

What makes modern Britain laugh? How semiotics helped the BBC bridge the Humor Gap

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Abstract

In 2018, BBC Marketing and Audiences approached semiotic agencies with a challenging brief. They wanted to know the following: *What makes modern Britain laugh?* The BBC's younger audiences have been steadily drifting to other platforms and broadcasters to satisfy their need for “funny stuff.” Brands that successfully leverage humor really resonate with this new modern mainstream audience, for example, Netflix, BuzzFeed, YouTube, Snapchat, and so on. The BBC, as part of its remit to continue to be a modern evolving brand, wanted to address this trend by understanding what types of comedy content convey a relatable sense of humor and how to best achieve this. The BBC required insight on the following key objectives:

- Identify key characteristics of content that younger audiences find funny;
- Explain how this compares with the preferences of the BBC's older audiences;
- Estimate how far the BBC brand can stretch in humor content across platform;
- Assess the need for innovation across BBC platforms to accommodate fresh content.

The project involved a multi-methodology approach, the centerpiece of which was a content analysis of 800 data points of consumer generated content derived from WhatsApp diaries. The semiotic analysis, informed by foundational thinking on humor schools and humor psychology, used an innovative hashtagging system to create a nuanced taxonomy of the mostly memes and viral videos with the primary types (e.g., #cringe, #pastiche, #awkwardness, #black humour, #satire, #schadenfreude etc.). The BBC received a comprehensive taxonomy of more than 50 humor types, a digest of levers of engagement for operationalising the humour, and maps for strategic channel positioning. The work has helped the BBC innovate in three core areas: rethinking their use of metadata for tagging comedy content on the iPlayer platform, modifying their tone of voice across all parts of the business, and in commissioning original comedy podcasts for the BBC Sounds app.

Keywords

brands, comedy, consumer-generated content, diaries, humor, memes, semiotics, youth

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Introduction

Semiotic thinking has traditionally been seen as a tool of brand strategy and communication by examination of the category or cultural codes that surround a brand. However, increasingly, media owners are turning to semiotics to inform their programming and content management and to inform commissioning too. The BBC Marketing and Audiences team has been an assiduous user of semiotics for some time. Semiotic agencies appointed onto its research framework roster are there to offer the deep qualitative insights the Corporation needs. These projects range in their scope from analyzing prospective channel idents for BBC2 and assessing imagery attached to news stories for BBC World Service through to digital trends for iPlayer. This case study shows the flexibility and inter-disciplinarity of applied semiotics as a methodology. It showcases the acuity of a semiotics lens in reading the hardest-to-read parts of culture and practical application of a semiotic content analysis to a complex area—*what makes us laugh*.

BBC's Humor Gap challenge

The BBC is known for its classic comedy: for example, *Fawlty Towers*, *Monty Python*, *Blackadder* and *The Office*. However, research had shown that audiences, especially younger ones, had steadily been drifting to other platforms and broadcasters to satisfy their need for “funny stuff.” In particular, this had eroded younger audiences’ positive perception and awareness of the BBC.

The business realized that a ‘relatable’ sense of humor is a vital property of modern brands like those successfully resonating with a young audience: Snapchat, BuzzFeed, YouTube, and so on.

However, the BBC realized that the challenge of getting “humor right” only through the lens of traditional forms of “comedy” content risked underplaying the breadth of the question. Their challenge was to gain a comprehensive overview of the types, forms, and tonality of content that meets the British need for humour. The client suspected that semiotics might be the answer.

Why semiotics? Well, semiotics excels at answering the big cultural questions like “what is the meaning of Britishness across the world?” and “how can we convey brand values through music and sound?” These are both projects Creative Semiotics has conducted for clients. In these cases, semiotics brings structure and clarity to what are chaotic, messy cultural domains.

Semiotics “joins the dots” and operates in the interstices providing a rich, holistic perspective.

Humor can be found dispersed across many different genres, styles, and formats. Semiotics is versatile and inter-disciplinary enough to cover the universe of humor; to see what is “funny” in music, internet memes, dramas, and consumer-generated content, as well as within comedy itself.

This is a critical advantage of using semiotics as a core methodology for studying humor.

Finally, semiotics is useful when encountering “unknown unknowns.” Of course, there are several “humor schools”: for example, theories root it in a human need for catharsis, one-upmanship, or a love of the absurd, but semiotics allows us to see patterns anew in what is deemed funny.

The BBC required insight into the following key objectives:

- Identify key characteristics of content that younger audiences find funny;
- Explain how this compares with the preferences of BBC’s older audiences;
- Estimate how far the BBC brand can stretch in humor content across platform;
- Assess the need for innovation across BBC platforms to accommodate new content.

The insight derived from this work was not to be confined to just one part of the business but was designed to inform commissioning needs to work across the following parts of the BBC:

- Comedy and Entertainment commissioning aiming for a family audience (TV);
- BBC Three’s existing remit to “make me laugh” (+ to commission more entertainment);
- Radio commissioning and podcast commission;
- Digital commissioning and content creation.

Preliminary culture scope enquiry

The semiotics study on the type of content being consumed by young audiences was to take place alongside qualitative research geared toward a granular investigation of need states, consumption occasions, and the media platforms on which audiences discover “funny” content.

Creative Semiotics was asked to collaborate with a research agency—MTM whose research was to generate the corpus of consumer-generated content for the semiotics analysis team.

While MTM recruited the sample and harvested data from respondents, Creative Semiotics embarked on some preliminary background research to spark off our initial thinking on humor.

We entered the project without any preconceived notions, but sought to review and interrogate existing theory so as to determine what frameworks would be most apt for analysis.

These are the most challenging, intense projects for any semiotic analyst because one needs to become a “shallow expert” in a short period of time. This entails accelerated learning to acquire a condensed digest on the smartest, most compelling current thinking on the subject as efficiently as possible: in this case, by blending expert interviews with a literature review.

Expert input

Expert interviews are perfect for such large culture scope projects such as examining humor. They are useful for two purposes: (a) to get an overview of the history and trends in a cultural area and (b) to get a short cut to sourcing the most relevant, insightful cultural texts for analysis. We chose five experts to be representative of UK humor. Two experienced stand-up comedians, a young writer, a comedian who runs a comedy podcast, and as an outside perspective a developmental psychologist who studies humor styles in school. From the comedians, we were seeking to sketch out the parameters of comedy and humor, what constitutes the spectrum of humor types and a snapshot of the trajectory of change within the comedy scene.

1. Marcus Brigstocke—Comedian, Writer;
2. Doc Brown—Comedian, Writer, Musician;
3. Stuart Goldsmith—Comedian, Podcaster;
4. Ambreen Razia—Comedian, Writer, Performer;
5. Dr. Claire Fox—Developmental Psychology.

Comedian interviews

It became clear during the interviews that stand-up comedy performers’ focus on pragmatic performance meant they had metabolized the ways to maximize funny on stage. The comedy types cited by our interviewees included a medley of formats (sketches, panels), joke writing techniques (unexpected endings), and genres (like surrealist) all rolled together. However, while they did recognize different styles, they downplayed their significance relative to the wondrous idiosyncrasy of each individual’s unique schtick and on stage persona. It seems that comedy had become for them an “unconscious competence” and perhaps not amenable to scientific examination in this way.

“Humour is what’s funny—comedy is the set of rules within which I communicate it.” (Marcus Brigstocke)

“Firstly, comedy is a contrivance. Humour is a natural human instinct—it is something that all human beings share . . . humour will always be funnier than comedy . . .” (Doc Brown)

There was, however, interesting insight drawn into the differences between comedy and humor.

Stuart Goldsmith made the interesting point that he saw a distinction between “clever” material and material that was “visceral and connected,” and while he much appreciated the former, the latter seemed more “fun” and satisfying to achieve. The expert interviews with comedians planted a seed on the visceral versus the intellectual: an insight that was echoed in the academic writing.

The next step was interviewing Claire Fox, developmental psychologist at the University of Keele. Dr Fox has been using the Humor Styles Questionnaire to explore peer group relationships at school and how individuals within social groups often mediate group dynamics by the use of different types of humor. In her work (Fox, Dean, Lyford; 2003), the four humor styles, self-enhancing, self-defeating, affiliative, and aggressive, are used to analyze how humor styles become adaptive coping mechanisms in social dynamics and can aid emotional resilience. The Humor Styles Questionnaire or “HSQ,” for short, has been a phenomenally successful assessment instrument, is endorsed by many scholars, and is a mainstay of humor research—with more than 125 published studies using the measure and more than 500 citations. This robust framework – which eventually inspired the x axis of the quadrant map – is based on the pioneering work of Canadian professor Rod Martin (2007) whose work would be proved to be increasingly influential as we proceeded to look for ways to “map” humor types.

Literature review

This was a combination of comedy overviews, academic papers, online articles, and comedy blogs. Within the literature surveyed, there were some useful texts that provided foundational thinking. These books included, for instance, Andrew Stott (2014) *Comedy: The New Critical Idiom* and Stephen Hoover (2013) *What’s So Funny? Theories of Comedy*. However, tellingly, there was nothing scholarly and credible on the subject of humor types.

Another clue to the tenor of the final work was an academic paper by Sam Friedman (2011) based on a survey examining contemporary comedy taste cultures at the Edinburgh fringe. The core insight was based on an extension of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) classic conception of “cultural capital.” Friedman found that high-brow comedy that challenges the audience is used as “embodied cultural capital” and flaunted by those who “get the joke” as an index of their cleverness versus a lower brow consumer group for whom “cleverness” of conception is not important and making them laugh is the main draw. This further primed us to factor in intellect as a humor marker.

By far the most useful ingredient within this Literature Review was the work of Professor Rod Martin, pioneering humor psychologist, at University of Western Ontario who is the most cited academic writing on humor. Martin’s classic text *The Psychology of Humour* (2007) is replete with scientific evidence but also a model of clarity. Professor Martin splits the phenomenon of humor into two parts, arguing that it contains both a cognitive and an emotional component (Martin & Kuiper, 2016).

The first is the cognitive aspects, namely the perception of incongruity . . . “bisociation” or “cognitive synergy.” . . . It seems to involve the simultaneous activation of two or more incompatible interpretations of a situation in the mind. It also tends to be associated with a playful, non-serious frame of mind and some degree of diminishment, in which things are viewed as being less important or admirable than they usually are . . .

Second, there is the emotional component. The cognitive processes activate a unique emotional response, which I refer to as “mirth.” . . . Mirth is related to joy but somewhat different because of the element of funniness involved. It is accompanied by activation of pleasure circuits in the limbic system as well as various autonomic and endocrine responses.

As we shall see, this cognitive (or intellectual) versus emotional (or visceral) binary formed the vertical axis for a map we eventually devised on which to plot humor types.

Super groups

At Creative Semiotics, we use so-called super groups (discussion groups comprising practitioners, semi-experts, leading edge consumers, and those proven to be knowledgeable in a subject) as well, to enrich the semiotics investigation. In this project, we believed there was merit in congregating up-and-coming comedians and comedy writers to gain their derive inspiration and perceptions on the changing nature of comedy, online humor, and consumer-generated content. We believed that those thinking most deeply about humor on a day-to-day basis would be able to substantiate our hypotheses on why older humor does not resonate as well with a younger target and what is emergent within humor types. So we convened both a male and female group of 20- to 30-year-old comedians, comediennes, and script writers. They were all given a pre-task to curate a selection of clips to help illustrate their sense of what emergent humor was, thus giving us a benchmark of sophistication by which to assess the mainstream.

Research design: consumer-generated content on WhatsApp

MTM, the research and strategy company delivering the qualitative research, sought to base their work in “evidence based” consumer input grounded in “actual,” rather than “claimed” behavior. They opted for a spontaneous personal consumption diary (capturing content, occasions, and context) via WhatsApp, building upon this with in-depth friendship WhatsApp group chats. MTM also conducted face-to-face research in Friendship Quads using this material as a springboard, but this was a separate stream and did not feed into the semiotics. The methodology was designed to capture all consumption occasions, passive and active—whether scrolling through Instagram, listening to Radio 1, or watching EastEnders, and traditional comedy shows; content was varied though the majority 85%+ was from online.

The sample included 14 different friendship triads split between London, Leeds, Nottingham, and Glasgow to ensure regional representation and with three age breaks of 12–16, 16–24, and 25–40 to ensure demographic diversity and enabling us to track generational shifts in humor.

Respondents were not screened for their affinity toward any particular kind of humor or taste in comedy but had to be able to speak confidently and articulately about what makes them laugh (Figure 1).

MTM methodology briefed the respondent participants’ task as follows.

Over the course of days 1–7 the respondent will be asked to submit examples from across each day of things that made them laugh, or that they found humorous, from any media source. They would be encouraged to submit these examples in different multimedia formats over the week—a mix a brief text description, a photo, video, screenshot or voice recording—which can be related to the content consumed, or just their personal preferences in how they wish to express why they found something amusing.

In the second part of the pre-task during days 8–10, each friendship quad or family unit will join up as a WhatsApp group to continue submitting examples of things they find funny. This allows us to explore how humour works on a group—as well as individual—level, giving us an insight into how their friends / family react to humour, and whether what they find funny changes in a group setting compared to an individual one.

	London	North	Midlands	Scotland
4 x c.1.5 hour friendship quads	Male 12-13	Female 13-14	Male 14-15	Female 15-16
	Mixed gender 16-17	Mixed gender 18-20	Mixed gender 21-24	Mixed gender 18-20
6 x 2 hour friendship quads	Mixed gender 21-24	Mixed gender 16-17		
4 x 1.5 hour family groups	Young family 25-30 (kids under 10)	Older family 31-40+ (kids 10+)	Young family 25-30 (kids under 10)	Older family 31-40+ (kids 10+)

Figure 1. MTM research sample grid for the qualitative research.

The data derived from the diaries consisted of raw humor content selected by the respondent across the week. These tended to be memes; viral videos; and Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook videos or clips from the TV but there were also some anecdotes, pub jokes, and everyday photos too.

Once the fieldwork was finished, MTM shared the annotated data with our semiotic analysts.

The content was stored in a Google Doc for each location, sorted into the following categories.

Group	Name	Gender	Age	Content type	Description	Why funny	File name
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MTM and Creative Semiotics were engaged in separate workstreams, and in the event, the thinking from the two independent streams only came together at the very end of the process.

Quantitative semiotic content analysis

What was shared with Creative Semiotics contained links amounting to more than 800 data points.

Because this was a semi-quantitative data set, we decided that a content analysis would be appropriate. Content analysis in market research can be defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Kassarjian, 1977).

The client question was geared to identifying the “types, forms and tonality of content.” This was a necessarily vague wording and actually it is fairly typical for such broad cultural scope projects which start with a host of “unknown unknowns.” “Types” of humor could mean satire or slapstick comedy. “Forms” of humor can relate to stand-up or sitcoms. “Tonality” could be seen as a synonym for *emotional timbre* and so could mean light-hearted or sardonic. As with all semiotic analysis, we approached the corpus armed with frameworks but aiming to engage with the material on its own terms, describing the content and its interpretive thrust on a “first pass” of material and taking rough notes as well as attempting to label each data unit. Every good semiotic analysis starts with this form of descriptive inventory (Arning, forthcoming), by which the analyst takes stock of what he sees, starts to detect soft signals, patterns and to formulate hypotheses. In this case, it was pretty clear that we needed to conduct a formal content analysis which would allow us to classify the humor content in some way, thematically on the basis of codes.

Typically, a semiotics project would work through sorting the material, brands, ads, or packs into a series of codes. In semiotics, a “code” is defined, as by Umberto Eco (1976) in *A Theory of*

Semiotics, as a correlational and combinational system of signs that conveys meaning. Codes operate effectively as shortcuts to meaning. In applied semiotics, we use pattern recognition to divide a subject domain up into these codes to see how they structure category dynamics and create differentiation among the brands in a marketplace. This now leads us to the vexed topic of categorization. Being part of the humanities and arts, and based on idiosyncrasy, we would *expect* humor to be constituted of malleable and expressive codes operating with weak, *implicit conventions* (Mollerup, 2006) rather than logical and rigid codes (c.f. genetic or traffic codes). But as we proceeded reviewing the material and found out just how connotatively rich, polysemous and intertextual humor ingredients were, we realized we needed to take a more radical and fine-grained approach to accounting for the humor found within each item.

Devising humor taxonomy via #Hashtags

Our analysts were briefed to label each content item with the humor types it belonged to. In this project, we were interested in the high-level patterns, so we privileged smart labeling over exhaustive description of minutiae or for example the semantic structure of each individual text.

Our attempts to classify the content made it clear that there was major overlap between humor types (e.g., pastiche and parody)—what cognitive scientists call “fuzzy sets” (Lakoff, 1987)—but also that most individual humorous pieces of content were ascribable to more than one type. To do justice to the richness and often the ambiguity of the material, we departed from normal practice and hashtagged each item reviewed to indicate what humor types most accounted for it being deemed funny. This was a method that fit the indeterminate, polysemous, and often ironic character of online humor, the richness of cultural references and borrowed a tagging system from social media for denoting trending topics, familiar to our young analysts.

Below, we offer a few examples of individual pieces of content selected from the corpus to shed light on the way the analysis team inventoried and hashtagged the materials.

Due to copyright issues, we have been only able to offer the URL links and not the images.

YouTube: mocking the hyperbole and “smack talking” of gangsta rappers and the impressionable nature of their audience with a spoof video that makes quite heavy use of #dramatic irony.

#PARODY, SPOOF, PASTICHE
 #HYPERBOLE / EXAGGERATION
 #ECCENTRIC MANNERISMS
 #VERBAL HUMOUR
 #DRAMATIC IRONY

Instagram meme: spoofing a scene in Star Wars and pairing it with a well-known dance from the 1990s—*La Macarena*—which was a choreographed dance with various set moves to it.

#INTER-TEXTUALITY
 #SILLYNESS, CHEESINESS
 #INCONGRUOUS JUXTAPOSITION
 #OBSERVATIONAL DETAIL
 #VISUAL HUMOUR

Video—*Take On Me* girl: Video of nerdy girl dramatically turning and grinning set to classic Aha hit *Take On Me* repeated on a loop during the song. Laughing at random and nerdy appearance.

#RANDOMNESS/ ABSURDITY
 #SILLINESS / CHEESINESS
 #ECCENTRIC MANNERISMS
 #VISUAL HUMOUR
 #CROSS MODAL JUXTAPOSITION

Instagram Meme: Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet reprise their roles in Titanic juxtaposed into a pothole and submerged in a way they probably would not normally be to show Britain's pothole problem. Laughing at the improbably juxtaposition of romantic film and mundane British life.

#ADAPTATION / REFERENTIAL
 #CRAPNESS/RUBBISHNESS
 #DISPARAGEMENT
 #BLACK HUMOUR
 #INCONGRUITY, THE UNCANNY

Shows UFC fighter Conor McGregor “bowling” (swaggering in an exaggeratedly confident and macho way) around the ring in an exalted way—along with caption “My level of cockiness after someone asks me to open a jar for them and I succeed” Laughing at the gap between mundane deed and level of arrogance derived from it.

#HYPERBOLE / EXAGGERATION
 #ECCENTRIC MANNERISMS
 #HUMAN FOIBLES (OBSESSION, RIGIDITY, LACK OF AWARENESS)
 #INTER-TEXTUALITY (CONOR MCGREGOR)
 #DRAMATIC IRONY

Meme—mummy profiles. Series of descriptions of different stereotypical “mum” personalities. Laughing at the relatability, stereotypes, child/parent awkwardness, age distinction.

#SOCIETAL DISTINCTION
 #CULTURAL / SOCIAL MORES
 #ECCENTRIC CHARACTERS
 #PARODY / PASTICHE / SPOOF
 #DISPARAGEMENT / DIMINISHMENT

Facebook meme—*There's no such thing as British cuisine Me: . . .* Meme illustrating the peculiarity of British pride in childhood “crap” foods such as SPAM, turkey twizzlers. Laughing at the relatable response, positive crapness.

#CRAPNESS / RUBBISHNESS
 #WITTICISM / BANTERING

#SOCIETAL DISTINCTION
 #VISUAL HUMOUR
 #SILLINESS

When we consider these examples, we see a mix of labels we could put into different semantic domains of types (SPOOF, PARODY), forms (VERBAL HUMOUR), and tonality (EXAGGERATION).

However, as we proceeded, we saw the boundaries between them gradually dissolve and become moot when we observed how certain kinds of humor naturally clustered together.

Across the 18 logging sheets and around 800 data points, we merged together similar titles (like INCONGRUOUS JUXTAPOSITION / MASHUP) or combined them (e.g. PASTICHE/PARODY).

As with most semiotic analysis, the descriptive inventorying of the text-objects studied bled naturally into the analysis. Pattern recognition works to detect salient tendencies and motifs, positing rolling hypotheses that we periodically checked against the data. This is what is referred to in qualitative literature as the *hermeneutic circle* (Ereaut, 2002). The more we scrutinized the corpus, the more certain salient themes started to emerge. As we kept reviewing materials, the same themes recurred until the patterns started to solidify; until no further themes seemed to be forthcoming.

We ended up with a list long of humor types (NB the sum of humor types totals higher than 800 because each item had multiple tags) which extended to more than 50 different types.

We tallied up the incidence of the top three hashtags that best captured the spirit of each piece of content. We ended up with a top 20 list of types in a descending order of popularity as follows:

1. HUMAN FOIBLES (237)

Based on instantaneous empathy with human frailties, flaws, and foibles, we all share as human beings: usually to do with our weak will, competitiveness, poor time keeping, our vanity, tendency to be inconsistent, paradoxical, incompetent, lazy, greedy, or addictive etc.

2. ECCENTRIC CHARACTERS (164)

Someone whose idiosyncracies are funny or the recurrence of predictably stereotypical traits causing humor because these individuals never adapt their ways to the environment or observe social norms—we vicariously enjoy observing this and feel both smug and amused.

3. INTER-TEXTUALITY (156)

The logic of modern remix culture is layering references. Each cultural text is parasitic on another work. Especially in memes, allusions to famous celebrities, film, song, event, or other memes are rife. Often this affords the content both cultural resonance and cultural capital.

4. SILLINESS/ CHEESINESS (147)

Something trivial, light-hearted. Could also be called “whimsy.” This type often has theatrical, camp or kitsch elements to it. But it is always about lightening the mood and bringing people together. It can also be said to be daft—reveling in cuteness can also be included here too.

5. FUNNY MANNERISMS (143)

Funny physical movements, or facial expressions (which the primitive parts of our brains are most susceptible to) that convey an exaggerated stance or attitude toward something (often entails animals or children reacting in situations that are amusing via an extreme caricature).

6. IN-OUR GROUP DISTINCTION (134)

Humor that pivots on the fault lines between cultural, class, racial identities with implicit flaunting or self-deprecation of one's own identity, or poking fun at another one for one-upmanship, or just pointing out or foregrounding the differences or paradoxes between them.

7. RUBBISHNESS /CRAPNESS (124)

Reveling in the tawdry quality, or generally poor or shameful state of something. Subverting the status quo to want better things and embracing rubbish instead—encompasses the UK's desire always to subvert and undercut earnestness and so on. In narrative is closely tied to bathos.

8. DISPARAGEMENT/DIMIINISHMENT (104)

Bringing a higher status person “down a peg or two”—it can be a celebrity being diminished (with or without tacit consent) but usually someone with the robustness to take the flak. On the comedy circuit, this would be known as “punching up” to power—versus “punching down.”

9. RANDOMNESS/ABSURDITY (103)

Funny is created because it is an interruption of the normal by the absurd or nonsensical. Appears to be out of context or unconnected with the normal course of events. Funniness is in appreciating the warped imagination of the mind that comes up with these imponderables.

10. EMOTIONAL HYSTERIA (102)

Based on the humor that results from us seeing someone experiencing or expressing the extremes of emotion, usually euphoria, or extreme anger and frustration, being overwhelmed or distressed. We are often infected by this emotional contagion. Can also include Unfounded Fears, a sub type.

11. GENDER RANCOUR (97)

Highlighting of gender trait differences, stylized gender performance or manifestations of gender “rancour,” which can entail one-upmanship or just wry or silly observations. Can also involve self-deprecation rather than just aggressive “one up” chastisement or mockery.

12. SLAPSTICK / PHYSICAL (95)

Classic physical humor involving bodily movements—physical gesticulations, usually contortions, and pratfalls of various kinds. In the corpus, silly dancing is counted within this category. Includes physical violence and “wipeouts” like either falling or crashing into things.

13. ANTHROPOMORPHISM (93)

Finding animals funny either finding their “in the moment” lack of awareness funny or even because we attribute human traits to animals (cats = evil and scheming) (dogs = servile and moronic) how we use them as proxies to tell human stories or because they are cute or odd.

14. TRANSGRESSION (90)

Based on breaking the rules, being rebellious, and defying any sort of “system,” authority or institutional control (government, schools, companies) or flouting some protocol, or social taboo—vandalism, drug taking, sexual freedom are common ways to express this.

15. SCHADENFREUDE/REVERSAL (89)

The idea of “poetic justice” or a person or entity getting his or her comeuppance—“reversal of fortunes”—can also be applied to anyone who is striving to better themselves too earnestly. Most effective when there is a symmetry in the offense and penalty and when the victim is “hoist by their own petard.”

16. CULTURAL/SOCIAL MORES (85)

Humor based on flaunting the quirks and the conventions of individual cultures. In this corpus, it is about showcasing the foibles and idiosyncracies of being British or the regional, tribal or sub-cultural, or diasporic identities in UK audience—about how we play with loveable quirks.

17. SCORN/MOCKERY (81)

Highlighting someone’s failures and shortcomings or reveling in their misfortunes. This can run the gamut from light teasing or joshing through to vindictive bullying or full on roasting. Can be contrasted with disparagement in that the “butt” of a joke may not have justified an attack.

18. EXAGGERATION/HYPERBOLE (80)

Exaggeration of anything being funny because it helps to point out truths—this is the basis of caricatures but also extreme reactions and hyperbolic language used, either in terms of superlatives or perhaps for effect as part of a witticism—plus manipulated visual images that supersize dimensions for instance.

19. AWKWARDNESS/CRINGE (80)

About the squeamishness we have moving through zones with different rules and about the transgressing of social taboos as well as cringeful things that happen to us to either shame or embarrass us. At its extreme, it is excruciating, wince inducing, or just a “little bit awkward.”

20. WORD PLAY / PUNS (80)

The bringing together of two apparent opposite senses of a word to create a thrill of “benign violation.” It might be a fresh coinage of an existing word, or a humorous adaptation or other rhetorical effect to create humorous flourish, usually working at a high level of linguistic skill.

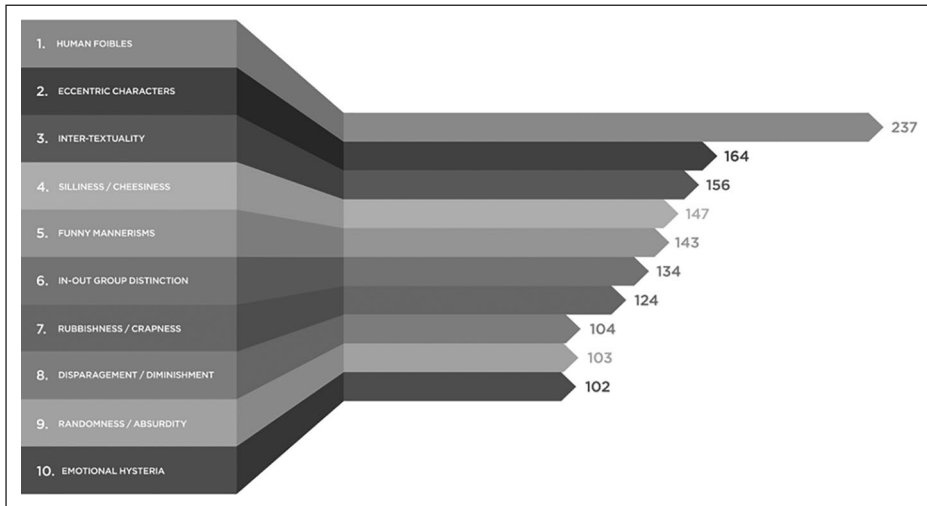


Figure 2. Highest ranked humor types: all age groups.

These tentative findings became substantiated and were corroborated further, by nuggets of the insights emerging from immersion in the literature review, expert interviews, and the Super Groups with up and coming comedy writers and stand-up comedians. These Super groups helped to supplement our corpus with personally curated selections of jokes, random stories television clips, social media memes, and online videos. Their input gave gratifying validation of the insights emerging from our content analysis regarding the most popular humor types.

Identifying and explaining salient age cohort differences

One of the key questions for the BBC was how the funny content we were to identify would differ by audience type, age, or segment and *why* might that be? The client also requested that the semi-otic investigation be alive to any discernible evidence of a rise of new forms or shapes of humorous content. They had stated they believed that semiotics would give them in-depth understanding of content characteristics and contextual hypotheses as to *why/how* they resonate with young audiences versus older ones. We had produced a robust taxonomy of humor types through the ensuing content analysis: now we had to segment them.

We created charts to reflect the top-ranked humor types according to our taxonomy for the entire corpus. We then parsed these out by age cohort to help the BBC see the inter-generational differences. These are displayed in the colored infographics below (Figures 2 to 5).

Comparing the much younger tween with the older late teen and early 20s age cohorts, we see a crucial gap in that Randomness / Absurdity plays a bigger role within the youngest age group, as well as Disparagement / Diminishment, Moronic / Dumb as opposed to the cohort immediately above.

This was where the development psychology lens came into play as an explanatory heuristic.

Dr Rod Martin, referring to research entitled A cognitive-developmental analysis of humor by Thomas Shultz (1976) into the role of “incongruity resolution” in children’s humor at different stages of cognitive development writes that “younger children find humor in incongruity alone and do not require the incongruity to be resolved. Beginning sometime between grades one and three, and presumably continuing into adulthood, resolution of the incongruity becomes important for humour appreciation.” Martin shows that children are able to process more sophisticated forms of humour as they get older.

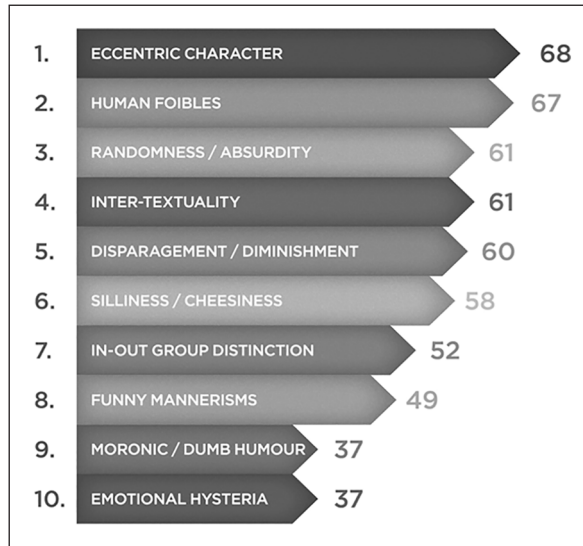


Figure 3. Highest ranked humor types: 12- to 16-year-olds.

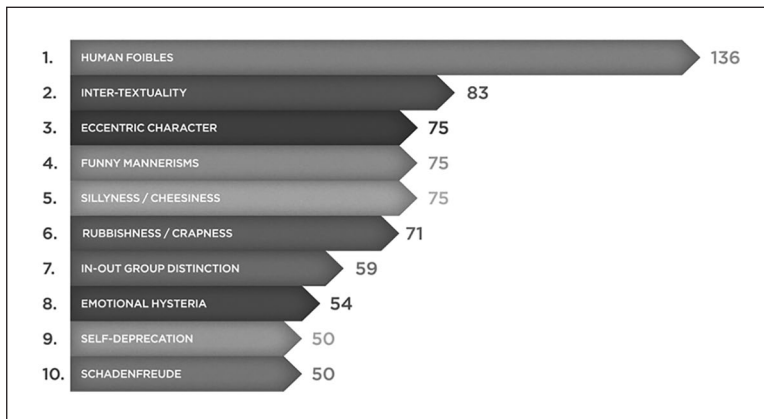


Figure 4. Highest ranked humor types: 16- to 24-year-olds.

Things that seem incongruous and funny at an early age become mundane and less humorous at a later stage of cognitive development . . . the older child’s more sophisticated schemas enable him or her to perceive and enjoy new . . . more complex forms of humour. (Martin, 2007)

This is consistent with the gap we saw in humor appreciation between 12- and 16-year-olds (higher incidence of absurdity, randomness, and sheer “dumb humor”) versus 18- and 24-year-olds, when self-deprecation and more mature forms start to come to the fore within their humor repertoires.

The predominant humor delivery mechanism in the corpus turned out to be the meme. As in any semiotic culture scope, we save time and add value by borrowing from the best thinking on the pivotal issues: understanding the structure of the meme was a key to doing this justice. Limor Shifman’s

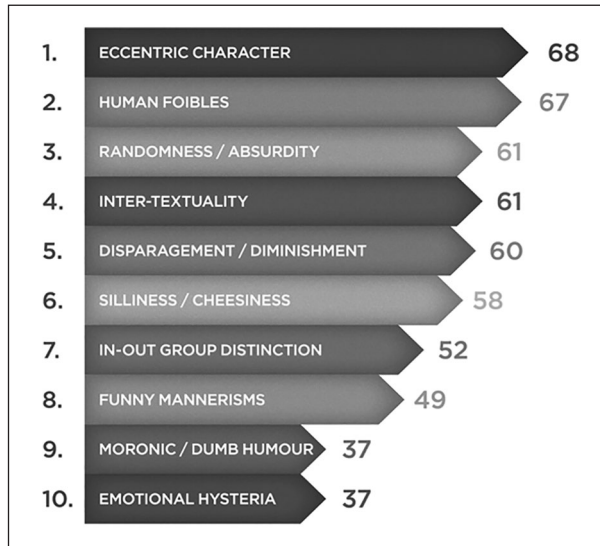


Figure 5. Highest ranked humor types: 25- to 40-year-olds.

(2014) *Memes in Digital Culture* was a good primer on this subject. Shifman defines memes as “a) A group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which b) were created with awareness of each other, and c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users . . .” We also had viral videos in the corpus. For Shifman (2014), one of the distinguishing characteristics of the meme versus the viral video is that memes tend to consist in a series of adaptations and re-adaptations by creators with each meme creator adding new meanings—so as to create a loosely shared circuit of meaning. This tends to perpetuate an “in joke” garbled in translation. Inter-textuality is endemic not only at the meme-to-celebrity-culture layer but also at the meme-to-meme level; thus, parody and pastiche are mainstays of meme humor, for example, the slew of ironic, satirical memes (McNeill, 2017) following the tragic demise of Harambe, a male gorilla who was shot dead at Cincinnati zoo for approaching a small child who had strayed into his pen.

Apropos “random,” there was a preponderance of memes in the corpus many of which were tagged “randomness / absurdity.” Semiotics professor Paul Bouissac (2017) at Semiofest traces the origin of memes in experimental art movements like Surrealism and Dadaism. He argues that memes inherit their nonsensical absurdity but also an often “poetic logic” to the audacious and unsettling juxtapositions found and used in these art movements. Bouissac argues the impact of memes inheres in their novelty and our savoring of unexpected connections which stimulate the brain’s dopamine reward centers.

Semiotician Nick Gadsby (2010) writes “randomness for the young is a way to transform the mundanity of their lives into something much more exciting. This is the source of randomness’s magic—it is a way to make extraordinary out of ordinary . . .”

As we move into 17–24, Human Foibles is dominant, as awareness of human frailty, complexity and self-contradiction grows with maturity. Penchant for Rubbishness/Crapness we can see as a symptom of growth in cynicism and socialization within a British socio-linguistic milieu. The older age cohort favors types of humor involving existential themes, morbidity, and cynicism. For example, Schadenfreude is a more sophisticated type of humor in that it involves making moral judgments about deserving outcomes and functions as a more conscientious form of Disparagement and Self-Deprecation entails some self-awareness, reflexivity, and empathy.

As we move into the top demographic of 25+, we see a repertoire of humor types gradually settling into what we classically see as ingredients of the conventional sitcom: Human Foibles, In-Out Group Distinction, Eccentric Characters, Funny Mannerisms. These might be taken as a sign of growing social conservatism and an ossification in taste. Pop culture material, in the guise of Inter-Textuality, seems to wane in primacy, and Gender Rancour grows in prominence.

Across all age cohorts, we see Human Foibles and Eccentric Characters as consistently the most popular types of humor, possibly why they work as a bridge for age cohorts within family comedy. These are supported by In-Out Group Distinctions creating humor out of cultural, class, or generational flash points. Silliness / Cheesiness is also common across the age cohorts, which seems very common to shared online humor forms. This shows that a juvenile sense of humor persists into middle age though it goes into gentle decline as we enter the 25–40s. To hypothesize, we can see Silliness / Cheesiness as a stress reliever in dissolving anxiety. Both Silliness / Cheesiness and Emotional Hysteria (the latter slightly less popular, but still prominent) provide relief for 17 to 24-year-olds starting to feel life's pressures more keenly.

Crucially, in terms of differences across and between the groups, we see that popular culture is a very prominent driver of humor among the two youngest targets. They both have a proclivity toward a heavy usage of Inter-Textual references (i.e., awareness of, allusions to popular culture, topical events, sports, music, celebrity culture, and current affairs). This is present in the youngest cohort but is most pronounced in the middling group (we can speculate that displaying their *cultural capital* grows in importance as they enter adolescence). This is a salutary observation indicating to the BBC that this is an absolutely critical element if wishing to better connect with young people via comedy. If a hypothesis going into this research was that the BBC was not doing enough to appeal to the humor types of youth, then, in the light of the BBC's poor representation in this area, this was proof.

The semiotics findings dovetailed with a BBC report (below) "What do youth audiences need from us?" conducted by Crowd DNA and commissioned by Patrick Collins, BBC Marketing and Audiences. This Youth Audience Needs study (academic research, self-observation and deprivation diaries, in-home interviews) was shared with us as part of a client briefing pack.

The BBC carried out this foundational and wide-ranging study (Collins, 2016) to understand the psychological needs that younger audiences have around media technology. The study found that as young adults within the 16- to 24-year-olds band move into maturity, stress becomes a bigger part of their life and that humor can help both to stimulate them and help them to "wind down" as part of their mood management. One finding from this study is "the perception is that the BBC delivers more thought provoking high-brow drama content requiring heavier concentration levels"—but that it does not consistently provide enough "wind down" humor (Figure 6).

Devising our humor quadrants

Quadrants are frequently the means of presentation at the close of a semiotics project. A map is a spatial diagram that represents, through via analogy, the conceptual closeness or the distance of discrete entities (in this case, brands or cultural codes) usually to opposing values.

Maps work as a neat summary and visually concise way to see the inter-relationship and the proximity of entities to each other based on their similarities and differences. They effectively map content items, by metaphor working via a semantic differential scale, onto a spatial diagram.

Given the inchoate, indeterminate nature of culture, every conceptual model strikes a bargain with reality. Most actual content examples lie at the intersection or the margins of multiple cultural categories. Gradations and nuances of mutual belonging are then reflected along a continuum.

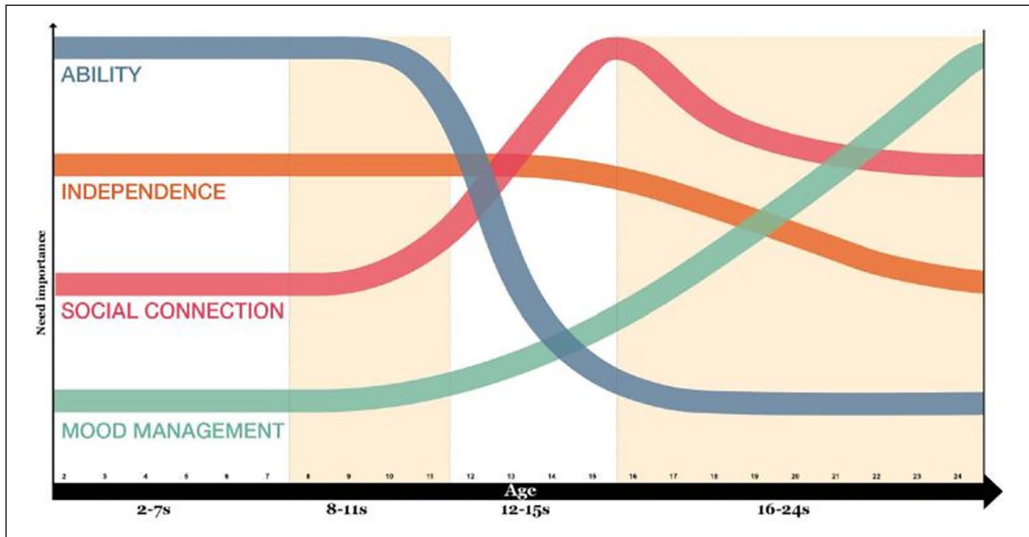


Figure 6. “What Do Youth Audiences Need From Us?” written by Crowd DNA and commissioned by Patrick Collins, BBC Marketing and Audiences.

Quadrant maps are formed out of the two axes chosen on which to plot results. The values that structure the cultural domain in question naturally derive from oppositional values. The knack with the second axis is then to find a binary opposition that is not already implied in the first so they are not mutually contradictory and different enough to qualify and produce genuine quadrants.

In this case, the answer lay in thinking derived from the literature review or expert interviews. The expert interviews broadly accepted that most comedy fell on a continuum between the cleverer and more amusing forms and a more basic sense of humor. This intuition was then echoed in our review of the psychology of humor literature. Professor Rod Martin, the most influential figure in this academic field, splits the phenomenon of humor into two main parts: the COGNITIVE part, “amusement” which usually involves surprise and the perception of incongruity in cortical areas, and a VISCERAL emotional facet, called “mirth,” related to joy and that activates pleasure circuits inside the limbic system. This gave us our vertical axis.

The horizontal axis came from Rod Martin’s Humor Styles Questionnaire. As a reminder, this suggests that we all unconsciously default to using distinct humor styles in our interactions. When outer directed these interactions can either be AFFILIATIVE—making other people laugh by telling jokes and amusing stories (wit, silliness, puns, slapstick, physical humor) to build rapport or they can be AGGRESSIVE—by emphasizing in- versus out-group differences, by victimizing people, by teasing (e.g., sarcasm, mockery, disparagement) and ultimately, in vying for superiority.

When combined, these two axes (the vertical y axis Cognitive vs. Visceral and horizontal x axis Affiliative vs. Aggressive) help to account for humor variation. First, this allows us to assess something inherent in the humor in terms of its intellectual register. Some humor is cleverer and more conceptual in tone and other types may be more crude but still hysterical. Second, we evaluate its social function: some humor being benign and bringing people together and other forms exercising power or pulling rank in some way through separation (Figure 7).

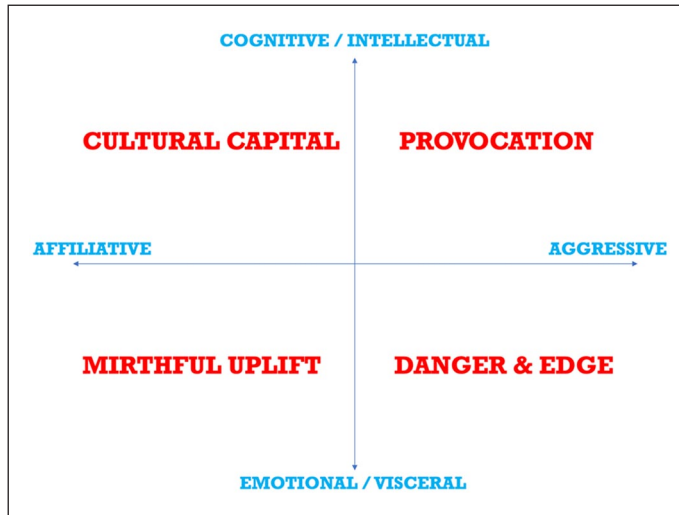


Figure 7. The humor quadrants with the rhetorical function of each.

QUADRANT 1 COGNITIVE + AFFILIATIVE is the realm of CULTURAL CAPITAL

Humor types like #SPECULATIVE FANTASY #PARODY / PASTICHE #ADAPTATION / REFERENTIALITY #OBSERVATIONAL DETAIL #RANDOMNESS / ABSURDITY

QUADRANT 2 EMOTIONAL + AFFILIATIVE is the realm of MIRTHFUL UPLIFT

Humor types like #EMOTIONAL HYSTERIA #SILLINESS / CHEESINESS #MUSICAL / SONIC HUMOUR #DUMB / MORONIC #SLAPSTICK / PHYSICAL

QUADRANT 3 COGNITIVE + AGGRESSIVE is the realm of PROVOCATION

Humor types like #POLITICAL SATIRE #WITTICISM / BANTER #IN-OUT DISTINCTION #PROVOCATIVE #CARICATURES #BLACK HUMOUR

QUADRANT 4 EMOTIONAL + AGGRESSIVE is the realm of DANGER AND EDGE

Humor types like #SCORN / MOCKERY #PRANKS / TRICKERY #GROSS OUT / EXTREMITY #SEXUAL HUMOUR #TROLLING #ROASTING

These two x and y axes and the quadrants they yield are not definitive but are grounded in a legacy of robust psychological research. As theory and heuristic, they stand up to scrutiny because they seem to reliably explain why some humor types lie closer together and tend to work together and are perceptually close and why other clusters work in a different way.

The litmus test for any quadrants is whether they allow you to meaningfully map out examples. This quadrant map enabled us to project, at a glance, the humor styles of famous UK stand up comedians. These comedians can be taken as rough archetypes. Harry Hill is known for silly, whimsical humor that can border on the puerile. Eddie Izzard reconciles silliness with the high brow—he creates metaphysical conceits in his humor and goes off on wild, imaginative, hypothetical excursions. Ricky Gervais is also philosophical and usually deals with weighty matters in his work but with a much more provocative and often polemical agenda underlying his work with his insistence on his right to cause offense. Jimmy Carr is known for his direct, pugnacious,

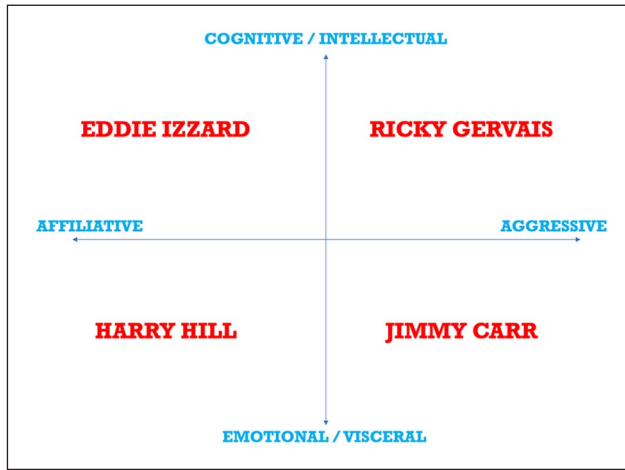


Figure 8. The humor quadrants each with an illustrative UK comedian.

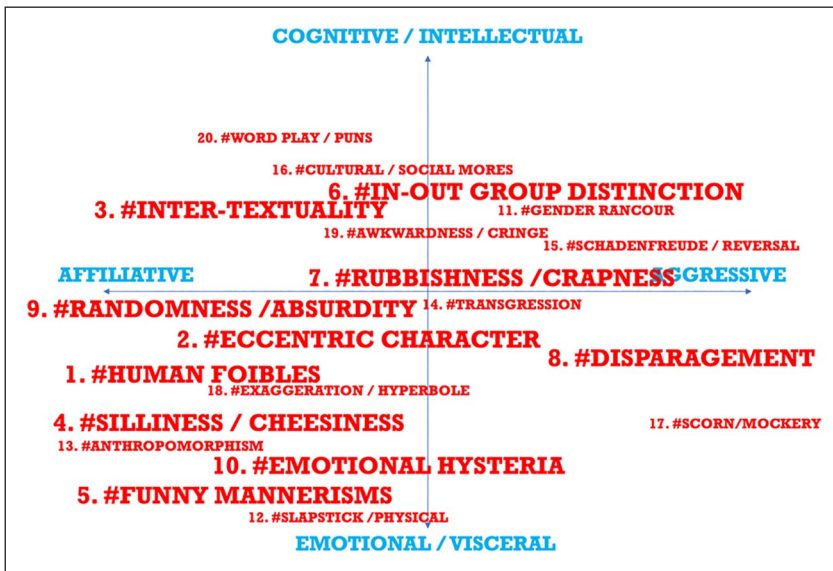


Figure 9. The humor quadrants featuring the top 20 types overall.

even belligerent attitude to his audience and guests; he frequently destroys hecklers, for example. The humor quadrants also allowed us to plot and to compare a plethora of humor types (Figure 8).

They enable us to see that some humor types are closer to others and they form a cluster. This showed the BBC that each quadrant, and the humor types positioned on them, could be called upon to perform different rhetorical and strategic roles for channels, programming, and the BBC Masterbrand, thus giving the organization leeway to flex their humor muscles. Below is the map of the top 20 humor types as mapped onto our humor quadrants below (Figure 9).

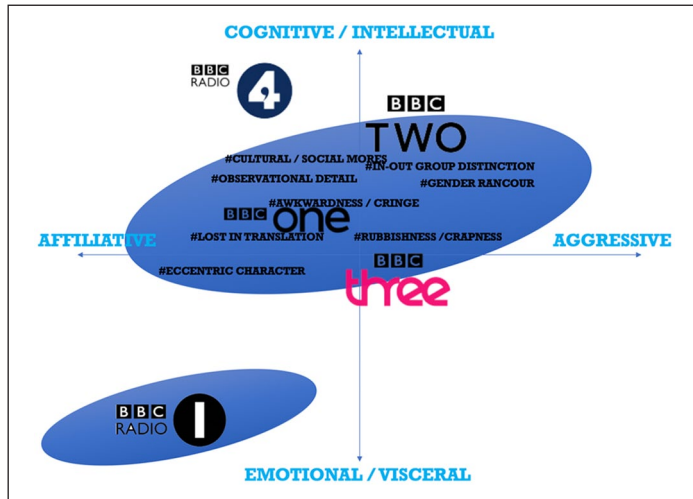


Figure 10. The humor quadrants plotting BBC channel brands.

The strategic mapping of BBC channel brands

The client wanted to know how big the gap was between where they were and innovative new players in the humor stakes. A key part of the brief was to offer recommendations as to how far the BBC brand could and *should* stretch in terms of its content offering across its multiple platforms and across channel brands and how this would feed into BBC’s Masterbrand (Figure 10).

We did this first, by looking at the humor types most deployed by the BBC in classic comedy output on mainstream channels, more niche channel content, on radio stations as well as the most shared humorous posts across BBC social media platforms. This was an edifying exercise as it showed, in sharp relief, the discrepancy between the humor types that form the mainstay of BBC comedy content and the types most popular with the youngest target group.

When we look at a map produced on which are plotted BBC shows, we see all mainstream BBC comedy corralled within a central reservation at the center, narrowly arrayed around the staples of situation comedy, that is, Eccentric Characters and Cultural / Social Mores and In-Out Group Distinction supported with Observational Detail. This, in recent times, has tended to be underpinned either by Crapness / Rubbishness or by Awkwardness / Cringe as humor types.

Crapness / Rubbishness account for prominent humor styles of, for example, *People Just Do Nothing* and *This Country*, and shows like *Young Offenders*, or *The Other One*, intermingled with Black Humor. Sometimes this can be predicated on a sort of working class “chav minstrelsy” which at worst can appear demeaning to the British White working class.

Awkwardness/Cringe is at the heart of shows like *Motherland* and *Josh* as well as shows such as BBC3’s *Things Not to Ask People*. This is within the tradition of BBC comedies such as *W1A* and *Miranda*, which arguably, project White middle-class neuroses as universal values. Adam Kotsko’s essay *Awkwardness* Kotsko, A. (2010) traces the popularity of awkwardness as a mirth inducing social disease that became endemic in comedies across both sides of the Atlantic in the Noughties.

The risk here is the BBC settling into an outmoded, lumpen, and class-based view of the United Kingdom.

The big insight here is that mainstream BBC content misses out on the types of humor at the extremes of the map most popular with the youngest target group—the knowing *cultural capital* gleaned in the top right, the danger and edge of the bottom right, and the uplift and silliness of the

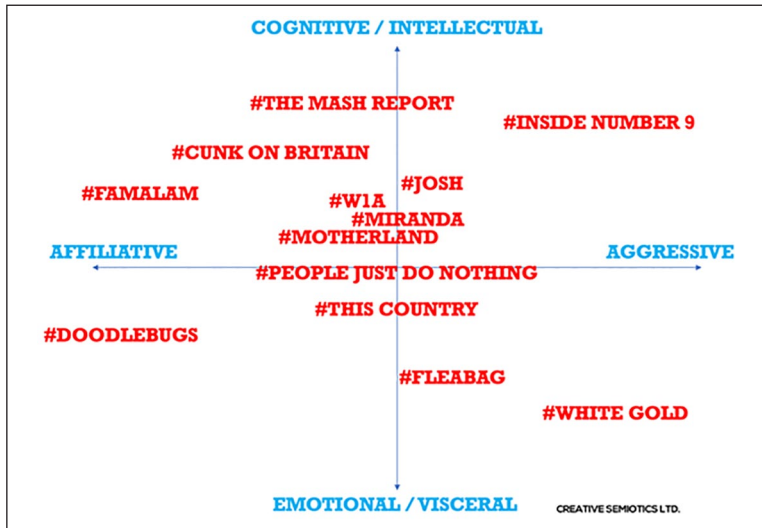


Figure 11. The humor quadrants plotting BBC television comedy shows.

bottom left quadrant. Outlier BBC shows break out of this formula. *Famalam* top left, and *Fleabag* as top right, with *Cunk on Britain* dominantly top left with some top right elements (Figure 11).

In the context of the bold and unfiltered humor offerings online, BBC TV offerings can seem to be amorphous and targeted at very broad demographics when compared with idiosyncratic, intersectional, and bespoke offerings that the Internet, as an aggregation of niches, represents. A youth authenticity gap is an age-old challenge for the BBC and goes well beyond just the domain of humor.

It is a different story when we consider BBC Radio shows, for instance, Radio 1 programming.

The core of Radio 1 comedy content, judging from the content shared on social media and shared in the top BBC Comedy Content doc lies in this bottom left quadrant, feeling closer to humor types popular on the Internet. In other respects, the channel's specific comedy offerings showcase a wider variety of humor types. *Rants Against the Answer Machine* would be arrayed toward the right with its focus on social commentary making it closer to top right. *Playground Insults* are deliberately puerile, even if done ironically being more bottom right. *Innuendo Bingo* because ultimately about slapstick pratfalls is arrayed more toward the bottom left on the map. *Unreal Lives* is a spoof mockumentary and parody so would plot top left. So, what is interesting is that Radio 1 shows how it is possible for a single channel to have a very diverse funny stuff comedy portfolio that showcases programming brands based on very different humor types. This consequently gives the Radio 1 brand a more vibrant and relevant humor portfolio than any of the television brands—including BBC3—it is a paragon in this regard.

One immediate learning was for mainstream BBC channels like BBC1 and BBC2 to consider learning from the spontaneity, playfulness, and more light-hearted transgression of Radio 1.

Strategic recommendations

The clarity of the mapping and clear gap highlighted between current BBC comedy output and unmet or underserved humor types offered a clear opportunity to redress that balance. However, Creative Semiotics also offered up three potential strategic options for the client.

First, the BBC could target the bottom left quadrant of the humor map to address the humor type cluster where 9 of the top 20 most popular types are located. This would make a more directly straightforward BBC appeal to the heart of U.K. youth's social currency (Figure 12).

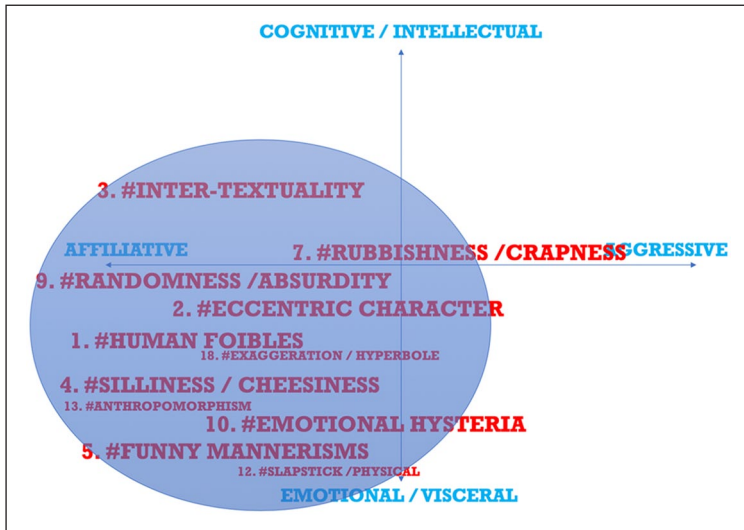


Figure 12. The humor quadrants with 9 of the top 20 ranked types.

Second, the BBC could consider each of the quadrants on the humor map and the likely need states addressed by different clusters of humor types to be tested in further research. They might assess how they should be deploying humor in order to better match quadrants to platform or program (Figure 13).

Third, they might plan to lighten the BBC staples and to judiciously incorporate a diverse portfolio of humor type across formats and channel given that a plethora of humor types embedded in individual content works to boost the likely humor quotient (e.g. super-additivity). See more below (Figure 14).

Tangible outcomes for BBC Marketing and Audiences

The work has been a success within the BBC and had a ripple effect beyond the immediate Marketing and Audiences team. The project commissioners presented the work internally to several interested parties. These included BBC Sport, BBC2, BBC3, Factual and Comedy commissioners as well as BBC Radio. The work has been particularly influential at BBC Sounds with the work leading to several new podcast commissions including *The Gemma Collins* podcast, *Ru Paul’s Drag Race UK*, *That Peter Crouch Podcast*, and *Brown Girls Do It Too*.

In general, teams responded positively to the work’s message that they need to create more bottom left quadrant (i.e., tonally “light” content). This ended up supporting the overall aim of the organization to produce more youth content that generally sits in this space and indirectly endorsed the need for a funding injection to BBC Three. The work was also introduced to engineers at iPlayer exploring the idea of using hashtags for metadata purposes for search on the platform. They fed back:

the semiotics has been used to demonstrate that our tagging and metadata needs to increase its nuance because Fleabag is not the same as Mrs Brown’s Boys even though they’re both tagged “comedy.” This has helped teams understand and work out how to make the metadata work harder.

A further acid test for the value of the work, however, has been that it has led to more semiotics.

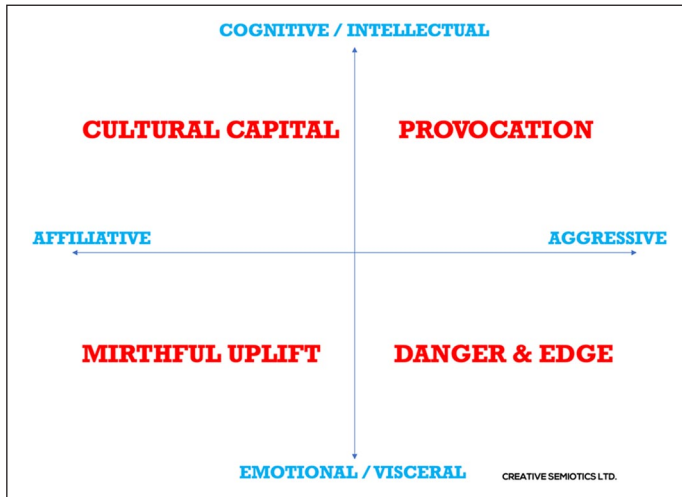


Figure 13. The humor quadrants with the rhetorical function of each.

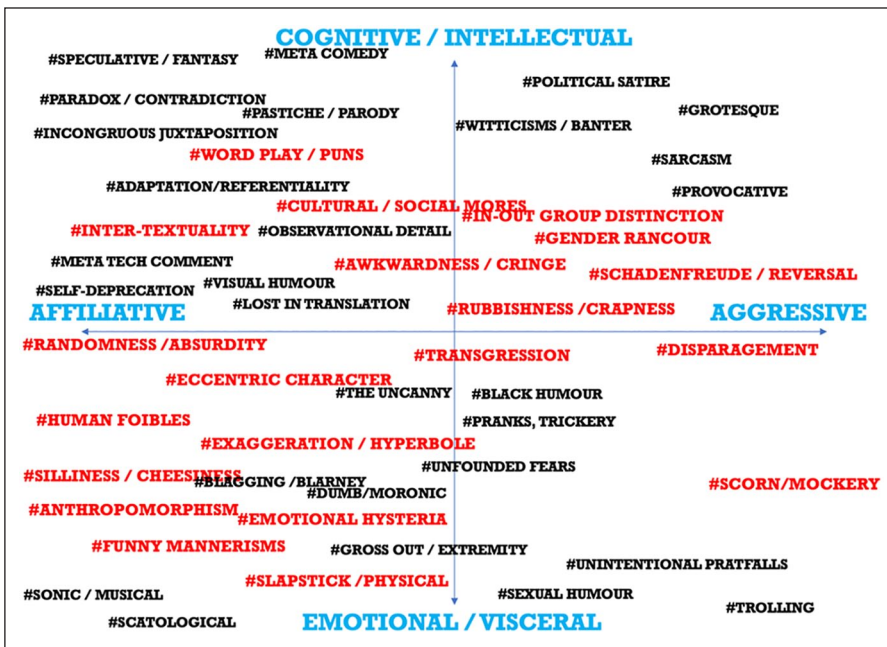


Figure 14. The humor quadrants plotting the universe of humor types.

The BBC News team was enamored of the way Humor Gap built nuance and created both structure and a common reference language in a complex domain. Creative Semiotics has since been commissioned by News Labs to work with data science and information architects. The results will eventually be used to rethink how editorial news items are tagged across BBC’s digital news offerings.

Conclusion, limitations, and discussion

This case has demonstrated how semiotics blends both rigor and breakthrough insight. In the view of this author, the case study displays creative, lateral thinking and problem-solving in the use of hashtags to accommodate the hybridity, liminality, and mash ups as the “new normal” and the prevailing organizing logic of contemporary (particularly digital) culture. The case study also evidences methodological innovation and the flexibility of semiotics to devise a conventional binary system which incorporates the axioms of humor psychology. Semiotics is a part art and part science (Lawes, 2018) which makes it the perfect tool for understanding areas of culture like humor—an inchoate and inter-subjective magma—where boundaries between categories are always vague and constitute “fuzzy” sets. Undertaking content analysis of the quantitative sample lent extra credibility to the findings. However, it was the cultural literacy and interpretive nous of semioticians that enabled us to tease out and most accurately model the complexity of humor types. What was perhaps particularly pleasing about the work was not only that it immediately won client “buy in” but that the semiotic findings chimed almost exactly with MTM’s parallel qualitative findings. MTM identified RELATABLE HUMOR as a prime type of humor, which is analogous to our top ranked humor type of HUMAN FOIBLES. Their second criterion was SOCIAL CURRENCY which can be seen as a colloquial synonym for INTER-TEXTUALITY. Third, AUTHENTICITY which might be equated with ECCENTRIC CHARACTERS. The two pieces of work—conducted as independent workstreams—were therefore highly complementary and synergistic in their recommendations—but each also had their own areas of thrust and focus. This gave the client a great sense of confidence in the work and the robustness of the findings.

In terms of limitations to this study, first, there was the sample size. Eight hundred data points is not an insignificant sample, but there is certainly potential to augment this with a larger social media monitoring study scraping from social media profiles—this would help to corroborate the aggregated inventory of humor types in the taxonomy and show how universal they are. Once the data was cleaned up, it might be worth performing some inter-annotation exercises whereby independent annotators are given a crib and asked to tag the same corpus of content separately to test how much consensus there is over how to classify various types. Semiotics approaches humor as culturally constructed and shared, *inter-subjectively*—like a language—even if it is ultimately experienced individually and subjectively in solo and social situations. Because everyone has a unique sense of humor, it might be useful to undertake more in-depth netnography to interrogate the spectrum of attitudes to these various types. Given the nature of the MTM corpus and the scope of the project, the focus was deliberately on humor types rather than humor formats. This is partly because the BBC is wedded to certain formats but also because they wanted something that transcended the conventional categorizations of humor. This means that all findings are largely “format agnostic” though the predominant format for CGC was the meme or viral video. It may be that humor types vary by format and that mainstream television or film humor types will be skewed versus online humor. The humor types are merely ingredients, but not the recipe. They are neither injunctions nor prescriptions to “do” anything. They just help you to determine the sub types within funny things. Neither are they elemental but work as compounds and clusters of them tend to be bundled together, hence using hashtags so that the semiotics as a culture modelling tool, could represent the messiness of the reality (Figure 15).

The top-shared Twitter content from the BBC from March 2017 to March 2018 was that of Liam Gallagher from Oasis in a piece of impromptu off-camera antics grumbling about having to make himself a cup of tea before a studio session—playing up his “difficult” rock star diva reputation and lightly self-deprecating about his relatively less exalted profile latterly versus his messiah status of his heyday in the 1990s. The litany of humor types embedded in this hilarious clip shows how they can often co-exist in a single piece of content.



Figure 15. Liam Gallagher on the *BBC Music Backstage Pass* Twitter feed, September 2017.

#ECCENTRIC CHARACTER #ECCENTRIC MANNERISMS #SELF-DEPRECATION
 #SCHADENFREUDE / REVERSAL #RUBBISHNESS / CRAPNESS #EXAGGERATION /
 HYPERBOLE #EMOTIONAL HYSTERIA #INCONGRUOUS JUXTAPOSITION
 #INTER-TEXTUALITY #IN-OUT GROUP DISTINCTION #SOCIAL / CULTURAL MORES
 #FLOW STATE VIRTUOSITY #BLACK HUMOUR #OBSERVATIONAL DETAIL
 #WITTICISMS / BANTER #SCORN / MOCKERY #TRANSGRESSION

On this note, because these humor types tend to be entangled within a single content item, a strong hypothesis—that could be tested—is that the co-existence of an ensemble of several of them seems to boost the funniness quotient. When we look at the most shared of the BBC content as well as the most humorous content shared in MTM corpus, this is certainly the case.

These can/could be explained by several parallel theories from neuroscience and semiotics like inter-textuality, super-additivity, multi-modality, multi-coded polysemous, figurative density. If proven, this could feed into researchers formulating a humor type “blending” strategy to maximize impact.

There is rich potential for ambitious researchers to use this semiotics model and test it further.

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