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How Nordic expatriates in Tokyo use humor and for what purposes: language as a social practice perspective

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Today’s schedule

18:05 – 18:10 introducing myself
18:10 – 19:10 talk on humor as a social practice
19:10 – 19:30 Q&A

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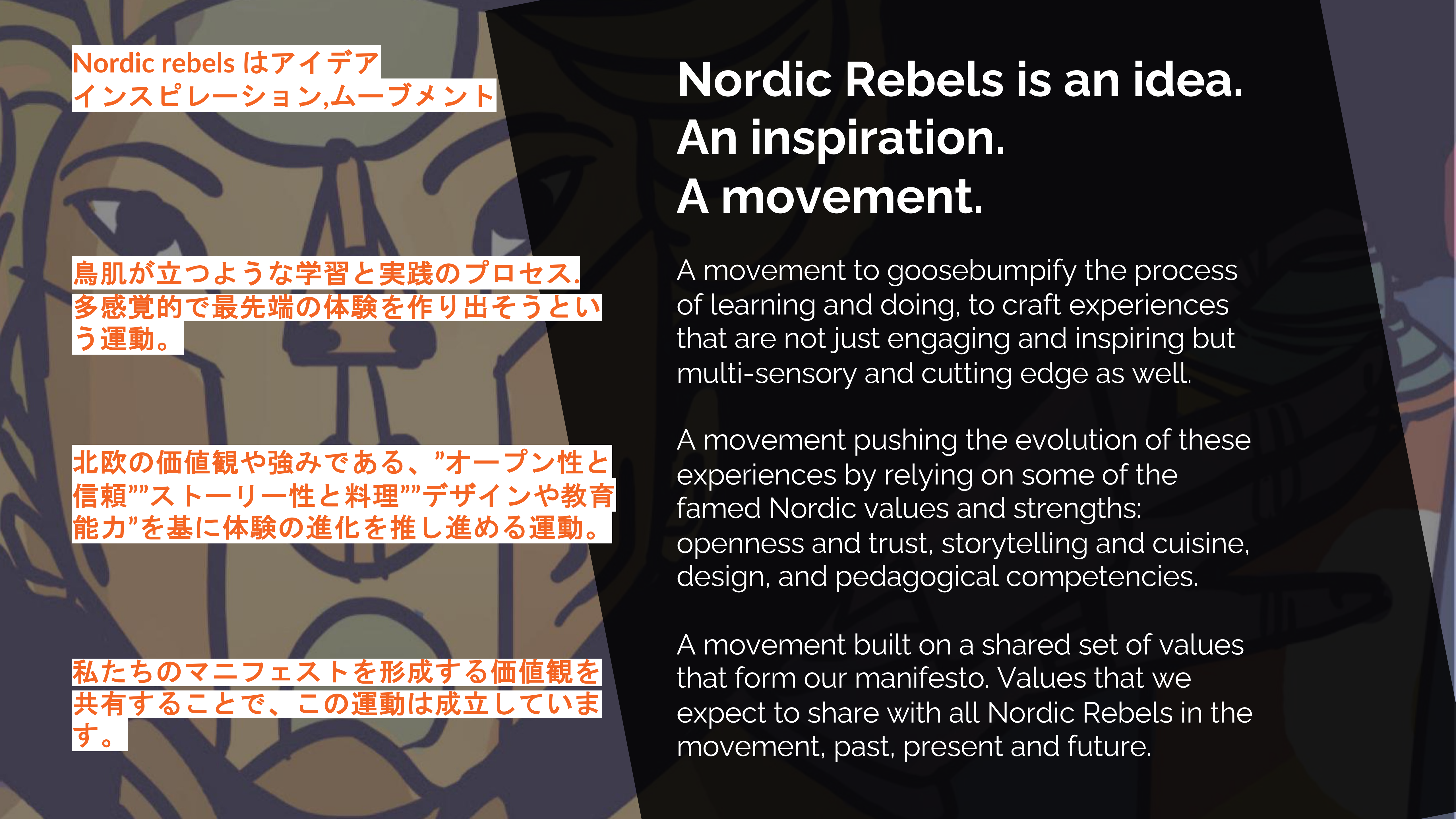
Who am I?

- Specially Appointed Associate Professor, Rikkyo University (04/2021-)
- Assistant Professor, Dubai Institute of Design and Innovation (2019-2020)
- Visiting Assistant Professor, Aalto University (2016-2019)
- Assistant Professor, The University of Tokyo, i.school (2014-2017) (also Denmark, USA, China, Russia, India, cruise ship)
- Visual methodologies, management and creativity in game companies, expatriates, and (blended) design pedagogies



Nordic rebels はアイデア
インスピレーション,ムーブメント

鳥肌が立つような学習と実践のプロセス.多感覚的で最先端の体験を作り出そうという運動。

北欧の価値観や強みである、”オープン性と信頼””ストーリー性と料理””デザインや教育能力”を基に体験の進化を推し進める運動。

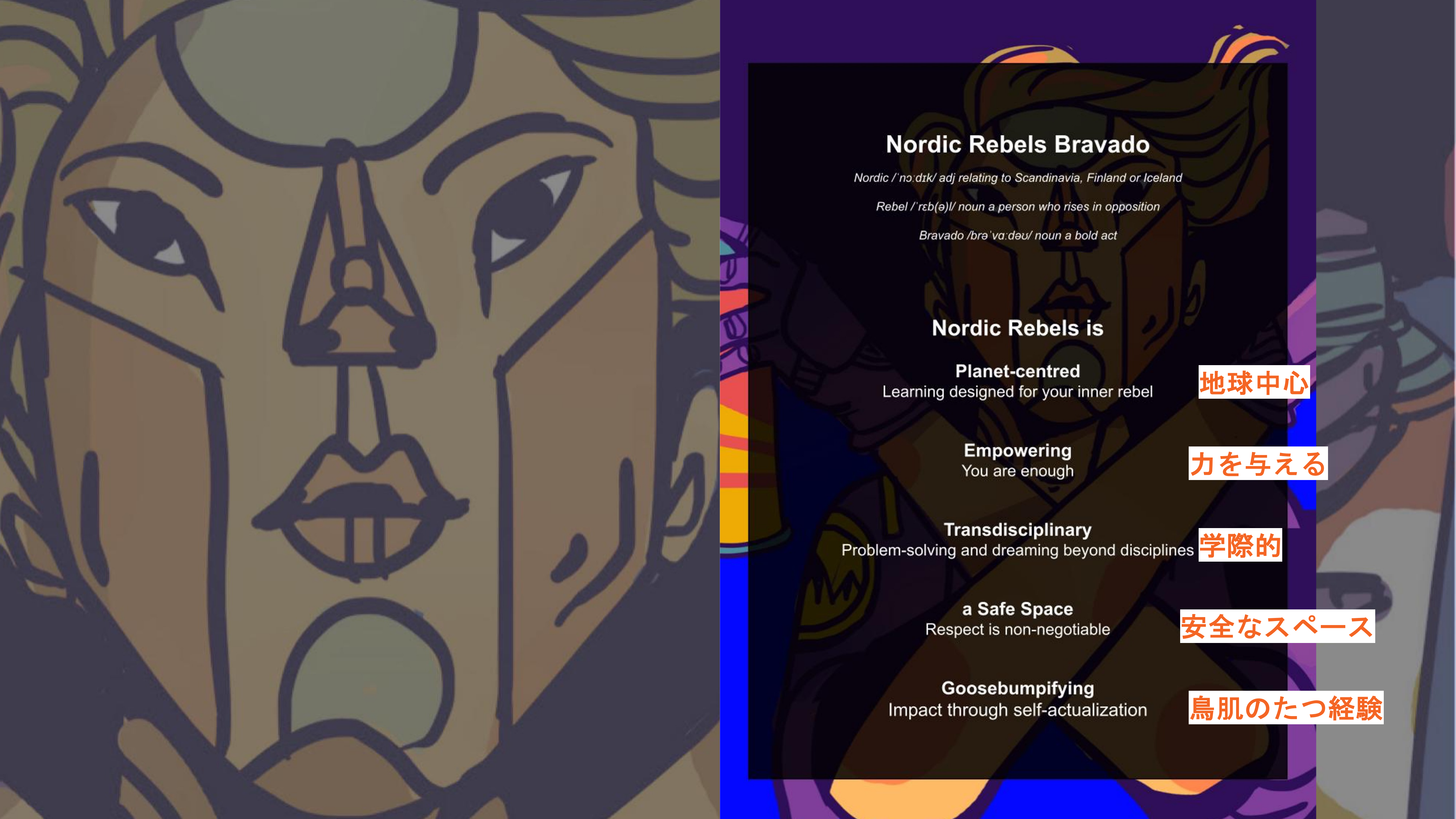
私たちのマニフェストを形成する価値観を共有することで、この運動は成立しています。

Nordic Rebels is an idea.
An inspiration.
A movement.

A movement to goosebumpify the process of learning and doing, to craft experiences that are not just engaging and inspiring but multi-sensory and cutting edge as well.

A movement pushing the evolution of these experiences by relying on some of the famed Nordic values and strengths: openness and trust, storytelling and cuisine, design, and pedagogical competencies.

A movement built on a shared set of values that form our manifesto. Values that we expect to share with all Nordic Rebels in the movement, past, present and future.



Nordic Rebels Bravado

Nordic /ˈnɔːdɪk/ adj relating to Scandinavia, Finland or Iceland

Rebel /ˈrɛb(ə)l/ noun a person who rises in opposition

Bravado /brəˈvɑːdəʊ/ noun a bold act

Nordic Rebels is

Planet-centred 地球中心
Learning designed for your inner rebel

Empowering 力を与える
You are enough

Transdisciplinary 学際的
Problem-solving and dreaming beyond disciplines

a Safe Space 安全なスペース
Respect is non-negotiable

Goosebumpifying 鳥肌のたつ経験
Impact through self-actualization

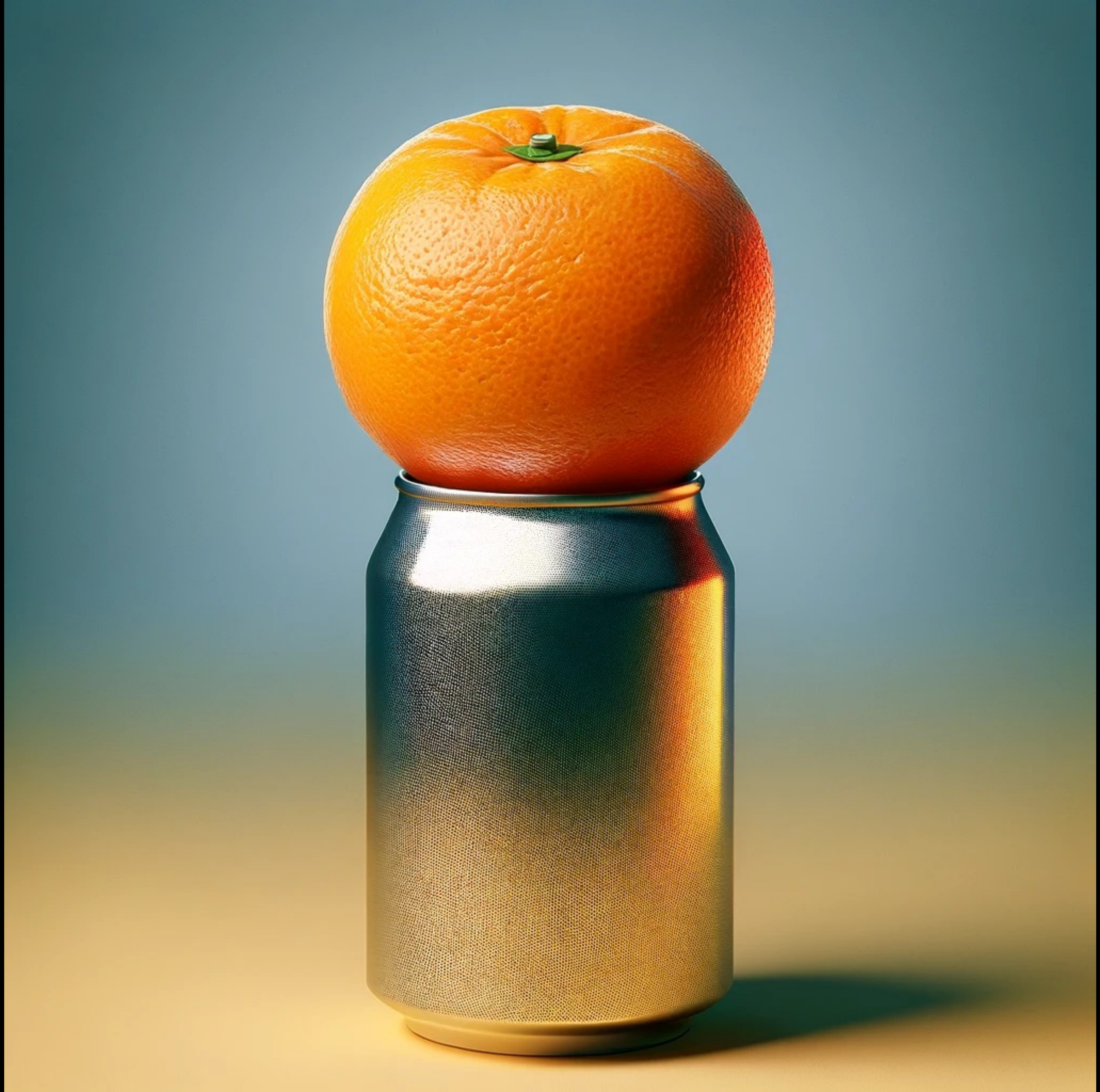
Why did we end up studying humor?

- Intercultural competence, defined as the individual's ability to effectively “draw upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes in order to work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad” (Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006: 530), has been shown to be critical in terms of adjusting to and thriving in new / foreign contexts
- Yet, prior literature has predominantly argued that culture influences communication, not the other way round
- Flawless grammar is not as important as being able to achieve different things in a foreign setting
- Furthermore, achieving native-level fluency does not always lead to effective communication (Peltokorpi & Pudelko, 2021)

In this study, we draw attention to one important, yet often overlooked in literature, way in which individuals use verbal and non-verbal communication and engage with their sociocultural environment - namely, humor. More specifically, we understand humor as “an open text that constitutes and reflects both dominant and alternative claims on reality” (Huber, 2022: 548), thus illustrating the dynamic and situational nature of humor.

In other words, understanding two things: 1) what might be funny about this image, and 2) what can we do with that knowledge?

How do we learn what we can do with language in a foreign setting?



How does a social practice approach to humor explain how expatriates develop intercultural competences?

(Not a study about humor but intercultural competence)

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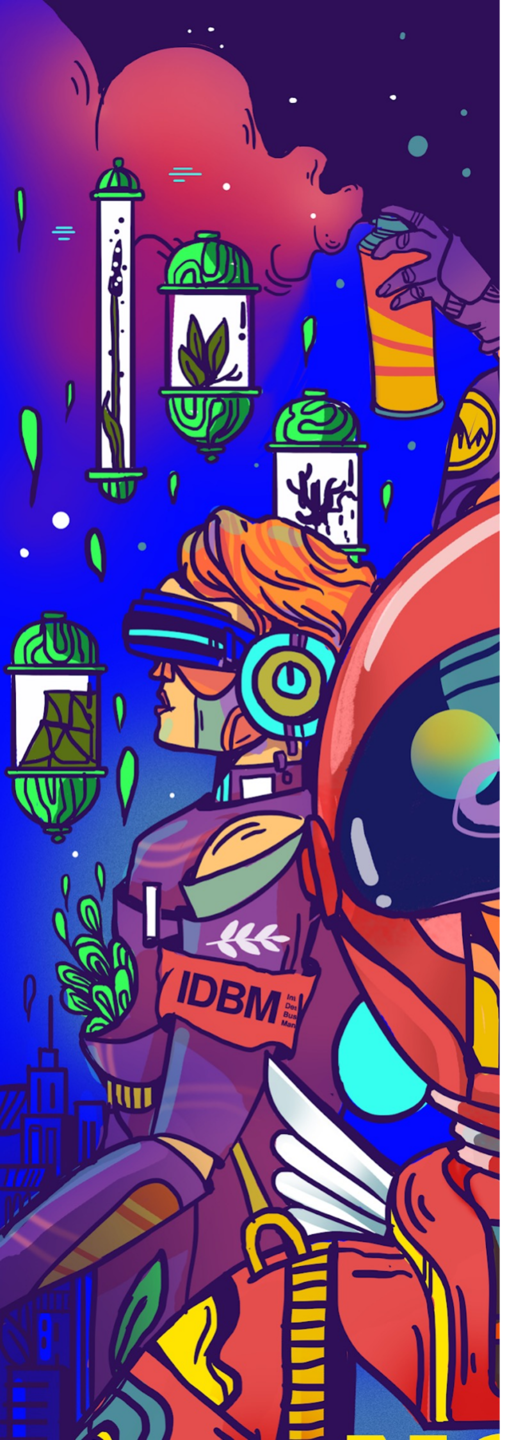
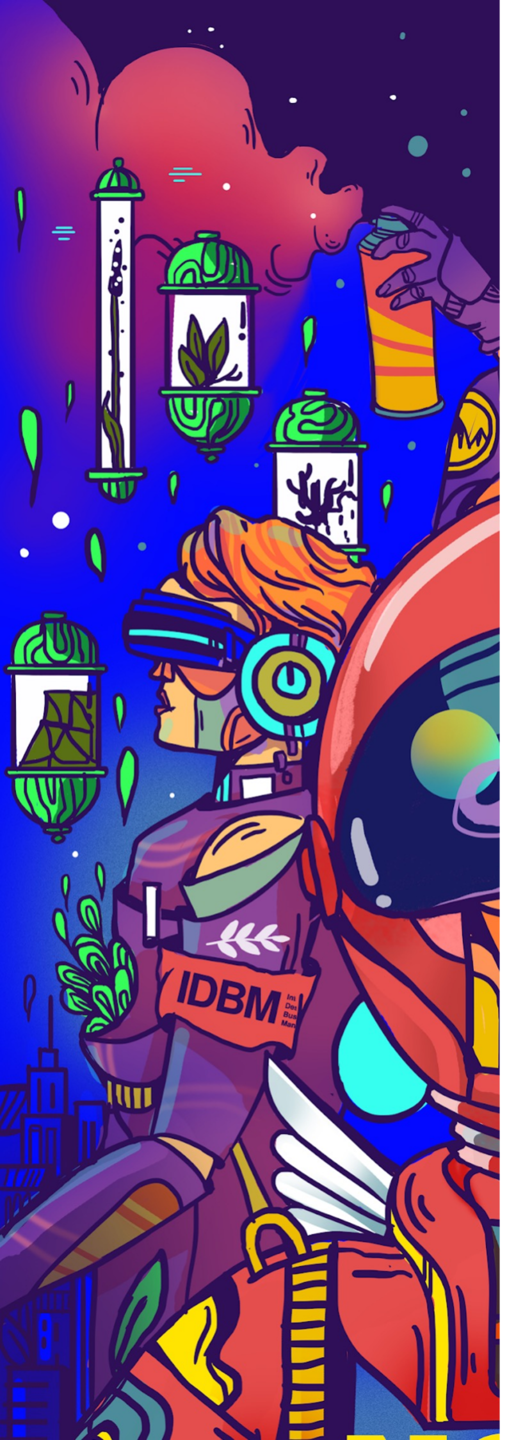
As noted by Karhunen et al. (2018: 997), language "**competence in a particular linguistic system is not an appropriate measure for revealing how fluently or effectively a person is able to communicate in specific situations**". Such effective communication extends beyond mere linguistic proficiency and encompasses an individual's ability to effectively understand, manipulate and convey meanings in a local context. Yet, it remains little understood and explored how individuals working in foreign contexts learn to utilize language to achieve various communicative purposes.



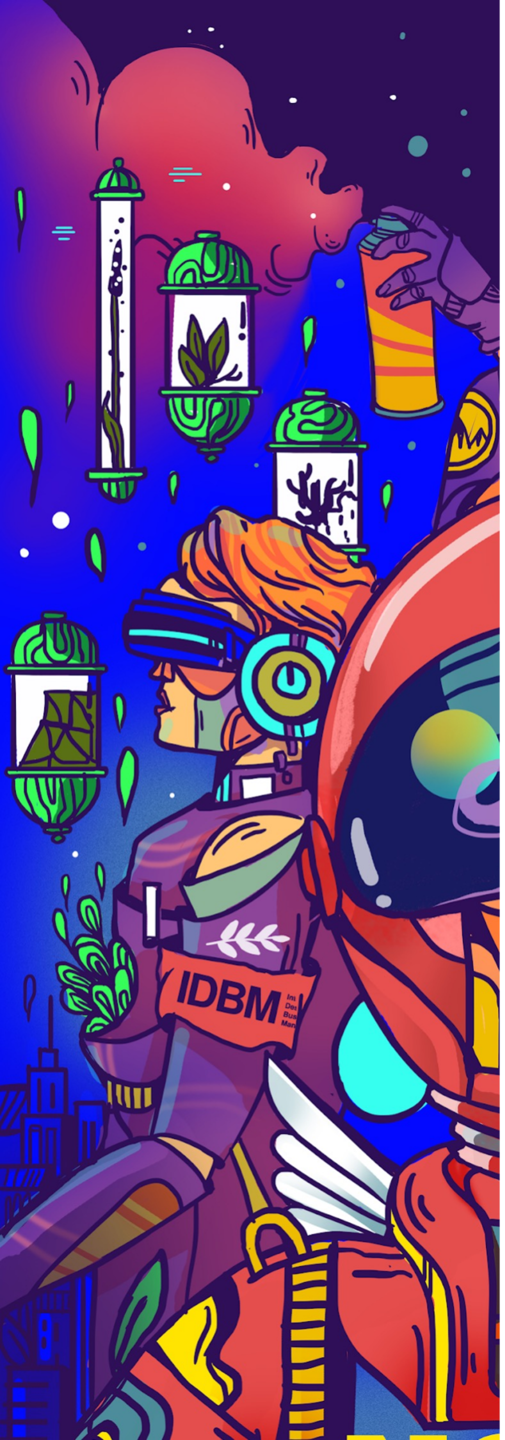
What do we know so far?

- Intercultural competence has been shown to be a crucial factor behind individuals adjusting to (Abugre & Debrah, 2019; Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2014; Froese, 2012) and thriving in diverse contexts (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016; Leung et al., 2014).
- We now know how local language proficiency helps individuals to thrive in the host country and organization (Peltokorpi, 2007; Tenzer et al., 2021).
- Native-level fluency does not always lead to effective communication (Peltokorpi & Pudelko, 2021).
- Yet, it remains little understood and explored how individuals working in foreign contexts learn to utilize language to achieve various communicative purposes.



Social practice perspective

- Language is not something that exists out there but it “emerges *in situ* through interaction among MNC employees making use of their linguistic resources in specific situations” (Karhunen et al., 2018: 994)
- ”Although team members use the same linguistic system, e.g. English, ‘they hear in a variety of different ways’ (p. 69) and need to be aware of this diversity in order to negotiate shared understandings” (Kassis Henderson, 2005 in Karhunen et al., 2018: 994)
- Also, how corporate context influences how language is used (Logemann & Piekkari, 2015)
- In essence, meaning and communicative outcomes emerge from individuals using language in a specifix context



Humor as a social practice

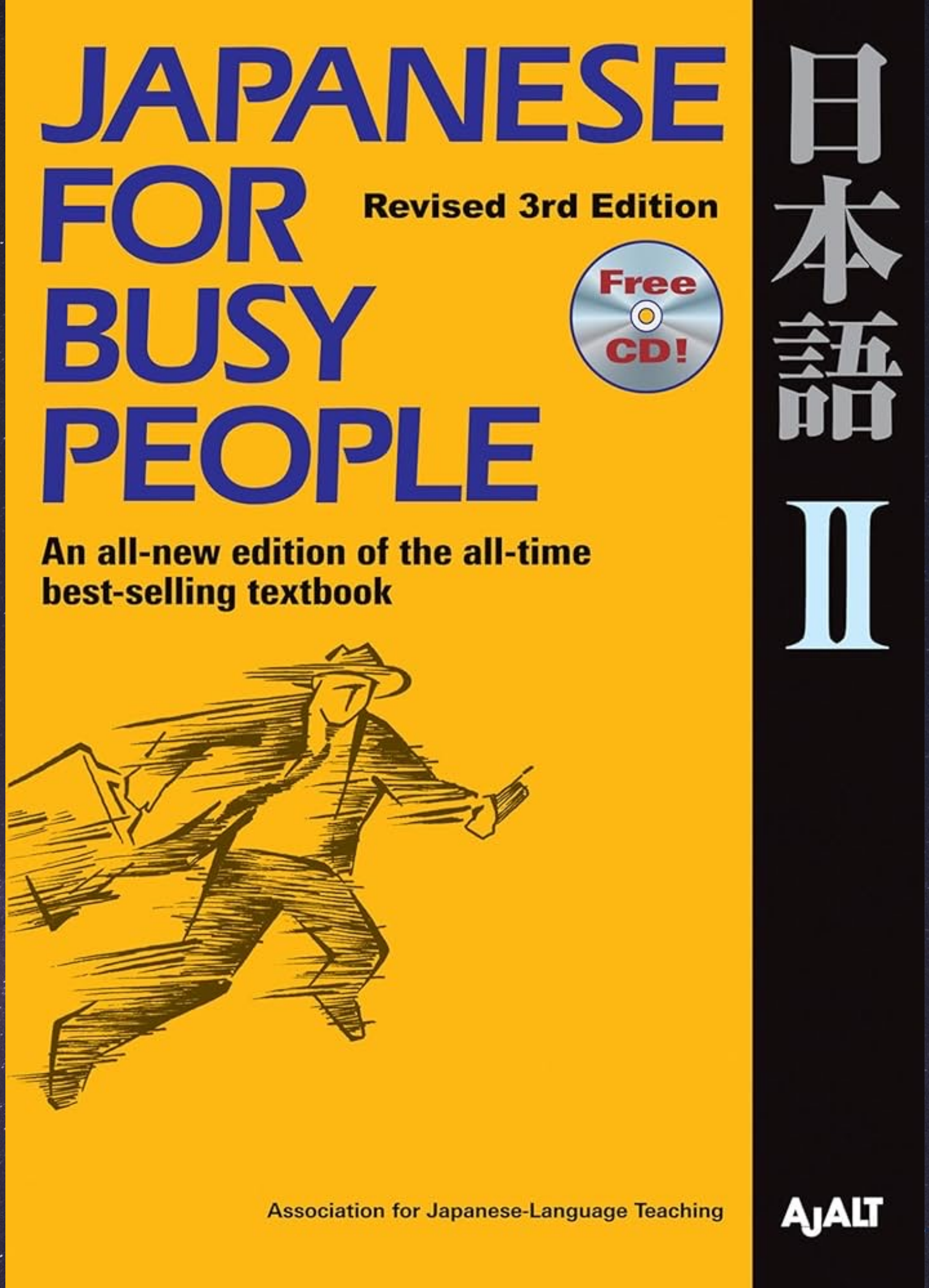
- Humor arises from identifying incongruities in social situations (Hatch & Erhlich, 1993)
- As such, humor is not something static but evolves through individuals engaging with the sociocultural environment

If I don't want to do something, like picking up the phone or writing an email, I'll just pretend that I can't speak Japanese and make a joke about it. Maybe hinting that you might be able to do it more efficiently than I can, instead of offering to take your job and answer the phone myself. (Participant M26)

- To be able to use humor, one must know what the *status quo* looks like
- What might we learn from investigating humor in the context of Nordic expatriates in Tokyo, Japan?

Given that prior research has predominantly focused on exploring how achieving native-level fluency helps people thrive in foreign settings, we seem to have neglected humor as a crucial vantage point.

Put differently, what might I be trying to achieve in this talk by being humorous? How do I learn what you find funny or amusing?


JAPANESE FOR BUSY PEOPLE
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An all-new edition of the all-time best-selling textbook
Association for Japanese-Language Teaching
日本語 II
AJALT

44 Nordic expatriates living and working in Tokyo were interviewed in 2018.

Different industries, AEs & SIEs, 0 to 10 years spent in Japan.

Interview focus: background information, participant’s sense of humor and their understanding of Japanese sense of humor, how the interviewee utilizes humor both at and outside work, and work-related situations where the interviewee considered humor to have either negative or positive consequences

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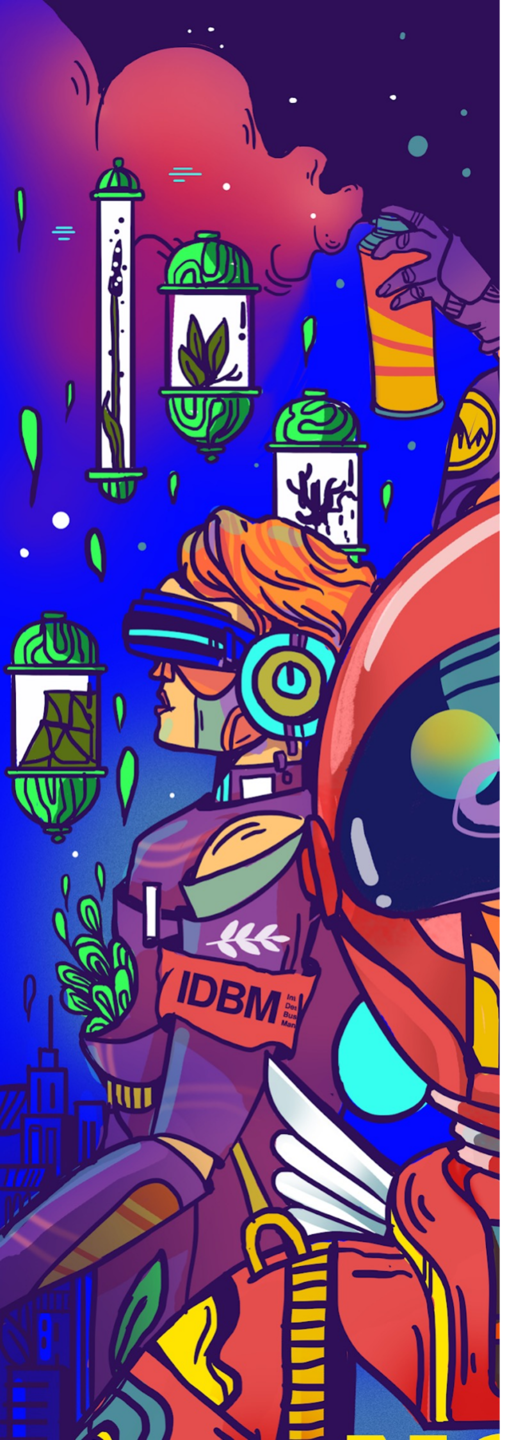
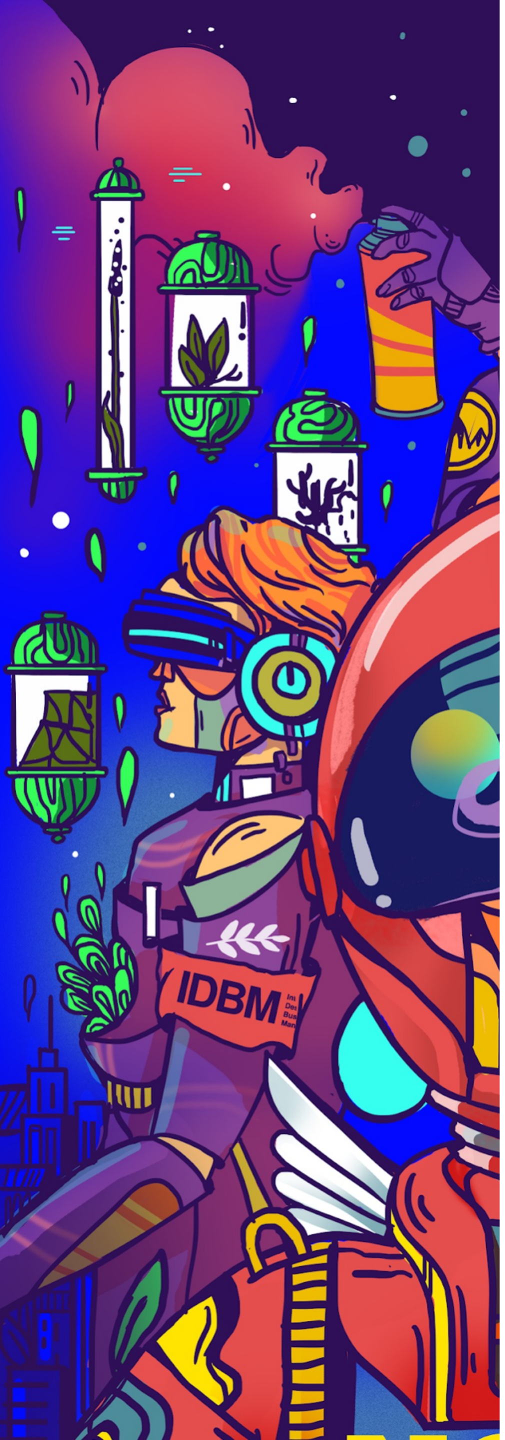


Data analysis

- Three phases
- During the first phase, we worked with the original data by reading and rereading the transcripts to identify instances where the participants discussed humor.
- During the second phase, we categorized the codes according to ELT's four stages (concrete experience (87 codes), reflective observation (125), abstract conceptualization (73), and active experimentation (75)) (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).
- During the third phase, we investigated codes from each ELT stage more closely by focusing on how our interviewees employed humor in the host country context and with what implications in mind.

Experiential learning theory stage	Description
Concrete experience	“In the workplace, what I notice is mostly situational humor, and how some Swedish person has done something funny, that’s strange in Japan.” (M6) “Maybe that it’s just over the line. It’s like jackass but damaging people or hurting people. It’s just over the line of what would you do in Scandinavia. You would never be naked in a TV program or have another guy stuffing his face into nether parts.” (M30)
Reflective observation	“When you meet with some people, authorities, strange people first, then you are careful in the beginning. Then you meet them again and again you learn to know them. Then you know what is appropriate and what is not.” (M27) “If they’re my clients, I will be extremely careful. I say there’s not much I can’t joke about, but probably with them, there’s not much I … I don’t know, I wouldn’t take any chances.” (M13)
Abstract conceptualization	“It definitely translates over to humor as well. It wouldn’t be appropriate to do a physical humor joke in my office. As a foreigner or for Japanese.” (M5) “Not now, consciously, but initially, I remember trying to crack jokes about something and it would just fall flat. First it was the irony, but even when I took that away and tried to say it, sometimes the jokes were direct translations, and it just didn’t work.” (M14)
Active experimentation	“It’s something that I adjusted myself to. I don’t really know what kind of jokes I’m throwing. I guess I just threw a joke and then I watch how the other person reacted. Then I learned through that way, kind of what not to throw at them and what I can.” (M26) “Maybe more in English, I think. In Japanese, sometimes. If I joke, it’s gonna be, like … I can’t think of an example right now, but if you have a word, and then you change it a little bit, the meaning changes, or something like that.” (F2)

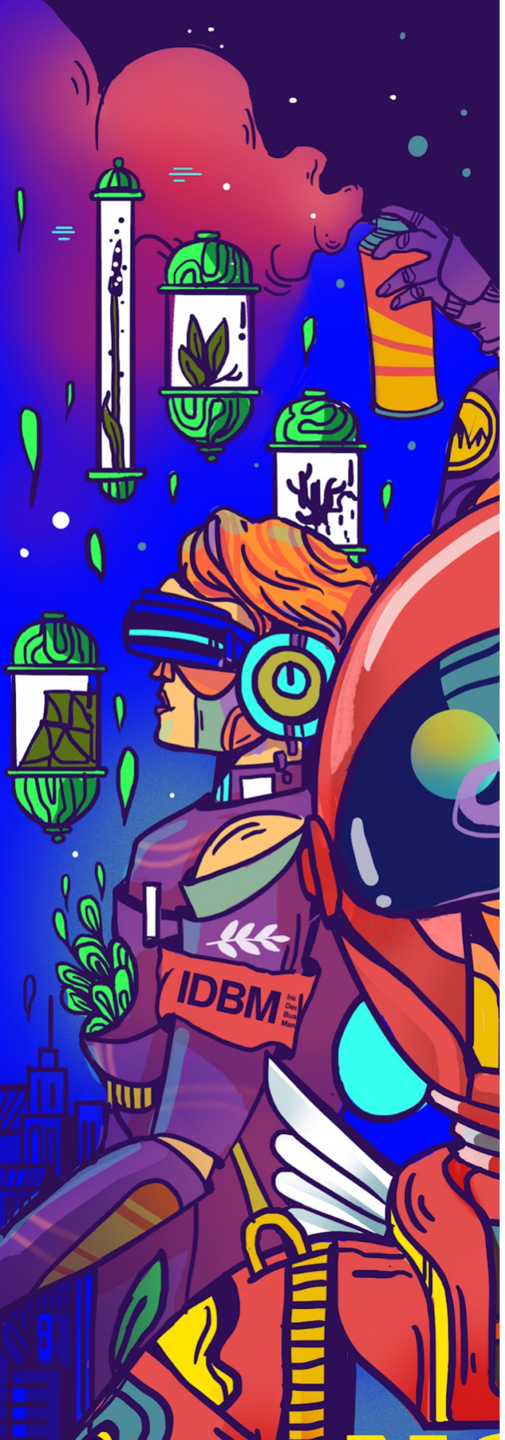
Property	Representative data	Description
Concrete experience	"Well, first of all, in terms of like anything that's formal or any kind of like registrations, or processes, I don't think humor has helped there at all. It doesn't help that you go to the immigration office, and you crack a joke. It doesn't take you anywhere. It just makes things even more difficult." (M4) "There is a lot of joking. It's not, like, practical jokes and stuff like that. But I guess a lot of it is just laughing at funny situations at work, you know, misunderstandings, or laughing at certain situations that occur." (M13)	Being able to understand in what situations humor does not have intended outcomes. Using humor as a common ground to achieve social cohesion.
Reflective observation	"On the other hand, if I'm in meetings with other academics or whatever in a casual setting like it is now it's a little better, I'm never laughing with my supervisor. There's this clear hierarchy that he's my supervisor and he's speaking English or whatever, and he's really nice and doing whatever he can, but it would just not fit in, do you know what I mean? I think engaging in humor, I don't know if this is true, but it would almost make the hierarchy between us go away, and that's a no no in Japan in that particular situation." (M12) "I mean, it's easier now to understand or to anticipate what people's reactions to things that you say and things that you do will be." (M7)	Reflecting on how humor could be used as a means to challenge social norms and conventions. Observing social situations as being heavily scripted, thus realizing when humor can be used to achieve specific purposes.
Abstract conceptualization	"Maybe that's one of the things that is difficult in here because I think a Westerner would have an easier time in other places in Western countries to adapt and maybe people would have that, but like at the workplace, the humor would be a bigger part. If I say like what I consider like a joke or lightly about something, it's like the look on the faces is like, "What? No."" (M11) "In private, I speak my mind more, what I actually speak. At the workplace, I'm more, I go by the, what I think seems to be the rules." (M23)	Drawing boundaries between insiders and outsiders to understand what kind of humor can be mobilized. Consciously mobilizing different ways of using humor at and outside work.
Active experimentation	"…now that I do my executive education … yeah, I do get the managers to laugh. Not laughing with me, but there is humor involved. And it's not because I'm purposely trying to be funny. I think I've learned to take what they say and repeat it in a way that makes them laugh. So, I'll be like, "okay, so why do we need to go global?" …someone goes, "oh, because we need to make money.' I'm like, "okay. Money." And I'll write it big on the wal". And they think that's funny." (M14) "Now if I would make a joke like how this is strange and stupid in Japan that's not a good thing. I would avoid that a lot. More like when it comes to the national differences maybe I could compare Finish and Japanese in some but put them on the same level not that this is better in Finland and this is in Japan so hahaha like somehow but also not mocking Finland either, so the same level definitely." (F7)	Drawing on Japanese comedy repertoire to foster interaction. Reconciling possible discrepancies between one's sense of humor and what kind of humor is acceptable in Japan.



Data analysis

- Prior research on humor styles and functions can be understood via two continua; namely, self- / other-directed (e.g. Martin et al., 2003; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006) and power- / cohesion-focused (e.g. Duncan, 1982; Westwood & Rhodes, 2007).
- To maximize mutual exclusivity, the two continua were used to create a 2x2 matrix onto which we mapped the codes from the four ELT stages.
- Four practices of the development of intercultural competence
- We named these practices based on what each of them reveals about the development of intercultural competence: **coping** (self and cohesion), **disarming** (other and cohesion), **mingling** (self and power), and **shaping** (other and power).

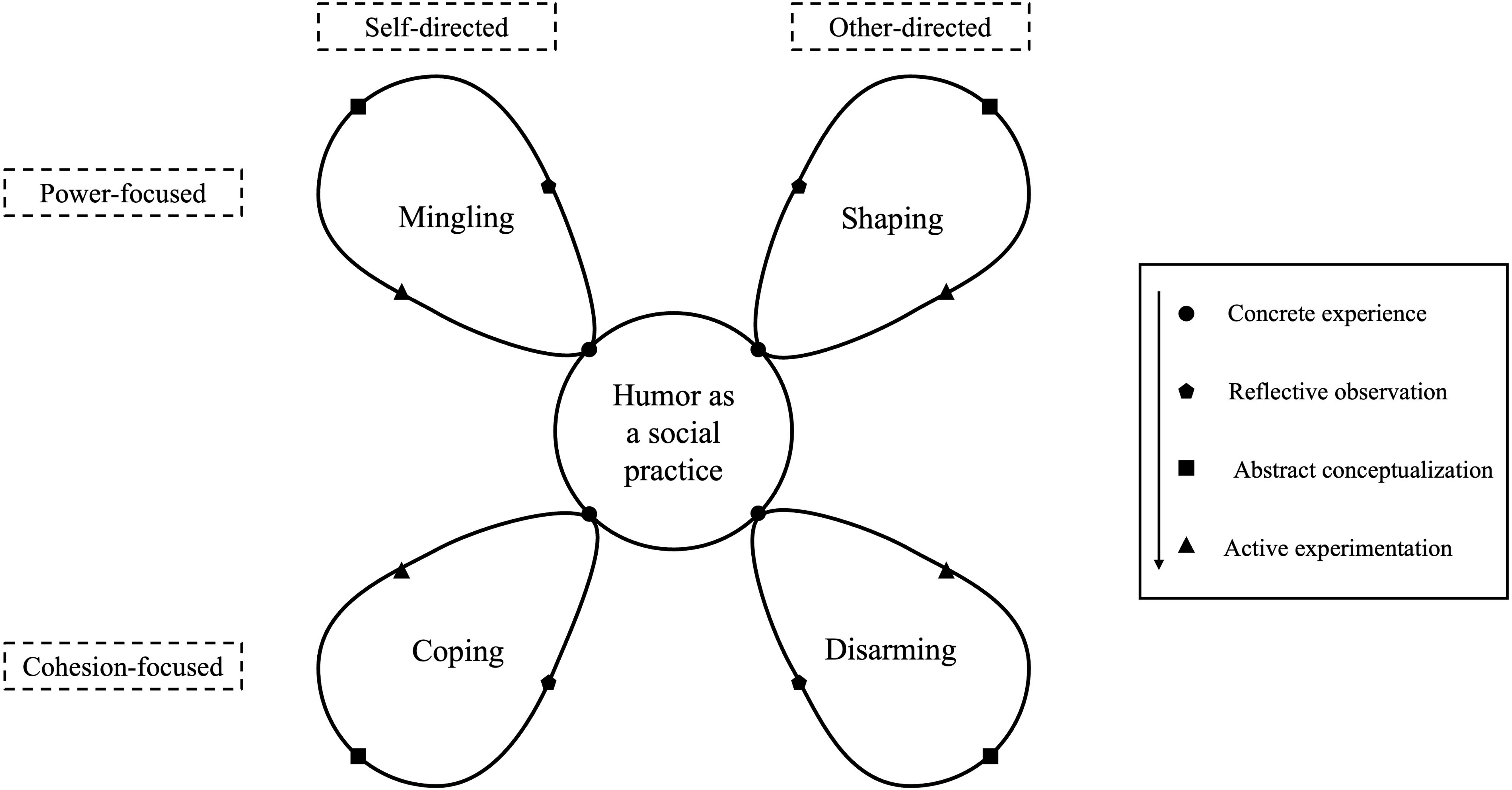
	1) Concrete experience	2) Reflective observation	3) Abstract conceptualization	4) Active experimentation
Coping **(utilizing humor to alleviate stress arising from being in a new context)**	Absence of familiar humor, social isolation, nonconforming	Distancing from home culture, distinction between work and leisure time, global and local practices	Humor as culturally bound, self-protection, social awareness	Venting frustrations, sense-making
Disarming **(mitigating cultural differences)**	Cultural bridging, conforming to social norms	Humor as social lubricant, language as mediating social distance	Language as influencing humor, understanding hierarchies	Understanding language's affordances, humor as creating cohesion
Mingling **(using humor for own well-being)**	Understanding one's linguistic limitations, social acceptance	Adjusting humor based on the other person, navigating in-group and out-group distinctions	Conforming to social conventions, understanding professional expectations	Experimenting with humor, humor for well-being purposes, learning from the locals
Shaping **(harnessing humor's ability to challenge status quo)**	Positionality vis-à-vis verbal and written communication, formalizing linguistic competences	Humor revealing power structures and hierarchies, the importance of knowing the host country culture	Taking advantage of linguistic conventions, humor as subverting hierarchies	Utilizing slapstick humor according to local conventions, using otherness for achieving something

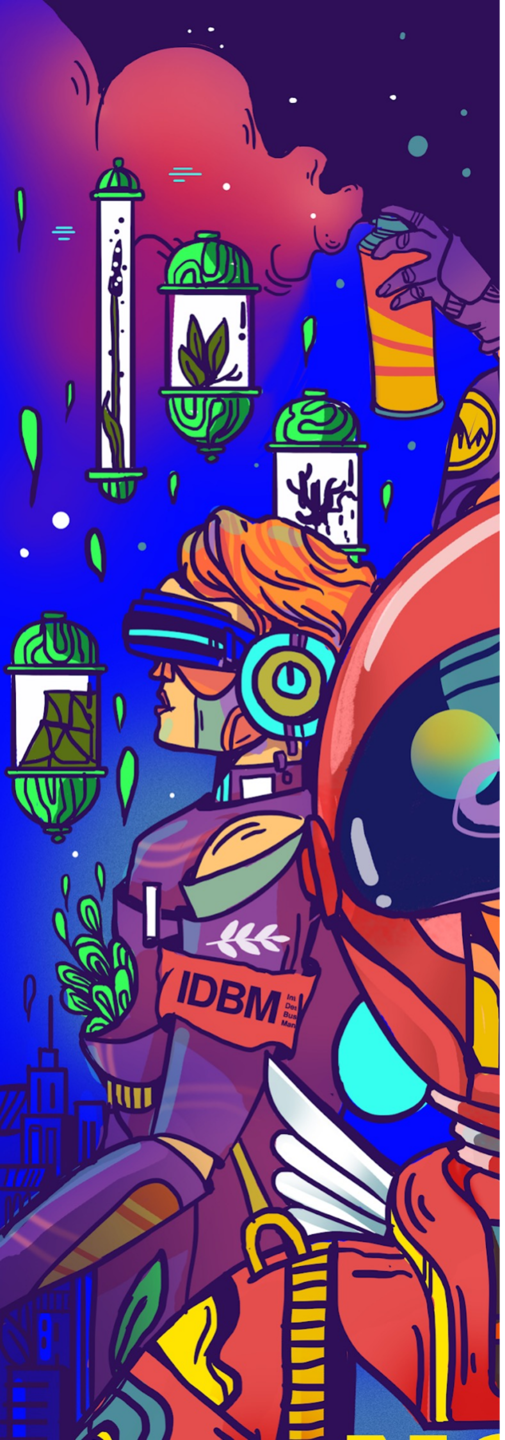


Findings: four practices

- Coping: employing humor mostly to release stress arising from working and living in a foreign context
- Disarming: seeking rapport
- Mingling: altering one's style and sense of humor becomes more prevalent as individuals become more aware of the social practices in which they are embedded
- Shaping: how focus can shift from socializing to using humor to change the situation into a more favorable one from the expatriate's point of view

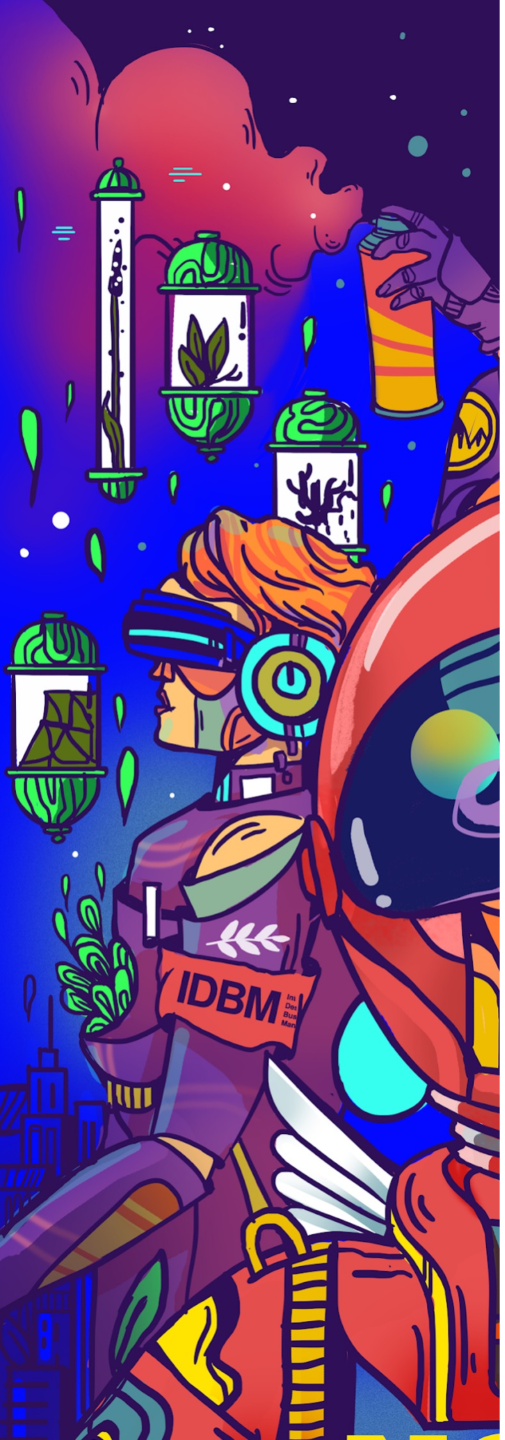
…the four practices emerge "from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (Kolb, 2014: 51) through "synergetic transactions between the person and the environment" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005: 194). While each practice serves different means, taken together they illustrate how humor as a social practice broadens an individual's intercultural competences.


Self-directed
Other-directed
Power-focused
Cohesion-focused
Mingling
Shaping
Coping
Disarming
Humor as a social practice
● Concrete experience
⬟ Reflective observation
■ Abstract conceptualization
▲ Active experimentation



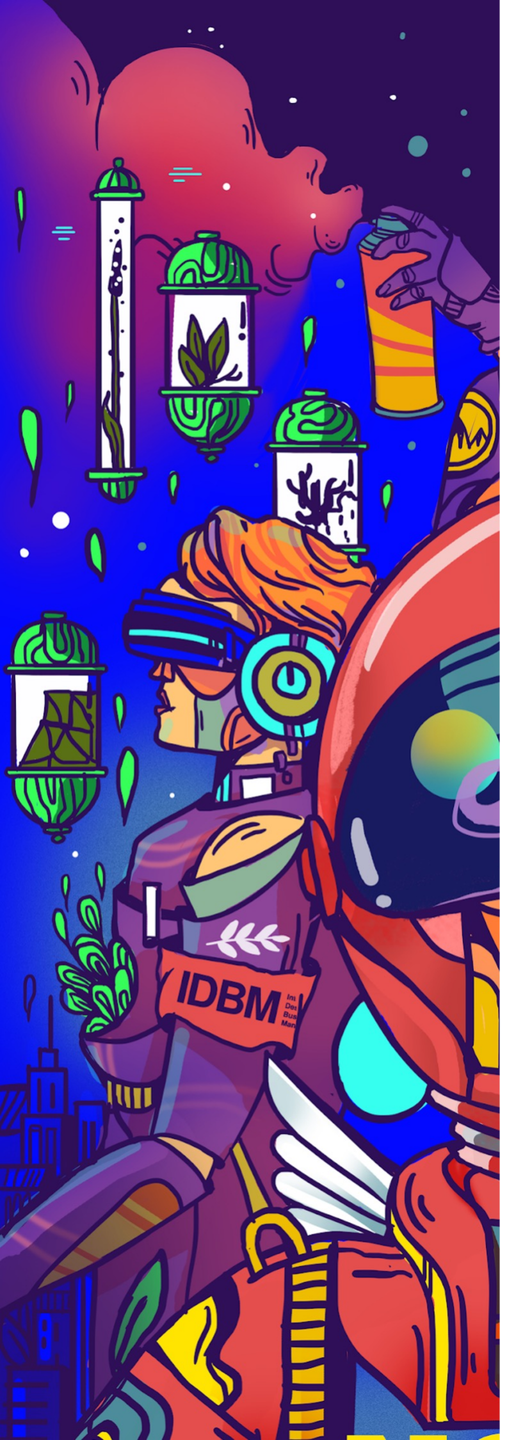
Coping

- “Yes, of course, like I have experienced that some people who come in, like visiting Japan or other cultures and then they give a speech, whatever, the represent themselves and so on…They try to be funny, but then they make jokes out of completely wrong items. This is a good example. This new US president will sometimes try to be funny but actually he’s embarrassing himself.” (M27)
- If I didn’t use humor, I would probably be very, very depressed right now. So, it’s like a self-protection mechanism.” (F1)
- “I think Japanese sense of humor tends to be very much quite straightforward, quite simplistic, often quite physical especially if it doesn’t involve yourself. Japanese people obviously think pain is funny. Japanese people also have a bit of penalizing humor. In all types of society, you don’t make fun of weaker people. Well, you can but it’s not entirely appropriate. Well here, the least talented member of the team gets picked on a lot.” (M8)



Disarming

- “Yeah. It’s definitely the oldest guy or the older guy who’s being funny. Of course, there’s always this hierarchy of where you are in the group. They would never make fun of a guy who’s older than you. That’s not always a problem in the western countries, because ironic humor, in Denmark it’s very normal.” (M30)
- “They said that I’m complaining a lot and I was like, “That’s sarcasm,” but yeah that’s when I learned … So, I learned that the sense of humor is different … and then I started feeling really bad because sense of humor is something I really consider … it’s like a sign of how you think.” (F7)
- “I am an authority and I can understand some people, they have a natural disgust to authorities or some kind of at least respect … Some people obviously become nervous when they have to talk to a government person of authority. This seems to be a very normal reaction, so I have to soften the situation very often. I have to be friendly, even funny to make them feel more comfortable until I show that you can relax, I’m not a bad guy.” (M27)



Mingling

- “Well, first of all, in terms of like anything that’s formal or any kind of like registrations, or processes, I don’t think humor has helped there at all. It doesn’t help that you go to the immigration office, and you crack a joke. It doesn’t take you anywhere. It just makes things even more difficult.” (M4)
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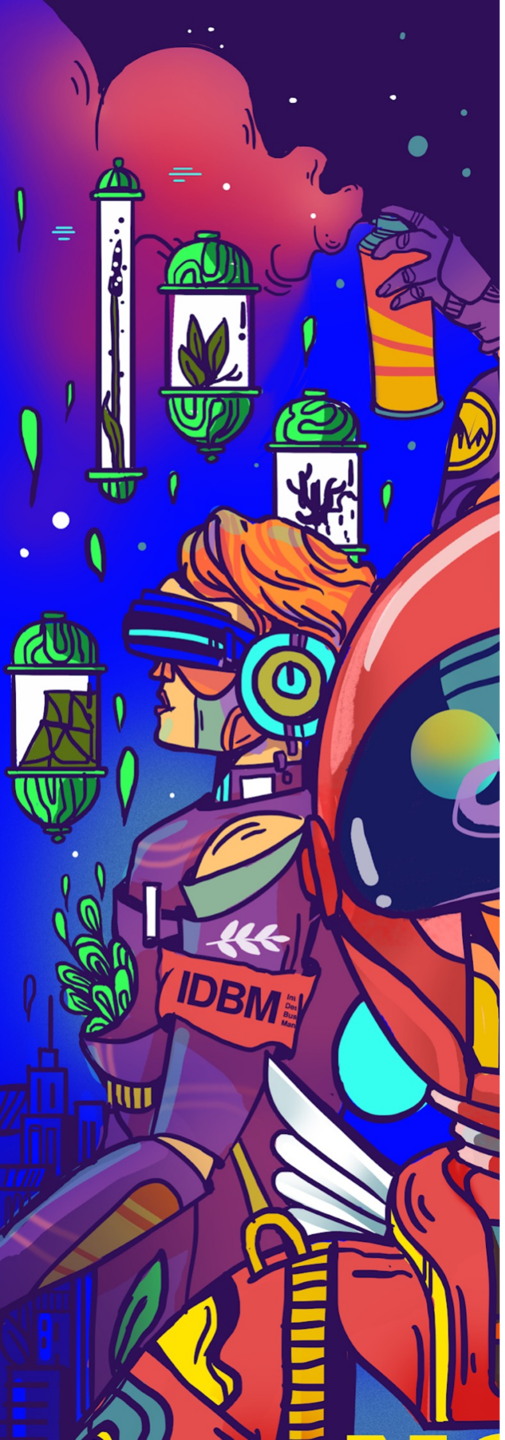
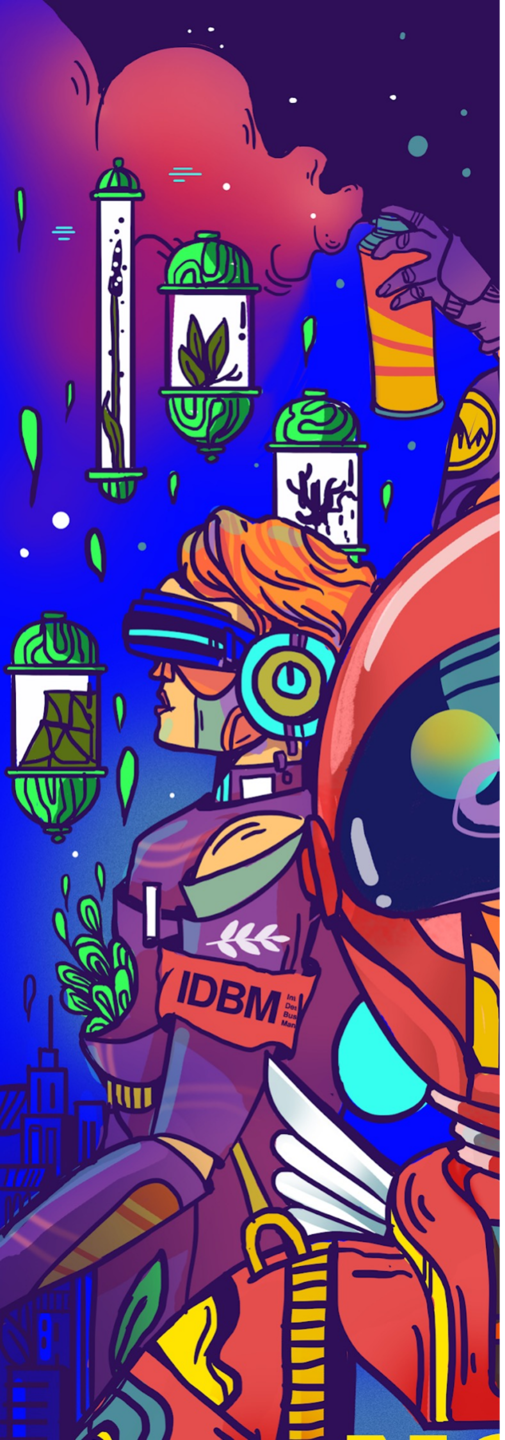


Shaping

- “And the other thing is, Japanese humor is very physical. It’s almost slapstick. And I know that but I can’t always do it correctly. And sometimes I don’t want to because I think it’s silly. ‘Cause it’s also built into hierarchy. There’s a lot of more senior people slapping more junior people on the head and that gets people to laugh.” (M14)
- “Recently we had a meeting with scriptwriters and directors and also with producers and the production staff. They were discussing the type of things we would like to include in the script, and should we include this certain element. And I was against that. I didn’t think it was a good idea. They kind of used me being a geek and otaku, and sort of used that in a funny way as well to make the director understand that that’s not something we should be putting in, concerning the otaku you’re aiming at. Then it was kind of probably easier for me to be the person to express that because … well, a foreigner and the weird guy, kind of. It was not a sensitive topic, but something that usually might not be discussed about.” (F4)



In conclusion

- First, rather than being a separate set of skills, the advancement of intercultural competence is a process of sociocultural accumulation that reflects the increasing humor repertoire of the individual as well as their understanding of how and when to use humor across social situations and based on their positionality in their organization.
- Second, different uses of humor by globally mobile employees differ in terms of their positionality, purpose, and target.
- Third, we also make theoretical inroads in terms of elucidating how individuals on international assignments not only adjust to their new sociocultural context, but how knowledge of institutional and organizational norms and values can also be mobilized to challenge and even transform the context in question.

What spoke to you?

What was interesting?

How does this study connect with what you’re doing?

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