

Use of jokes at stores and its impact on the satisfaction of Indian customers

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<b>KEYWORDS</b> <i>Jokes, Marketing, Humour, Customer Satisfaction</i>	<b>ABSTRACT</b> This study investigates and compares the effects of incorporating jokes in face-to-face interactions between employees and customers on the customers’ shopping experiences in two different settings i.e. small retail outlets and stores in large shopping malls in India. Two separate studies were conducted in the year 2023-24, involving a total of 578 participants from four retail outlets and four stores from one large shopping mall in Delhi. The findings revealed distinct shopping experiences among customers in India. In the retail outlets, customers reported higher levels of satisfaction when employees used jokes during their conversations. Conversely, in large shopping malls, customers expressed lower levels of satisfaction when jokes were incorporated. Additionally, the results indicated that humorous interactions led to increased sales in retail outlets, but had no impact on sales in stores at large shopping malls. Furthermore, the perceived relevance of jokes differed between the two settings, with retail outlets experiencing an increase in perceived relevance, while those in large shopping malls showed no such effect. The study also demonstrated that older customers in retail outlets tended to develop a stronger emotional connection with employees when jokes were included in their interactions. On the other hand, customers in large shopping malls preferred to engage in shopping activities without any interference from store staff.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Humor plays an essential role in various aspects of human life, including marketing. Most studies on humor in marketing have focused on its use in advertising (Voutsas, 2024; Chang, 2021; Grougiou et al., 2020). Research suggests that humor in advertisements can significantly enhance audience attention (Brennan et al., 2020; Chang, 2021; Duncan, 1979; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992; Eisend, 2009). Additionally, humor positively influences customers' attitudes toward the advertisement itself (Hameed et al., 2020; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992) and the advertiser (Strick et al., 2017; Eisend, 2009; Weinberger & Gulas, 1992). Some scholars argue that a humorous experience in commercials can even drive purchase decisions (Chowdhury et al., 2021).

Despite the extensive research on humor in advertising, its role in direct, face-to-face interactions between employees and customers remains underexplored. While some studies have noted its use in retail settings (Gilliam et al., 2014; Gwinner et al., 1998; Locke, 1996; Pearce, 2009; Price et al., 1995; Ryoo, 2005), the findings have been mixed. For instance, Söderlund et al. (2017) found that humor in personal interactions did not enhance customer satisfaction and, in some cases, even reduced the perceived relevance of the message—though this was observed in a European context. Meanwhile, Sinha et al. (2003) highlighted that shopping in India is deeply rooted in cultural traditions, social bonds, and personal relationships, making it a rich, interactive experience rather than a mere transaction. Similarly, Arnould & Price (1993) emphasized that shopping can be an extraordinary, emotionally engaging experience shaped by customer-service provider interactions.

Although humor in service interactions has been studied in different global contexts, there is limited research on its specific impact in Indian retail settings. This study seeks to explore how humor used by retail employees influences customer satisfaction in traditional retail stores compared to large shopping malls. It examines whether humor affects customer



perceptions of interaction relevance and whether it influences impromptu purchase behavior in these environments. Furthermore, the study investigates whether humor helps build stronger emotional connections in retail stores, in contrast to the often more transactional nature of interactions in malls.

With this background, this research aims to answer following questions:

1. Does the use of humor by employees in retail stores and shopping malls have a similar impact on customer satisfaction?
2. Does humor influence customers' perception of interaction relevance in retail stores versus shopping malls?
3. Does humor impact the likelihood of customers making impromptu purchases in retail stores compared to shopping malls?
4. Does humor enhance the emotional connection between employees and customers in retail stores versus shopping malls?

### ***Jokes and Humor***

Humor in verbal communication takes many forms—puns, malapropisms, spoonerisms, and more. Among these, jokes stand out as a fundamental way to generate humor. Cohen (2005) defines jokes as verbal constructs designed to elicit laughter or amusement. Research suggests that jokes are inherently conditional, meaning their success depends on the shared knowledge, language, beliefs, and cultural context of both the joke-teller and the audience.

Attardo et al. (2011) identify two primary ways speakers introduce humor into conversations: (1) canned jokes, which are structured narratives ending in a punchline, and (2) conversational witticisms, or "jab lines," which are one-liners embedded within broader discussions. While humor in advertising and media has been extensively studied, research on joke-telling in commercial face-to-face interactions is relatively scarce (Gwinner et al., 1998; Locke, 1996; Pearce, 2009). Even more strikingly, no studies have specifically examined this phenomenon in the Indian retail context, a market known for its rich cultural diversity and distinct customer interactions. Given this gap, our study focuses on jokes as a prototypical form of verbal humor (Dynel, 2009).

### ***Use of Jokes in Face-to-Face Customer Interactions***

Given that humor is widely used in both advertising and direct customer interactions, it is reasonable to expect that it has some influence on customer experiences. However, humor is highly subjective, varying based on personal perceptions, cultural norms, and situational context (Kozbelt & Nishioka, 2010). Previous studies suggest that humor in face-to-face settings can reduce negative emotions (Locke, 1996), enhance rapport (Ryoo, 2005), build trust (Bergeron & Vachon, 2008; Lyttle, 2001), and offer social benefits to customers (Gwinner et al., 1998). However, not all research points to positive outcomes. Söderlund (2018) found that humor in face-to-face service encounters could negatively impact the perceived relevance of a message, particularly in European retail environments.

### ***Humor in the Indian Retail Context***

The Indian retail landscape presents a unique contrast between local retail outlets and modern shopping malls. Local retail stores are typically family-run businesses located in residential neighborhoods, where strong personal relationships exist between shop owners and customers. Shopping in these settings extends beyond transactions to social and cultural interactions, with conversations often including casual chit-chat, social gossip, and even political discussions.

In contrast, shopping malls are large, structured environments with numerous employees. They are frequented by middle-class professionals and families and designed for convenience and efficiency rather than social engagement. Customer-employee interaction is limited, as shoppers often prefer an independent experience. Given these differences, we propose the following hypothesis:

***H1: The use of jokes by employees in retail outlets enhances customer satisfaction, whereas this effect is less appreciated in shopping mall stores.***

Some studies suggest that humor can be disruptive in daily communication (Bell, 2009; Young, 2008; Evans et al., 2019). Specifically, humor embedded in a customer-employee exchange may reduce perceived relevance—the degree to which a message contributes to a clear understanding of its theme (Heckler & Childers, 1992; Lee & Mason, 1999). Research indicates that humor can lead to message discounting and customers may take the information less seriously (Nabi et al., 2007). Additionally, humor imposes a cognitive cost (Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003). Processing humor requires mental effort, which can increase cognitive load and distract from key information (Cantor & Venus, 1980).

However, in India, humor in conversations with local shop owners may serve a different purpose. It can act as an icebreaker, making discussions about products more engaging, help in image building, reinforcing the likability of the shop owner, and be used strategically to introduce new products in an informal manner. In contrast, shopping malls prioritize a self-service model where humor from employees may be perceived as unnecessary interference. Customers prefer to browse independently, and humor in conversations may even be seen as an interruption. Thus, we hypothesize:



***H2: The use of jokes does not alter perceived relevance in local retail outlets but reduces perceived relevance in shopping mall stores.***

In Indian local retail outlets, customers often rely on verbal interactions with shop owners to discover new products. Many small shops have limited display space and customers engage in conversations while waiting at the counter. This provides shop owners with opportunities to subtly promote new arrivals through friendly banter. An old Indian saying, "Shop owners who tell well, sell well," reflects this cultural dynamic. A well-timed joke can influence a customer to consider purchasing an item they hadn't planned on buying.

On the other hand, shopping malls offer a visually driven shopping experience. Customers freely browse aisles, compare prices, and make independent purchasing decisions. Employee recommendations—humorous or not—are less likely to influence impulsive buying. Thus, we hypothesize:

***H3: The use of jokes in conversations increases impromptu purchases in local retail outlets but does not significantly impact buying behavior in shopping malls.***

Humor in customer interactions is often an attempt by employees to build rapport (Mathies et al., 2016). In local retail outlets, where customers frequently return to the same shop, humor can strengthen long-term relationships. The attitude and personality of the shop owner play a crucial role in shaping customer loyalty (Priporas, 2002; Paridon et al., 2009).

However, in shopping malls, interactions are usually one-time encounters. Employees work in shifts, and customers rarely interact with the same staff member twice (Anselmsson, 2006). While occasional humorous exchanges may leave a positive impression, they are unlikely to establish deep emotional bonds. Thus, we hypothesize:

***H4: The use of humor by employees enhances emotional connection in local retail outlets, whereas customers in shopping malls maintain emotional distance.***

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

The study investigated the role of humor in face-to-face customer interactions across two distinct retail settings in New Delhi, India, during the year 2023-24. The first setup involved local retail outlets, which are typically family-owned stores where customers and shopkeepers share a close rapport. The second setup was a large shopping mall, where employees interact with customers in a more formal and structured manner.

The study was designed to adapt to Indian markets. Unlike previous studies that focused on a single store type, we examined humor's impact in two contrasting shopping environments. To test the effect of humor on impulsive buying behavior (H3), we introduced a new product in both the humor and non-humor conditions and observed whether customers purchased it. Instead of using pre-recorded humor or staged role-play experiments, we trained actual store employees to integrate jokes into their customer interactions, ensuring authenticity.

### ***Participants***

Customers visiting the selected local retail stores and shopping mall outlets were invited to participate voluntarily. To ensure linguistic consistency and accurate interpretation of humor, we included only native Hindi speakers. Participants were categorized into two age groups:

- Younger group: 18–35 years
- Older group: 36–60 years

Children (below 18 years) and senior citizens (above 60 years) were excluded from the study to control for variations in humor perception across different life stages.

### ***Experimental Procedure***

Employees of both local stores and shopping mall outlets underwent a two-week training program before the experiment. During training, they were guided on when and how to use jokes in customer interactions and instructed to maintain a consistent conversational style across all interactions.

Customers were randomly assigned to one of two conditions:

1. Jokes condition – Employees casually inserted light-hearted, generic jokes into their conversations with customers.
2. Non-jokes condition – Employees interacted normally without using humor.

After shopping, customers completed a short questionnaire to assess customer satisfaction, perceived relevance of conversations, emotional connection, and likelihood of revisiting the store.

### ***Measures***

Customer Satisfaction (H1)

To evaluate whether humor influenced customer satisfaction, participants responded to three 10-point scale questions:



1. How satisfied are you with the store? (1 = Very dissatisfied, 10 = Very satisfied)
2. To what extent does this store meet your expectations? (1 = Did not meet expectations at all, 10 = Completely met expectations)
3. Imagine a store that is perfect in all respects. How close to that ideal is this store? (1 = Very far, 10 = Cannot get any closer)

A higher mean score indicated greater customer satisfaction in that retail setting.

#### Perceived Relevance of Conversations (H2)

To measure the impact of humor on perceived relevance, we used a 10-point semantic differential scale based on previous studies (Söderlund et al., 2017; Ang, Lee & Leong, 2007; Krishnan & Chakravarti, 2003). Participants rated their experience using four adjective pairs:

1. "Few things were relevant – Many things were relevant"
2. "Weak connection to what I wanted to buy – Strong connection to what I wanted to buy"
3. "Low level of fit with the buying situation – High level of fit with the buying situation"
4. "Certain parts of the content were not appropriate – Most parts of the content were appropriate"

A higher score reflected greater perceived relevance, whereas a lower score indicated that humor may have distracted from the shopping experience.

#### Impulsive Buying Behavior (H3)

To assess whether humor influenced impulse buying, we introduced a new product in both conditions and recorded actual purchase behavior. Rather than asking customers directly, we obtained sales data from store owners, tracking the number of new items purchased in the jokes and non-jokes conditions.

#### Emotional Connection and Likelihood of Return (H4)

To assess the emotional impact of humor, participants answered two 10-point scale questions:

1. How do you feel after visiting the store? (1 = Very bad, 10 = Very good)
2. Would you like to visit the store again? (1 = Never, 10 = Very much)

A higher mean score indicated a stronger emotional connection with the store and a greater likelihood of repeat visits.

#### Controls

Several factors were controlled to ensure that humor perception was not influenced by external variables:

- Standardized employee behavior: All employees followed the same customer interaction script, with humor being the only variable.
- Consistent interaction length: Employees were instructed to keep interactions brief and uniform across conditions.
- Balanced demographics: Customers were divided into two age categories (18–35 and 36–60) to control for age-related differences in humor appreciation.
- Language uniformity: Since humor perception is language-dependent, only native Hindi speakers were included in the study.

### 3. STUDY 1.

Study 1 was conducted in the Indian capital city Delhi. Being the largest city of India, it is a melting pot of diverse cultures, languages, and traditions from across the country, reflecting a rich tapestry of the nation's varied demographics. It also has thousands of local retail outlets. Some of them in the old city are more than 100 years old. For this study we chose 4 outlets in four different localities of the city. The choice to focus on a small number of outlet units was driven by the need for in-depth analysis and the practical constraints associated with conducting comprehensive face-to-face research. Out of these four outlets, 2 were older than 20 years and 2 were relatively newer ones. All the owners of the shops were males (average age 46.2 years; SD=3.4 years). The owners of the shops agreed to conduct the study. The duration of the study was 4 months.

#### Participants

A total of 354 (174 Females and 180 Males) were examined in this study. Participants were divided into two groups. The first group included participants between 18-35 (175) and the second group included participants between 36-60 (179). The average age of participants in the first group was 26.8 years (SD=5.9 years). The average age of participants in the second group was 52.2 years (SD=4.6 years). All the participants gave their consent in writing before answering the questions.



### Stimulus material

A total of 10 general jokes in Hindi were given to shop owners. All the jokes were 2-3 lines long. For example (*Sir, yeh naye chips try kijiye. Aaj kal ke chips bhi students jaise ho gaye hain! Patle hain, tez hain, aur zyada der tak nahi tikte!*) Sir, try these new chips. These days, even chips are like students—thin, sharp, and don't last very long! Another example is (*Bhai, naye chips aaye hain, ekdum chatpate! Bas ek baar kha lo, fir mohalle mein bataana padega ki hasi ruk nahi rahi!*) Brother, new chips have arrived—super spicy! Just have one, and you'll have to tell the whole neighborhood that you can't stop laughing! These jokes were not particularly related to current affairs or any ideologies.

### Procedure

A between-subjects experiment was conducted to assess H1–H4. The experimental design comprised a joke factor with two levels: (1) Joke condition, (2) Non-joke condition. For the manipulations, we used a text-based approach involving an employee–customer encounter in a retail setting. Similar approaches have been used frequently in previous research (e.g. Bitner 1990; Karande et al., 2007; Söderlund and Rosengren, 2008), and one main advantage is that they allow for homogenous treatments within treatment groups (and control of other factors).

The study was conducted on the shop floor. The shop employees consented to participate in the experiment. The experimenter provided the employee a list of 10 generic jokes. They were asked to use them (in joke condition) and not to use them (in non-joke condition) with customers while offering a new product. The new product was a recently launched Potato chips pack from a local brand. The product costed 20 INR (0.24 US Dollar). It is to be noted that in local stores, customers come with a specific list of items. The shop owner was asked to use the jokes randomly in such a way that it was embedded in the interaction and presentation of new items. The shop owner practiced these jokes with the experimenter for two weeks. The actual experiment started after a two weeks of pilot study in which the shop owner practiced with customers (these customers were not used in the actual experiment). This practice trial ensured a natural interaction between the shop owner and the customers. The shop owner was paid for his participation in the study.

In the experiment condition, the shop owner greeted the customer as usual. After serving them with their demands, he offered them the product with an introduction of the product in which he either used a joke (joke condition) or did not use the joke (non-joke condition). After the transaction was over and the customer had paid to the shop owner, the experimenter outside of the shop collected the responses from the participants. Participants were not aware of the experiment and its objectives, nor were they paid for their responses.

### Results of Study 1

The mean satisfaction scores in joke condition for age group 1 was higher ( $M=7.3$ ;  $SD=0.49$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=5.2$ ;  $SD=0.76$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(173)=2.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . The mean satisfaction score for the age group 2 was higher ( $M=8.7$ ;  $SD=0.69$ ) as compared to non joke condition ( $M=6.2$ ;  $SD=0.35$ ). This difference was statistically significant  $t(179)=3.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This result supports the H1.

The mean relevance score in joke condition for age group 1 was slightly higher ( $M=6.7$ ;  $SD=0.13$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=5.9$ ;  $SD=0.46$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(173)=1.65$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The mean relevance score for the age group 2 was 7.2 ( $SD=0.61$ ) and for non-joke conditions it was 6.9;  $SD=0.55$ ). This difference was statistically non-significant  $t(179)=1.23$ ,  $p = 0.11$ . This result supports the H2.

12% of customers bought the new item in age group 1 in joke condition as compared to .09% in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically non-significant. Similarly, 46% of customers in age group 2 bought new items as compared to 24% of customers in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(173)=3.26$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This result supports the H3.

The mean emotion rating in joke condition for age group 1 was slightly higher ( $M=4.8$ ;  $SD=0.17$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=4.6$ ;  $SD=0.27$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(173)=2.36$   $p < 0.01$ . The mean emotion rating for the age group 2 was very high ( $M=8.4$ ;  $SD=0.57$ ) as compared to non-joke condition ( $M=5.3$ ;  $SD=0.42$ ). This difference was statistically significant  $t(179)=3.17$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . This result supports the H4.

Hypothesis	Items	n	Age Group 1 18 years - 35 years		Age Group 2 35 years - 60 years			
			M	SD	M	SD	t	p
H1	Joke Condition	173	7.3	0.49	8.7	0.69	2.34	<0.01





	Non-Joke Condition	179	5.2	0.76	6.2	0.35	3.13	<0.001
H2	Joke Condition	173	6.7	0.13	7.2	0.61	1.65	<0.05
	Non-Joke Condition	179	5.9	0.46	6.9	0.55	1.23	0.11
H3	Joke Condition	173	0.12	0.02	0.46	0.03	3.26	<0.001
	Non-Joke Condition	179	0.09	0.02	0.24	0.03	4.45	<0.001
H4	Joke Condition	173	4.8	0.17	8.4	0.57	2.36	<0.01
	Non-Joke Condition	179	4.6	0.27	5.3	0.42	3.17	<0.001

**Table 1: Response of Participants in study 1**

We also found that for age group 2 in joke condition significantly correlated with emotion rating in joke condition  $r(173) = 0.195$   $p = 0.01$ . Whereas in all other conditions, the correlation was statistically non-significant.

#### Findings

The results indicated that customers, in general, reported higher satisfaction scores when shop owners incorporated jokes into their conversations. However, we observed a significantly higher level of satisfaction in age group 2 compared to age group 1. Additionally, the use of jokes had a positive impact on the sale of items specifically for customers in age group 2, whereas its effect on sales was not as pronounced for customers in age group 1. Furthermore, it was found that the use of jokes developed a positive emotional connection with customers, particularly with those in age group 2.

## 4. STUDY 2

This study was also conducted in the Indian capital city Delhi. For this study we chose a branded chain shop in a locality. It was a grocery store called Reliance smart (owned by Reliance company). Branded chain stores are different from local retail outlets in the sense that these stores have multiple employees. The interaction in these shops is very less. The only interaction they have is at the billing counter or when the customer is looking for something specific and unable to find it. We spoke to the store manager, and he assigned one of the employees to conduct the study. The employee was paid for his/her contribution.

#### Participants

A total of 224 (110 Females and 114 Males) were examined in this study. Participants were divided into two groups. The first group included participants between 18-35 (107) and the second group included participants between 36-60 (117). The average age of participants in the first group was 24.8 years ( $SD=3.6$  years). The average age of participants in the second group was 49.2 years ( $SD=6.6$  years). All the participants gave their consent in writing before answering the questions.

#### Stimulus material

A total of 10 general jokes in Hindi were given to shop owners. All the jokes were 2-3 lines long. For example (*Sir, yeh naye chips try kijiye. Aaj kal ke chips bhi students jaise ho gaye hain! Patle hain, tez hain, aur zyada der tak nahi tikte!*) Sir, try these new chips. These days, even chips are like students—thin, sharp, and don't last very long! Another example is (*Bhai, naye chips aaye hain, ekdum chatpate! Bas ek baar kha lo, fir mohalle mein bataana padega ki hasi ruk nahi rahi!*) Brother, new chips have arrived—super spicy! Just have one, and you'll have to tell the whole neighborhood that you can't stop laughing! These jokes were not particularly related to current affairs or any ideologies.

#### Procedure

The study was conducted on the shop floor. The experimenter provided the selected employee a list of 10 generic jokes. The employee was asked to use them (in joke condition) and not use them (in non-joke condition) with customers while offering a new product. The new product was a recently launched Potato chips pack from a local brand. The product costed 20 INR (0.24 US Dollar). The employee was asked to use the jokes randomly in such a way that it was embedded in the interaction



and presentation of new items. The employee practised these jokes with the experimenter for two weeks. The actual experiment started after a two weeks of pilot study in which the shop owner practised with customers (these customers were not used in the actual experiment). This practice trial ensured a natural interaction between the shop owner and the customers.

After the interaction with the employee, the customers were examined outside of the shop by the experimenter. Participants gave their written consent before registering their responses. They were not told about the objective of the study prior to the questioning. After responding to the basic questions they were asked to respond as in study 1.

### Results of Study 2

The mean satisfaction scores in joke condition for age group 1 was lesser ( $M=5.2$ ;  $SD=0.59$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=6.6$ ;  $SD=0.46$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(105)=2.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . The mean satisfaction score for the age group 2 was slightly higher ( $M=6.9$ ;  $SD=0.41$ ) as compared to non-joke conditions ( $M=6.6$ ;  $SD=0.62$ ). This difference was statistically non-significant  $t(115)=1.29$ ,  $p = 0.10$ . This result supports the H1.

The mean relevance score in joke condition for age group 1 was lesser ( $M=4.6$ ;  $SD=0.27$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=6.1$ ;  $SD=0.36$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically significant  $t(105)=3.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . The mean relevance score for the age group 2 was 4.9 ( $SD=0.43$ ) and for non-joke conditions it was 4.7 ( $SD=0.35$ ). This difference was statistically non-significant  $t(115)=1.04$ ,  $p = 0.15$ . This result supports the H2.

04% of customers bought the new item in age group 1 in joke condition as compared to 5.98% in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically non-significant. Similarly, 3.41% of customers in age group 2 bought new items as compared to 4.67% of customers in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically non-significant. Thus H3 is supported.

The mean emotion rating in joke condition for age group 1 was slightly higher ( $M=4.6$ ;  $SD=0.25$ ) than in non-joke condition ( $M=4.3$ ;  $SD=0.29$ ) in non-joke condition. This difference was statistically non-significant  $t(105)=1.29$ ,  $p < 0.10$ . The mean emotion rating for the age group 2 was high ( $M=6.4$ ;  $SD=0.32$ ) as compared to non joke condition ( $M=5.1$ ;  $SD=0.37$ ). This difference was statistically significant  $t(115)=2.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ . While the H4 is rejected for the age group 2, H3 is supported for the age group 1. No score correlated with any other score in this study

Hypothesis	Items	n	Age Group 1 18 years - 35 years		Age Group 2 35 years - 60 years			
			M	SD	M	SD	t	p
H1	Joke Condition	105	5.2	0.59	6.6	0.46	2.36	<0.01
	Non-Joke Condition	115	6.9	0.41	6.6	0.62	1.29	0.10
H2	Joke Condition	105	4.6	0.27	4.9	0.43	3.16	<0.001
	Non-Joke Condition	115	6.1	0.36	4.7	0.35	1.04	0.15
H3	Joke Condition	105	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.01	0.64	0.05
	Non-Joke Condition	115	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.02	0.45	0.05
H4	Joke Condition	105	4.6	0.25	6.4	0.32	1.29	<0.10
	Non-Joke Condition	115	4.3	0.29	5.1	0.37	2.35	<0.01

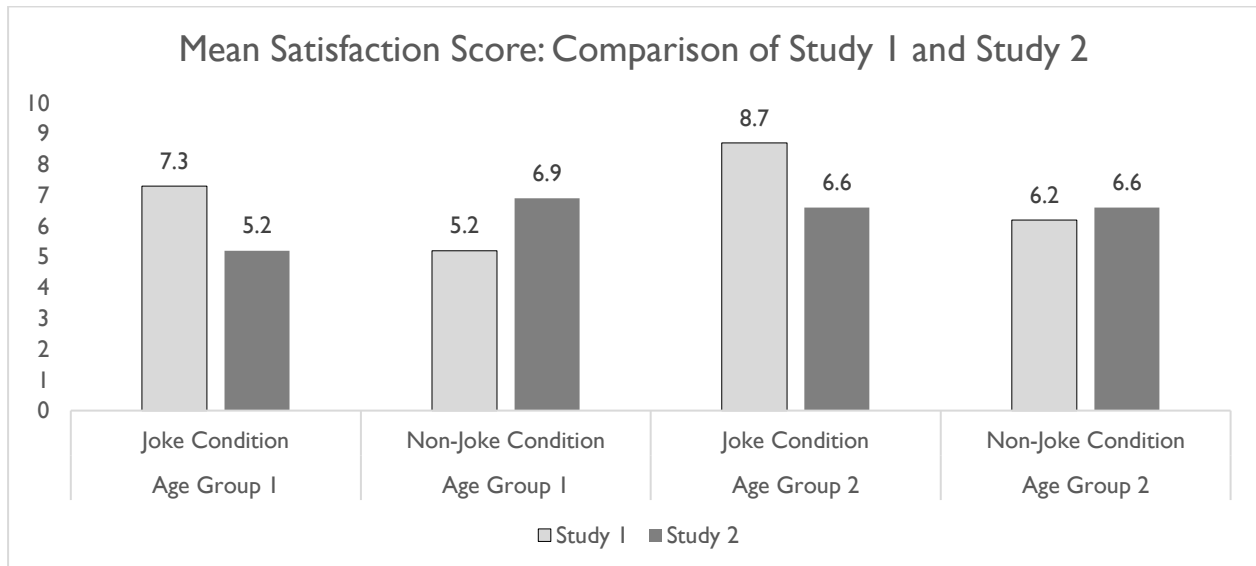
**Table 2: Response of Participants in study 2**



### Findings

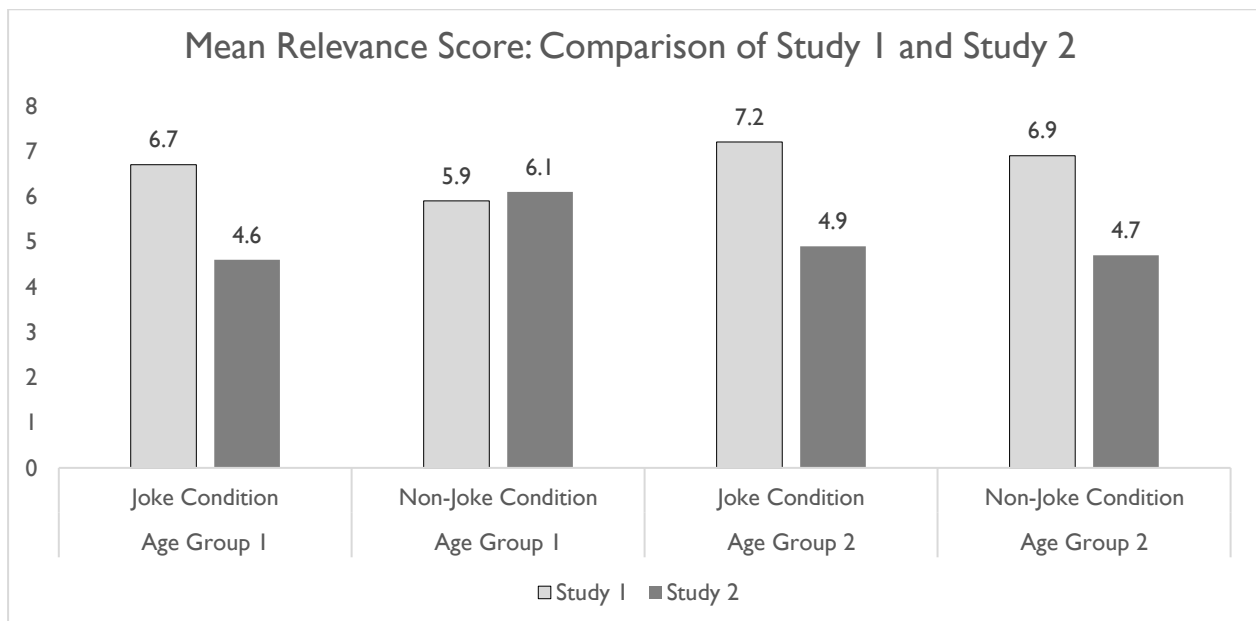
The findings indicated that there was no significant difference in satisfaction levels between the joke and non-joke conditions for age group 2. Therefore, it can be concluded that the use of jokes had no impact on their satisfaction. However, for age group 1, the use of jokes decreased the overall satisfaction score. Furthermore, we observed that the use of jokes by employees in shopping malls decreased the perceived relevance score for both age groups. Additionally, the use of jokes did not have a significant impact on sales in general. However, it was found that the use of jokes by employees did have an impact on the emotional rating of age group 2.

Comparison of Study 1 and Study 2:



**Figure 1: The impact of humor on satisfaction**

Both age groups demonstrate that incorporating jokes into conversations significantly enhances satisfaction compared to conversations without jokes. H1 is supported, as the differences in satisfaction scores between the joke and non-joke conditions are statistically significant across both age groups.



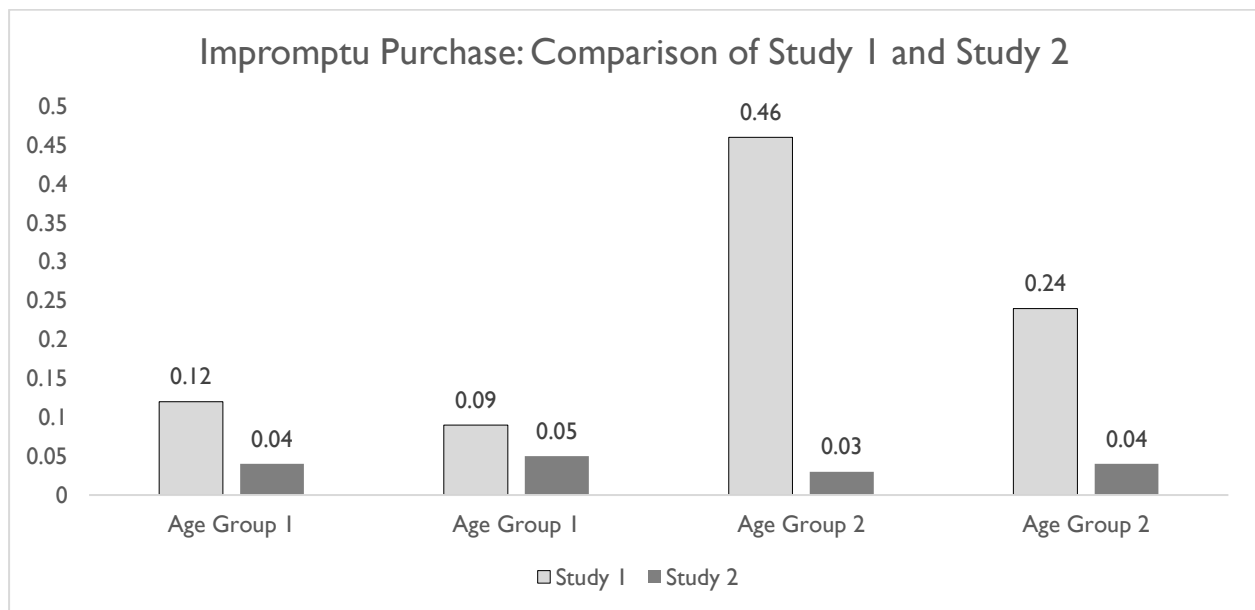
**Figure 2: Effects of humor on relevance**

Study 1 indicates a positive impact on relevance for younger individuals (age group 1), while Study 2 reveals a negative effect. These findings suggest differing influences of humor on relevance. In both studies, jokes had a minimal and non-





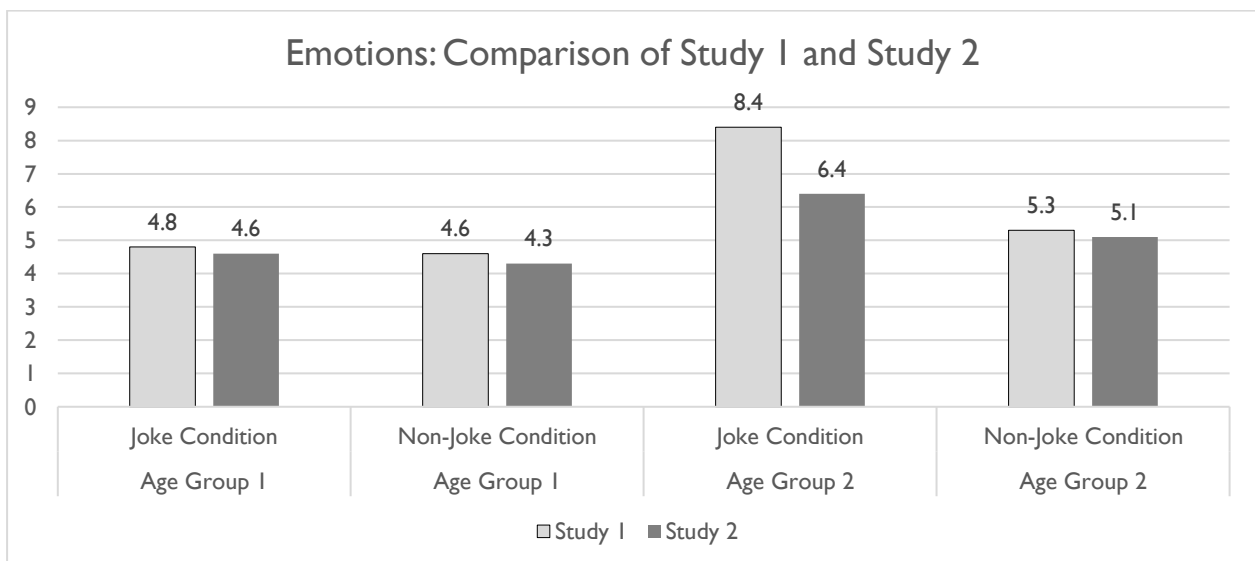
significant effect on relevance for older individuals (age group 2), highlighting variations in how humor is perceived across different contexts.



**Figure 3: Effect on Impromptu Purchases**

For Age Group 1, jokes had no significant impact on impromptu purchases, as the difference between the joke and non-joke conditions was not statistically meaningful.

In contrast, for Age Group 2, jokes significantly increased the likelihood of impromptu purchases, with a substantial difference between the two conditions.



**Figure 4: Effects of humor on Emotions**

Both studies found that jokes significantly enhanced emotional ratings, though the effect was more pronounced in Study 1 than in Study 2. The findings suggest that jokes had a stronger and more consistent emotional impact in Study 1, particularly for Age Group 2, whereas in Study 2, the effect was weaker or non-significant, especially for Age Group 1.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study explored the role of humor in face-to-face interactions between employees and customers in an Indian retail context. The findings indicate that the use of jokes enhances customer satisfaction in local retail outlets, whereas it reduces satisfaction in large shopping malls, confirming our initial hypothesis.



Notably, customer satisfaction scores were significantly higher when employees in local retail outlets incorporated jokes into their conversations. A key cultural factor influencing this result is the strong preference for local shopping in India. Local retail outlets, typically family-run businesses, serve as neighborhood hubs where shop owners cultivate long-term relationships with customers. Previous research has shown that various employee behaviors and characteristics, such as friendliness and enthusiasm, influence customer satisfaction in face-to-face encounters (Bitner et al., 1990). Our findings suggest that humor is one such characteristic, strengthening customer-shopkeeper bonds and increasing satisfaction levels.

Several studies have emphasized the importance of conversational content in shaping customer perceptions (Price et al., 1995; Gwinner et al., 1998; Grewal et al., 2002; Haas & Kenning, 2014). Our results align with these findings, highlighting how the inclusion of humor in employee-customer interactions fosters a more engaging and enjoyable shopping experience.

We observed a positive correlation between customer satisfaction and emotional ratings. Customers perceived humor as a social tool that strengthened personal connections with shop owners. Many participants reported that jokes created a warm and friendly atmosphere, making their shopping experience more enjoyable.

Subjective responses further revealed that humorous shop owners often went beyond standard customer service expectations. For example, some customers noted that a friendly and humorous shopkeeper was more likely to source out-of-stock products upon request, offer short-term credit to regular customers, and provide home delivery for trusted customers. These additional services enhance customer loyalty, reinforcing the idea that humor not only increases satisfaction but also fosters trust. Our observations suggest that many local shop owners intentionally use humor as a means to encourage repeat visits and build rapport with customers.

Our analysis found that older customers (36–60 years old) had significantly higher satisfaction scores in humor conditions compared to younger customers (18–35 years old). Several possible explanations emerge from customer feedback. Older customers prefer lively social interactions and engage more in face-to-face conversations, especially with people of similar age. Younger customers, by contrast, prefer digital interactions and tend to avoid extended conversations during shopping. Shopkeepers often initiated discussions on current affairs or politics, which older customers enjoyed and actively participated in, whereas younger customers preferred to disengage from such topics.

These results suggest that humor not only influences satisfaction but also fosters emotional connections, particularly among older customers. Interestingly, this pattern was not observed in big shopping malls, where customers generally preferred shorter, transaction-focused interactions.

We also found that male and female customers reacted differently to humor in local retail outlets (Study 1), but not in shopping malls (Study 2). Male customers reported higher satisfaction in joke conditions, whereas female customers reported lower satisfaction in joke conditions. This pattern may be culturally driven. In India, male-female interactions in local shop settings are common but often remain transaction-focused rather than socially engaging. Many female customers (mostly homemakers) mentioned that they preferred quick transactions and did not have time for casual conversations. In contrast, male customers were more likely to engage in discussions that extended beyond the transaction, including topics like local news, politics, and economic conditions.

Additionally, all shop owners in the local retail outlet sample were male, which may have further influenced female customers' discomfort with humor-based interactions. Future research could explore whether same-gender interactions (e.g., female shop owners and female customers) would yield different satisfaction ratings.

In Study 2, customers in big shopping malls reported significantly lower satisfaction in joke conditions compared to non-joke conditions. This result aligns with previous studies (Söderlund, 2017; 2018) and is further supported by the following findings. Customers' emotional ratings were lower in joke conditions, and perceived relevance scores were also lower in joke conditions.

Prior research has suggested multiple reasons for the negative impact of humor in certain retail contexts. Humor may reduce an employee's perceived trustworthiness (Bressler & Balshine, 2006). Jokes require additional cognitive effort from customers, which may reduce overall satisfaction (Sujan et al., 1986). A customer's personal humor preference affects their perception of humor from others (Martin & Lefcourt, 1983; Martin, 2001). Personality traits, such as conservatism and tolerance for ambiguity, influence reactions to humor (Ruch et al., 1990; Ruch & Rath, 1993).

Unlike local stores, big shopping malls in India are primarily entertainment spaces. Families visit malls for movies, dining, and leisure, with shopping often playing a secondary role. In such environments, any unnecessary conversation—including jokes—may be perceived as a distraction rather than an enhancement to the experience. This observation is supported by the low satisfaction scores in both joke and non-joke conditions, suggesting that mall customers generally prefer minimal interaction with store employees.

We also tested H3, which predicted that humor increases impulse purchases in local outlets. The findings support this hypothesis. Customers were more likely to buy newly introduced products in joke conditions. Older customers were particularly responsive, demonstrating a higher likelihood of purchasing the new product when humor was used.



This suggests that humor not only enhances satisfaction but also builds trust, making customers more open to trying new products. Interestingly, despite low relevance scores, customers still made purchases. This indicates that the decision to buy was influenced more by the social experience than by the joke's connection to the product.

Conversely, in big shopping malls, humor had no effect on impulse buying. Younger customers, in particular, were more critical of unsolicited humor and did not engage in impulse purchases based on humor alone.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The findings of our study confirm that incorporating jokes into face-to-face communication within local retail outlets in India has a positive impact on customer satisfaction, sales of new items, and the establishment of an emotional connection with customers. However, the results differed in stores located in big shopping malls. Our research indicates that humor used by store employees in large shopping malls does not enhance overall customer satisfaction. This contrast highlights a significant difference in customer expectations and shopping experiences across these two retail environments.

Local retail outlets serve as neighborhood hubs where customers, particularly older ones, engage in social interactions, fostering a sense of familiarity and belonging. In this setting, humor strengthens personal connections and enhances the overall shopping experience. In contrast, big shopping malls function as spaces primarily for personal or family outings. Customers visiting these malls seek uninterrupted time with loved ones, often perceiving interactions with store employees—whether humorous or not—as disruptions to their private shopping experience.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Our study collected immediate responses from customers following their interactions with shop employees. However, some customers—especially in local retail outlets—may have had pre-existing relationships with the employees, which could have influenced their responses. To gain deeper insights, future research should examine the long-term effects of humor in customer interactions and explore whether repeated exposure to humor enhances or diminishes its impact over time.

Additionally, employees in our study were instructed to incorporate jokes into their conversations after undergoing two weeks of training. While they were advised to keep interactions brief after the transaction was complete, some conversations naturally extended beyond that point. The effect of humor used after a purchase was not specifically measured but could be a valuable avenue for future research. Investigating whether post-transaction humor influences customer satisfaction and loyalty could provide further insights into the role of humor in retail settings.

Another limitation of our study is that we collected responses from individuals rather than entire shopping groups. In cases where a single representative from a family or group provided feedback, we assumed their responses reflected the group's overall experience. However, our findings suggest gender-based differences in customer experiences, which raises the possibility that the representative's gender influenced their personal evaluation rather than capturing the perspectives of the entire group. Future research could analyze group-based responses to better understand the collective dynamics of customer satisfaction.

Lastly, conducting similar studies in other metropolitan cities across India could help determine how customer satisfaction and humor's role in retail interactions vary across diverse urban contexts. Examining cities like Mumbai, Bangalore, and Chennai would provide a broader perspective on how regional cultural differences and market conditions shape customer experiences. Such research could offer valuable insights into tailoring employee communication strategies to different consumer preferences across India's varied retail landscapes.

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