor to communicate. It primarily uses television shows and blogs to show the similarities and differences in how the two cultures use humor. The research uses *Reductress*, an American blog that claims to be the first and only satirical women's magazine and the most popular humor site on the internet. The blog is titled *"Oh No! My Barista Thinks I'm Straight, Even Though I am"* Horgan (2021). It is compared to a U.K. blog from Parental Parody written by an anonymous parent on her experiences of parenthood. The blog's title is *"The Leaning Tower of Lego Pisa and an epic catastrophe."* Parody (2019). Blogs are commonly used to reflect everyday experiences

and present an authentic view of how humor is used in British and American cultures. They are an excellent source of information for the preferred choice of humor for the respective countries.

The study also compares American and British humor using comedy films and television shows between the two countries. *"The Office,"* originally a British television show that was adapted into an American version with the same name, is used to show the differences in how the two countries perceive humor Guirguis (2021). Furthermore, it considers the types of humor popular in the two countries by viewing the content delivered by the top comedians in the respective nations. The research mainly focuses on Sacha Baron Cohen's movies, popular among the British Dobuzinskis (2008). The content of Sacha Cohen's comedies will be compared to Will Ferrell's movies which are popular in the U.S. therefore considered to be the ideal humor for Americans. Movies and television shows are an essential part of modern society and reflect the cultures of different countries. Evaluating the difference between the content of the most popular comedy movies in the U.K. and the U.S. aids in determining how the two countries' senses of humor differ.

The research explores the content of the aforementioned blogs and movies to compare British and American senses of humor. It uses elements of British and American culture as portrayed and represented in the selected blogs and cinema work to compare and contrast the preference and reactions of the British and Americans to different kinds of humor. The content of the preferred blogs, movies, and television shows in America and the U.K. has been qualitatively evaluated to determine their similarities and differences. The secondary sources of data used in the study represent the cultures of the two countries. The purpose of using humor in these sources is assessed to determine the different reasons why the British and Americans use humor. Humor is heavily influenced by culture. It is important to note that culture is a dynamic component of society and changes with time. Therefore, care was taken to ensure that the study uses recent secondary data sources to capture the contemporary use of humor between the two cultures. The data collected from the study has been qualitatively assessed to find whether they fit into the preconceived notions of how American and British humor is different. This form a base to help the study determine whether there are differences between the two countries' senses of humor and, if true, to what extent they are different.

ANALYSIS

The research analyzes the data sources based on whether they contain self-enhancing, self-deprecating, affiliative, or aggressive forms of humor. According to Malecka and Grzegorzewska (2017, p. 164), self-enhancing humor entails the ability to laugh at oneself, for example, an individual making jokes about a bad situation that happened to them. Self-defeating humor involves individuals putting themselves down in an aggressive fashion. It is generally considered to be an unhealthy form of humor. Affiliative humor involves expressing jokes that everyone might find funny. Its main aim is to bring people together by creating a sense of fellowship, happiness, and well-being. Finally, aggressive humor involves put-downs or insults targeted towards individuals. It is commonly referred to as the "language of bullies," and some people might find it offensive.

In the blog *"Oh No! My Barista Thinks I'm Straight, Even Though I am"*, the author writes of the dynamics of sexual orientation in America and how the LGBT community is considered good. She uses humor to highlight how these sexual orientations are considered to be better in America. However, most of the humor is directed at the barista, as is typical of American humor.

The author also writes that "This is 2021! It is embarrassing to be straight". This shows that American humor usually is socially conscious as people seek not to offend others. Humor in the U.S. has to be politically correct. This is different from the British blog "*The Leaning Tower of Lego Pisa and an epic catastrophe*," where the author takes digs at herself without any inhibitions. She openly talks of her parenting failures, a subject that may be extremely uncomfortable for American parents to talk about. The British use humor to talk about their insecurities and poke fun at others in ways considered offensive or inappropriate in the U.S. As seen from the blogs, British humor is freer and is rarely toned down to meet social expectations.

Will Ferrell's movies such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* contains aggressive absurdity with quotable punch lines. This shows that American humor tends to be more individualistic than British humor and emphasizes the performance, using hyperbole and silly antics to exaggerate the performance. American humor is open and is usually unbiased concerning social constructs such as hierarchy. However, through sarcasm and irony, it is less common for American humor to satirize systems considered above criticism, such as social, patriotism, or national security Chen and Ayoun (2021, p. 18). Americans generally prefer observational techniques like stand-up comedians since it is witty comedy. They usually follow sarcastic or ironic remarks by qualifying comments such as "Just kidding." On the other hand, British humor tends to be based more on their culture. It also employs the use of satire and irony more often. It is often challenging to understand dry British wit since it is usually well-hidden and rhetoric. Besides, British humor contains silliness and slapstick. It is a reflection of the typically reserved demeanor of British Society. They frequently use irony and consider it a normal way of dispensing humor.

The British version of *The Office* shows that British humor is more biting and intelligent. It is a more artistic sense of humor. On the other hand, the American version of the show portrays that American humor is often playful and positive Guirguis (2021). English humor is often centered on an individual, and it is common to see comedians making fun of themselves. However, in America, people use sarcasm to look better than others, often making jokes at the expense of peers to look better. It is difficult for Americans to use humor when talking about their misfortunes because they are typically sensitive. The British commonly talk about bad things that have happened to them using humor. This can be seen from the Parental Parody blog, where the author talks of her bad parenting experiences. This would cause most Americans to sympathize with her, and they might even offer to help. However, it is a popular blog in the British Media, where people are more comfortable laughing at such bad experiences Parody (2019). The British are more comfortable using self-deprecating humor since it will be a source of mirth for their friends.

British humor is also more likely to be risky and offensive and would likely not be acceptable in the U.S. There is a popular misconception in the U.K. that Americans do not get irony. However, as seen from popular movies and television shows, including the U.S. version of *The Office*, Americans do get irony but do not find it funny in the same manner as the British Guirguis (2021). It is fair to say that British humor is comfortable being offensive and puerile while Americans only use humor to show off. Comparing the success of comedy movies between America and the U.K. also helps show the humor preferences between the two nations. The British prefer spontaneous and unscripted humor, as seen from Sacha Cohen's movies such as *Borat*. However, American humor is often more staged and scripted. It is also more obvious and slapstick Dobuzinskis (2008). As mentioned earlier, the British love to poke fun at themselves, their traditions, customs, and ways of doing things.

In contrast, Americans may regard this kind of humor as being unpatriotic. Humor in the U.S. has been toned down as American culture hurls towards being politically correct. As seen from the blog "*Oh No! My Barista Thinks I'm Straight, Even Though I am*", more and more people consider comments, slurs, and narratives to be personally offensive and an attack on their person even when they are delivered as humor Horgan (2021). The common ostracization of comedians proves this for their remarks in America. American humor is more censored, and people have to watch what they say about others, especially on topics such as race, weight, and sexual orientation, unlike in the U.K., where this kind of humor is generally acceptable and might not be seen as offensive.

The British use humor to tease each other. They also use sarcasm as a way of socializing with friends. As seen from Sacha Cohen's movie *Borat*, Americans view such mannerisms as socially awkward and can be interpreted as looking down on others. The U.K. and the U.S. versions of *The Office* have the David Brent and Michael Scott, respectively, as idiotic and oblivious bosses. However, the mannerisms of the two bosses serve to show the differences between how Americans and the British perceive humor Gervais, 2011). Michael Scott tends to ridicule his employees more intentionally and directly. This difference can be attributed to the fact that the British are more cynical than Americans Chen and Ayoun (2021, p. 15). They believe that good people get good fortune which is not the case in the U.K., which is generally more pessimistic. Therefore, the British are often pessimistic so as not to be disappointed by life. This is reflected in their unique sense of humor. In contrast, Americans are generally positive; hence have an over-the-top and exaggerated sense of humor. The distinct American humor is best portrayed by the exaggerated and silly impressions used in Will Ferrell movies Dobuzinskis, (2008). The actor relies on slapstick and absurdity in movies his movies and turns his characters into caricatures. Americans are humored by such characters because they are not aware of their silliness. This adds to the hilarity since the characters can comfortably make fun of themselves.

CONCLUSION

Humor and its cultural context can be conceptualized through communication and engagement, with the verbal range of humor categorizing from puns, comic anecdotes, quips, and jokes. Adult learning and human resource development argue that research is an exceptional tool for communication amongst individuals, which may disseminate information, teach new tasks, or encourage individuals to change their behavior or attitudes. Analyzing popular communication methods such as blogs and entertainment pieces such as movies and television shows helps reflect the difference between British and American humor and its use and efficacy in intercultural engagement and communications. The research illustrates the influence of humor in communication, borrowing insight from historical and cultural contexts emphasizing positive developments, which have facilitated the diffusion and awareness of humor as a significant cultural phenomenon. It has been established from the study that the common misconception that Americans do not understand British irony and sarcasm is false. They understand irony, but while it is the foundation of British humor, the American culture does not need to use it frequently. Americans also need to make their jokes more obvious and may even highlight the jokes in their communication, likely resulting from fear of offending others. The American sense of humor is generally slapstick than that in Britain, which can be attributed to the difference in culture between the two countries. American humor is more obvious and forward, while British jokes tend to be more subtle but with a dark, sarcastic undertone. It usually contains a hidden meaning that may

reflect the more reserved nature of British culture compared to American culture. It is important to note that the study might likely be biased due to ethnocentrism, where the researcher believes that one culture's sense of humor is better than the other.

The integration of theories in contextualizing the role and essence of humor between the British and American cultures supports the added clarification of rhetorical efficacy versus the ethical limitations of using humor. A significant knowledge gap exists in conceptualizing the role of humor in language and communication studies. This study encourages scholars to rethink the narrow existing conceptualization of the ancient philosophers' opinions and perspectives on humor by integrating a more contemporary focus. Notably, analyze the multiple intersections manifesting between the theoretical perspectives in exploring the interconnections and relationships influencing intercultural communication and engagement.

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