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Title - "I feel like everyone does it"- Adolescents' perceptions and Awareness of the Association between Humour, Banter, and Cyberbullying

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Abstract

Literature has acknowledged the alliance between face-to-face bullying behaviours and humour. However, comparably, little is known regarding humour and cyberbullying. Humour may be a motivating factor and, as such, explain why some individuals engage in cyberbullying. This study aimed to gain insight into adolescents' views and perceptions of how humour and 'banter' play a role within cyberbullying. Seven focus groups were carried out with 28 United Kingdom based secondary school students (female =20, male=8) aged between 11 and 15 years old. Reflexive thematic analysis identified three prominent overarching themes which became salient across each focus group: Banter as a social interaction, Online misinterpretation, and "Bad" banter and cyberbullying. Results indicate young people have a shared understanding of online humoristic aggressive behaviours, such as online banter, describing them as ambiguous and difficult to interpret. Participants demonstrated an understanding of how ambiguity, caused by the online environment combined with banter interactions, can be interpreted as perceived or fully acknowledged cyberbullying behaviour. Motivations for these behaviours are considered within the findings of the data analysis and previous literature. Findings are discussed with potential preventative implications and considerations for future research.

Keywords: cyberbullying, adolescent, humour, cyberbanter, cyberteasing, moral disengagement

1. Introduction

Ofcom (2018) report that 83% of 12- to 15- year-olds own a smartphone and that 99% spend on average 20.5 hours online a week in the UK. The benefits of information and communication technologies are especially advantageous for building and maintaining relationships (Livingstone et al., 2017; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). However, electronic communication can also be utilised to victimise others in the form of cyberbullying, which can lead to psychological harm (Nixon, 2014; Przybylski & Bowes, 2017). Exploring what

motivates young people to cyberbully others would lead to a more comprehensive understanding of how to manage and prevent cyberbullying (Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Paris, & Cutts, 2010; Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012). One consistently reported motivation for engaging in cyberbullying is for a “joke” or “for fun” (Baas, de Jong, & Drossaert, 2013; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). The current study adopted a qualitative approach to examine how 11- to 15-year-olds from the UK understand and perceive cyberbullying within the context of humour.

Cyberbullying is a form of aggression that is generally viewed as an extended version of traditional bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2018). The definition of cyberbullying involves a repeated and intentional aggressive act directed towards a victim who cannot easily defend themselves, which occurs electronically (Olweus, 2013; Wolke, Lereya, & Tippett, 2016). There are various forms of reported cyberbullying behaviours. Nocentini, Calmaestra, Schultze-Krumbholz, Scheithauer, Ortega and Menesini (2010) experimentally categorised cyberbullying into four types of behaviours, verbal/written text (i.e., phone calls, text messages, online text), visual acts (i.e., sharing or sending photographs or videos), excluding others purposely from group communication, and impersonating another (i.e., using another person’s online account or name negatively). A recent study compiled prevalence rates of cyberbullying activity for adolescents from 159 studies (Brochado, Soares, & Fraga, 2017). For the recall period of in the past year, the prevalence range for reported cyber victimisation was 1.0-61.1%. Prevalence variability was suggested to be related to intra country differences, varied cultural contexts, and varied research methods used to obtain the data (Brochado et al., 2017). Although there is variability in the reported prevalence of experiencing cyberbullying, the prevalence rates suggest that for some adolescents experiencing cyberbullying is a regular occurrence and, as such, it is important to understand the motives behind engaging in cyberbullying behaviours.

In addition to the prevalence rates of cyberbullying, frequently reported negative outcomes related to being a target of cyberbullying activity indicate the crucial need for preventative measures. Attributable emotional outcomes reported by adolescents who have been victims of cyberbullying are anger, frustration, sadness, feeling extremely upset, frightened, and embarrassed (Beran & Li, 2005; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). The most prominent negative consequences related to being a victim of cyberbullying are higher scores for depressive symptoms (Perren, Dooley, Shaw, & Cross, 2010; Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012), anxiety and

distress (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Reeckman & Cannard, 2009), low self-esteem (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), and experiencing greater loneliness (Şahin, 2012) in comparison to those who were not victimised. Consequently, there is strong evidence to suggest that being a target of cyberbullying is damaging and psychologically harmful for young people. Gaining further insight into young peoples' online perpetration behaviours may enable practitioners to accurately identify and manage cyberbullying behaviours in order to reduce the prevalence rates and impact of cyberbullying on victims.

Humour has been reported as being one motivational factor for cyberbullying perpetration. Limited, yet salient, research indicates cyberbullying perpetration to be an enjoyable activity for some (Topcu, Yıldırım, & Erdur-Baker, 2013; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008) or a behaviour that is for the purpose of humour or joke (Englander, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Evidence for the existence of humour and jokes used in cyberbullying is provided by Huang and Chou's (2010) research with high school students. Results from self-report measures found that 64.3% of bystanders have witnessed cyberbullying in the form of a joke. Further, victims (32.3%) and perpetrators (18.2%) also reported to have been cyberbullied that took the form of being made fun of. Young people have justified cyberbullying behaviours such as name calling and criticising comments as harmless jokes (Baas et al., 2013). Although there is some evidence regarding how humour is perceived in cyberbullying, very little research has considered how humour is characterised or how it is operationalised within the framework of the cyberbullying definition.

1.1 Humour and cyberbullying

Distinguishing between a harmless joke and cyberbullying behaviour is reported to be difficult for young people. Baas et al. (2013) considered perspectives of 11- and 12-year-olds regarding humour and cyberbullying behaviour. Their findings suggest that adolescents struggle to differentiate between humour and cyberbullying due to characteristics of the online environment. Baas et al. surmised that online humour that is directed at others could lead to an underestimation of the degree of severity from the perpetrators' viewpoint. In such cases, acts of innocent, humoristic online behaviours will be interpreted to be more hostile than they would be in face-to-face situations ultimately creating a sense of ambiguity, which distorts the victims' perception of the perpetrators' intentions. Supporting these findings, Smith et al. (2008) inferred from their focus group data that some cyberbullying could be

viewed as fun due to the victim not being physically present, leading to a lack of empathy from the perspective of perpetrator for the target. From these findings we propose that online humour is more likely to be ambiguous and therefore interpreted as cyberbullying. Consequently, humour may play a larger role in cyberbullying perpetration than in traditional bullying perpetration.

Researchers have recognised humour to have the ability to obscure perpetrator intentions, making it difficult for victims to subjectively perceive jokes as harmless or hostile, bullying behaviour (Carerra, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011). Considering the views of young people, Topcu et al. (2013) conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 year old students who had experienced cyberbullying. Participants consistently stated joking to be the primary reason for why others engage in cyberbullying, clarifying that humorous cyberbullying had no intent to cause harm. Topcu et al.'s findings, however, contradict Olweus' (2013) cyberbullying definition which emphasises that an act of cyberbully includes clear intent to cause harm. The incongruence between Topcu et al.'s findings and Olweus' definition indicate two points of interest. First, young people can conceptually ignore intentionality within an act of cyberbullying when it involves humour. Second, practitioners who are being guided by policy which states the definition of cyberbully and includes intention to cause harm, may overlook 'humorous' cyberbullying. If this was to occur it could result in a group of adolescents who experience the negative outcomes of cyberbullying who are not correctly identified as victims. Furthermore, Topcu et al.'s (2013) findings challenge the definitional aspect of intentionality, which alters the concept of the cyberbullying and therefore how it is operationalised within research. For instance, the ambiguity of jokes within the cyberbullying literature has led some researchers to use joking as a control variable for intent (Menesini et al., 2012) as this was proposed by previous literature to be appropriate according to the cyberbullying definition (Langos, 2012; Noncentini et al., 2010). Further investigation in to how humour and jokes interplay with adolescents' perception of cyberbullying is needed in order for future research to accurately define and measure cyberbullying.

1.2 Cyberteasing and cyberbanter

One form of behaviour which has been reported to be both humoristic and aggressive in relation to bullying behaviour is teasing or banter (Dynel, 2008; Khosropour & Walsh, 2001; Kowalski, 2000). The fine line between prosocial teasing and anti-social verbal bullying behaviour has been acknowledged within the bullying literature (Kruger, Gordon, &

Kuban, 2006; Mills & Carwile, 2009). However, sparse consideration has been given to teasing and banter and how it conceptually relates to cyberbullying behaviour. Furthermore, cyberteasing and cyberbanter as phenomena have received little research coverage in comparison to teasing and banter in the non-virtual sense. This raises the need for a qualitative approach to gain insight into adolescents' understanding of how humour, cyberteasing/cyberbanter, and cyberbullying are related.

Teasing can be used by young people to positively build and maintain friendships and demonstrate affection (Keltner, Capps, Kring, Young, & Heerey, 2001; Weger & Truch, 1996). Cyberteasing can have no intent to cause harm and is between those of equal power, i.e. friends (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). However, hurtful teasing has been conceptualised as the most common type of bullying (Jansen et al., 2012; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Hurtful teasing or hurtful cyberteasing is considered to be deliberate verbal aggression intended to cause distress to the victim (Infante, 1987; Madlock & Westerman, 2011; Warm, 1997). General teasing can be defined as ''the juxtaposition of two potentially contradictory acts: (a) a challenge to one or more of the target's goals and (b) play'' (Mills & Babrow, 2003, p. 278). Similarly, banter has been described as a playful interaction between individuals that serves to improve the relationship, which can involve innocuous aggression (Dynel, 2008). The contrast between challenge and play can create an ambiguous social interaction and requires non-verbal social cues, such as tone or voice and facial gestures (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Shapiro, Baumeister, & Kessler, 1991), to mitigate the interaction and display hurtful or benign intention. A notable distinction between online and offline communication is the ability to use physical and social cues (Baruch, 2005), which highlights how teasing and banter may be perceived differently online as opposed to offline. Focus group research with young people has identified online banter as a form of humour having the potential to escalate into cyberbullying due to the ambiguity of humour (Betts & Spenser, 2017). Supporting research involving adult participants found cyberteasing to instigate offline conflicts, with higher prevalence for hurtful cyberteasing reported than face to face hurtful teasing (Madlock & Westerman, 2011). Together, this evidence suggests cyberteasing or cyberbanter has a close relationship with cyberbullying and may occur more online than offline, which would increase the likelihood of becoming a victim of cyberbullying.

2. Research questions

Despite some studies highlighting jokes and humour as potential motives of cyberbullying behaviours (Englander, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the role of humour in adolescents' experiences of cyberbullying. Therefore, qualitative methods were adopted in the current study as a starting point to gain insight as no prior research has directly considered an association between humour, banter, and cyberbullying. The focus group approach was chosen over other methods, such as interviews, as focus groups have been suggested to mirror a more natural form of communication for young people (Eder & Fingerson, 2002) and therefore promote a more in-depth discussion (Carey, 1994). The term 'banter' was used instead of 'teasing' to ensure the focus group questions were as realistic and accurate to the current use of wording for adolescents, as demonstrated in Betts and Spenser's (2017) research. In view of the consistent evidence indicating that humour and cyberbanter have a prominent role within cyberbullying behaviour for adolescents, this study focused on two research questions:

1. What are young people's perspectives of cyberbullying within the context of humour?
2. What does banter mean to young people and how does cyberbanter relate to cyberbullying?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Focus group participants were recruited from two secondary schools situated in the Midlands area of the United Kingdom. In total, 30 schools were contacted during the recruitment phase. Both secondary schools involved in the study have a post sixteen option, educating young people 11-18 years old. One of the schools was larger than the other in terms of enrolled students, one having approximately 1,000 students and the other having approximately 650. 4 focus groups were held at the larger school and 3 at the smaller school. Both schools involved in the study have academy status and were pre-selected with the aim of obtaining a group of participants that are relatively homogenous. Participants for each focus group were initially selected using convenience sampling. This involved teaching staff approaching students and asking them if they would like to take part in focus group research concerning cyberbullying and humour. This method of participant selection was utilised on the basis that the young people who were taking part in the focus groups a) understood the topic being discussed and b) chose to be involved. In total, 28 participants took part in the study, aged between 11 and

15 years old. Table 1 provides details of the focus group participants regarding size of each group and the approximate age of each participant.

Table 1. Focus group and participant information

Focus group	*n*	*n* female	*n* male	Year group
1	3	2	1	10
2	5	5	0	8
3	4	3	1	7
4	3	2	1	7
5	3	3	0	8
6	4	1	3	9
7	6	4	2	10

Note. Year group 7: 11-12 years old, 8: 12-13 years old, 9: 13-14 years old, 10: 14-15 years old.

3.2 Procedure

The focus groups method was selected for this study as it provides the opportunity for participants to consider the subject of discussion and voice ideas, perceptions, preferences, and opinions in their own language (Carey, 2015; Creswell, 2003; Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2011). Focus groups were held by the lead author and generally lasted 45 to 55 minutes. Focus groups were tailored to the needs of the young participants and the potentially distressing topic of discussion. For instance, focus groups involved students of the same year group and so were similar of age as advised by Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, and Wilsdon (1995). A question schedule was produced based on the format recommended by Gibson (2007). Initial ice breaker questions were used which involved questions around favourite Social Networking Sites and communication platforms (e.g., "*Please can we start off with talking about the social network sites, which ones do you use at the moment?"*). These questions were designed to be simplistic in order to set a comfortable tone for the discussion and build a rapport between facilitator and students (Gibson, 2007). Following on after ice breaker questions the discussion led onto questions concerning participant perceptions of cyberbullying and the differences between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, the topic of banter, and how humour and banter can relate to cyberbullying, which was the final discussion section of the question schedule. All focus groups were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Initial permission was gained from the Head teachers which led onto obtaining parental consent for each student selected for the study, attained via an opt-in process. Prior to the focus group taking place, verbal consent was also acquired from each student.

3.3 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019), was applied to the focus group transcripts to analyse participant responses. The analysis was conducted by one coder, an acceptable practise approved by Braun and Clark (2019). This coder stringently followed the six phases of TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The phases were as follows: (a) familiarising with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report. The data analysis was data led and based on the entire data set.

Reflexive TA is a method of analysing data that is firmly placed within a qualitative paradigm. As there has been little research carried out in the subject area of banter/humour, within the phenomenon of cyberbullying, Reflexive TA was applied with an inductive approach allowing the analysis to recognise and reflect meaning from the data without relating to previous ideas or theories. Themes identified by this approach were generally determined from the data set based on their strength of alliance to participants' perceptions and dialogue (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Data analysis included prevalent patterned responses from all participant responses to build meaning to themes and sub-themes related to the research questions. Themes were identified and coded from a semantic level allowing the analysis to prompt explicit, detailed, and meaningful content from significant interpretations made from participant dialogue from across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012). Participants are identified via pseudonyms within the results.

4. Results

Three themes were developed from the focus group data set: Banter as a social interaction, Online misinterpretation and "Bad" banter and cyberbullying. Table 2 provides an overview of each theme and corresponding sub-themes.

Table 2. Identified themes and associated sub-themes

Theme	Sub-theme
1. Banter as a social interaction	Friendly banter
	Offensive banter
2. Online misinterpretation	Online banter
	Social indicators and Context
	Using emojis

3. “Bad” banter and cyberbullying	Euphemistic labelling of banter Popularity and social status

4.1 Banter as a social interaction

Banter consistently represented something similar to the adolescents who took part in the focus groups. Participants understood banter to be a harmless exchange of social interactions between friends which involves teasing or mocking one another either on a one-to-one basis or more commonly on a friendship group basis. Frequent references to banter were terms such as “taking the mick”, “messing around”, “inside jokes”, and “having a laugh”. The banter interaction between friends is a contradictive social situation that involves an offensive/negative comment or action which has no intent to cause emotional injury or to insult. When asked what banter means to them during one focus group, Veronica comments:

Veronica*: I’d say it’s sort of like, picking fun at your friends and stuff like, you’re all in on it and your all like having a laugh.* (Year 7)

Between friends, the outcome of such a comment or action is humour and laughter, which itself can reinforce the friendship. An example provided in one focus group was a student directing jovial comments to their friend who fell off their chair during class that day. Although the humour is resultant at the expense of the individual concerned, no offense is taken or perceived. A clear description of banter was made by Ben and Jayce:

Ben*: But banter’s just kind of, if you know someone well and you know that they won’t get offended or whatever by something they say. Say have a little tease and a joke about it, you know. So let’s say someone’s fallen over something and you kinda laughing at them but you’re like their mate so their just kinda like*,
Jayce: *Laughing with them.*
Ben: *Yeah, laughing with them instead of laughing at them*
(Both year 9)

4.1.1 Friendly banter

Participants’ responses expressed that the foundations of banter lie in the strength of the friendships. For an individual to perceive no offensive within the exchange of banter between friends, they must trust that their friend has no intent to harm them. There also must be a degree of understanding and acceptance between each friend in terms of their knowledge about one another:

Brea*: like with friends you know exactly, well, you might know exactly what they are going through, you might know about their home life, you might know about family life and friendship, and stuff like that, whereas if its someone you don't know, you don't know what's going off at home, you don't know if they've got mental health problems you know, it can obviously effect mental health.* (Brea, year 10)

Banter between individuals who do not know one another was described by students as something that would not usually occur. According to participants, the reason why banter between unknown individuals is unlikely is due to the increased chance that a line of acceptability would be crossed, and offence would be perceived. Without the existence of a friendship or a relationship the recipient of banter could easily feel offended as Charlotte explains:

Charlotte*: you have to be like, quite good friends with them to banter around with someone otherwise somebody you don't know will take it the wrong way and then you'll get in trouble for joking around.* (Year 7)

It would seem there is an unspoken agreement that in most social situations, the targeted offensive comments can only be humorous after a friendship has been established. Holly describes the distinction between friendly banter and banter from non-friends:

Holly: And friends know when like, not to cross the line, not to say something, know, like, personally, like, really upset them and not just be banter but people you don't know, when we're around know just, might say things that might cross the line, with like banter. (Year 10)

4.1.2 Offensive banter

The participants commonly referred to a metaphorical line of acceptability which appears to be fundamental to how banter functions in a social interaction. Participants consistently spoke of a line or referred to someone "crossing the line" or "going too far" within the context of friends and non-friends. When this line of acceptability is crossed, offense is taken by the recipient of banter because the achieved level of offensiveness has reached a degree that is too high for it to be deemed as a contradiction:

Eli: There is that fine line between like, having a joke and then like, actually offending someone… Even if they didn't mean it, it could be classed as like, offensive.
(year 10)

Discussions concerning crossing a line and causing offense lead onto highlighting a number of subjects that adolescents listed to be generally offensive. Subjects to avoid that were mentioned were: referring to another person's family member, comments about appearance and self-harming, comments about someone or something that has died (i.e.

family member, friend or pet), and hate crimes such as racist and homophobic comments. For example, Alan explains a situation which involves banter that has gone too far:

Alan: *You could like, I spose, keep going on about someone's appearance and they could, I don't know, like get to them in a way and then cause, cause them to like self-harm or something or try and lose weight and, or gain weight whatever*. (Year 10)

Spreading a rumour or sharing private media, was also something that was more likely to cause offense and cross the line of acceptability, which would suggest that trust plays an important role between friends and social interaction involving banter. Brea describes how banter can become offensive within a friendship due to media shared without permission:

Brea: *screen shotting something off of someone's social media and then pasting it on your own, with like a harsh caption or something, I think that's (.) quite embarrassing for the person…Like some people might think "oh, it's a joke" I'll do it, we do it, that to each other and that's where it's like banter, whereas if it's just constantly, or even just once it can be extremely embarrassing.* (Year 10)

Having an audience was also highlighted as an environment where banter could potentially cause offense. An audience may involve unknown people which consequently blurs the rules of banter occurring between friends. Depending on the banter interaction, having an audience could cause the individual receiving the banter to feel embarrassed. A participant, Jayce describes having a video on his phone of a friend pulling a silly face and commenting:

4.2 Jayce: I wouldn't dream of putting it on my main account where, to the nearest ten, 400 people would see that because that's not fair on him and 400 people that I don't know specifically or people that I don't necessarily get on with… that's just, adds fuel to the fire. (Year 9).*Online Misinterpretation*

From the data, it appears that online banter does occur but can have its pitfalls. Due to the limitations of online communication, banter becomes a social interaction that has an increased risk of leading to a negative outcome between friends. The internet provides obstacles which can lead to misinterpretation of harmless, yet potentially offensive actions or comments. The judgement that is initially made by an individual on their friend's line of acceptability is more susceptible to misinterpretation online than it is face-to-face.

4.2.1 *Online banter*

Characteristics of online banter are, suggested by the participants' responses, similar to those of face-to-face banter. Participant responses portrayed online banter to occur between friends,

one-to-one but more commonly as a group of friends in a group chat. Participants acknowledged that it would be more difficult to have online banter. One strategy to manage this was given by Rebecca when asked if you can have online banter:

Rebecca*: I'd say a bit but if you say in person and then you just say it online as well it'd be banter but if you just come up like online maybe it might not be banter to the other person.* (Year 8)

This structure of interaction enables safety within the group chat as during the face-to-face interaction the banter was inoffensive which then can allow the online banter to be perceived more clearly.

4.2.2 *Social indicators and Context*

The online misinterpretation theme is generally applied to the subtheme of social indicators within the data. It appears that online communications can be perceived by a recipient in a manner that is more confusing in comparison to communication made face-to-face. Ellie clarifies how online communication can be confusing:

Ellie:*…on text messages and on like social media and things you can't put your expression in there like, how you were supposed to be saying because if you was like joking around you might say a comment and it supposed to be like a joke or a bit of banter but then it can go too far cause the other person thinks "oh, have they said it in a mean way or in a funny way"* (year 7)

It became generally clear that adolescents are highly aware of the lack of social indicators throughout online communication and this was something consistently referred to across all focus groups. Social indicators that are available offline do not exist online, which can place a recipient of banter in a disadvantaged position when evaluating a humorous remark. Therefore, it is evident that adolescents do have a degree of understanding regarding the role of social indicators within online communication as illustrated in the following quote.

Josh*: you can't input your own, you can only type but can't say it in the voice you want to say it in sort of, anything to make it funny or to really like, make it mean, that's (.) the whole point, that's one of the bad things about social media is (.) people can take it wrong ways…* (Josh, year 7)

Participants' responses also acknowledged the lack of context in the online environment. A text message for instance does not have the surrounding framework and information that is usually present in a face-to-face interaction. One participant explains:

Beth; *You can't see the context of the message, like you can't see the way they're saying it, like, and it depends what they're joking about, like some people can be insecure about somethings, more than others can."* (Beth, year 9)

Without context there are limited resources for the recipient to use to evaluate online banter and so this leaves interpretation of communications more open. Jayce clearly describes an experience he had to further demonstrate this subtheme:

Jayce*:… in some groups chats that I've been in is someone's said something about someone as a clear joke and that person hasn't understood the context and then they've had a go (.) said somart back to try un' disprove it, rather than laughing along with it.* (Year 9)

Across the data, focus group responses indicate that misinterpretation of banter is not uncommon between individuals. For instance, in relation to bad banter online, James in year 10 expresses "*I feel like everyone does it…but they don't realise they're doing it sometimes"*. Participant responses portray that misinterpretation of online banter may lead to young people to perceive themselves as a victim of cyberbullying. Stephanie demonstrates how a joke can be taken differently online:

Interviewer: *Which one* (bullying or cyberbullying) *do you think happens more?*
Stephanie: *Cyberbullying*
Interviewer: *Why do you think that is?*
Stephanie: *Because anyone can do it and they can do it without not meaning it because, if its face to face you have to build up courage to say bad stuff about them but if its online you can do the simplest thing and it's still be hurtful to them but you don't know you've done.*
Interviewer: *Why do you think they won't know?*
Stephanie: *Because sometimes people can have jokes with other people about someone and they can be taking the mick out of them but to them that's their humour but to the person's who's it happening to its really upsetting.* (Year 8)

4.2.3 *Using emojis*

Across the sample there was strong evidence that adolescents are using emojis as a strategy to express themselves clearly and to ensure a message is interpreted how the sender intends it to. By using emojis, adolescents are attempting to overcome the lack of social indicators and context and reduce the likelihood of their banter interactions being misinterpreted, as described by Rose:

Rose*: Like, you can tell it's a joke, like say, it says something funny but then like, you reply to them saying "you're such an idiot" but you can put emojis on them, say you put a laughing face, you could just mean it as a joke but if you didn't do anything erm, it could mean that you were, mean it in a bad way. (*Year 7)

Although the majority of participant responses included general discussion around the useful application of emojis, it was acknowledged in some focus groups that they are not fully reliable. Ben demonstrates how emojis can fail to express emotion clearly:

Ben*: … there's not really a piece of punctuation for laughing and anger and (.) whatnot, so. You know, that (emojis) can help people express what they are feeling but it still doesn't go nowhere near expressing what you're feeling in real life.* (Year 9)

4.3 "Bad" banter and cyberbullying

Banter that was classified as 'bad' was identified by the participants as being directly related to the overarching term of bullying or cyberbullying. As Beth (year 8) comments *'Bad banter is cyberbullying, that's what I think'*. Bad banter, according to the participants, generally refers to banter that is perceived as offensive and primarily involves crossing the line of acceptability. Between friends, crossing the line tends to be unintentional and can lead to arguments or flaming and the breakdown of friendships, especially if repetition of the comment occurs, as Jessica demonstrates:

Jessica: *I think like if someone says something to someone and then they like, say like "arr stop it now it's not funny anymore" and they carry on then I think that's when it goes too far because they've asked you to stop and you don't stop.* (Year 8)

Bad banter between non-friends is generally accepted as being bullying/cyberbullying behaviour on the basis of the social norm that banter between non-friends is deemed as offensive generally. Natasha describes the banter between non-friends:

Natasha: *You sort of need to be close to them so that they know it's a joke and you're not really like that, you're not the person who's goes round beating people up or something, it's just a joke cause you're friends.*(year 9)

Offensive banter between friends was suggested by participants to be a more hidden form of bullying and cyberbullying which involves a social dilemma. If the line of acceptability is crossed during a banter interaction and the recipient feels offended, they may decide to hide their offense and a fake a positive, humorous response in order to avoid any conflict or lose the friendship. Jordan (year 9) expresses his opinion on the social dilemma clearly:Jordan*: yeah, well there's a few people that I know that have been put in a group chat and there's someone's that took offense to it that's been sent, and I don't think people will say anything cause they want to stay with that group of people, it' about staying with your friends.* (Jordan, year 9)

An imbalance of power within a friendship group could therefore lead to some individuals having the need to fake their true response. Jessica and Rebecca (year 8) provide an example of faking a response whilst taking about banter interactions between friends:

Jessica: *I'd say banter is like, just like, joking around with your mates like, just a joke.*
Interviewer: *Yeah?*
Rebecca: *That you both find funny though, not just like one person finds funny and everyone's like fake laughing, cause they think it's funny but really they just don't wanna show it's not funny.* 4.3.1 *Euphemistic labelling of banter*

Responses from the focus groups indicated that the alternative situation to the social dilemma is to initiate conflict that may arise from offensive banter between friends. Sophie (year 10) explains "If you got offended by it the other person will be like "oh, it's just banter" and you just have to try and take it as a joke" In this situation, offense has been taken after a friend has unintentionally or intentionally crossed the line and made an offensive comment. In order to bypass an argument, or take any responsibility for the offense that was caused, the word "banter" can be euphemistically used by the instigator to cover the offense and play down the extent of the impact it may have caused. This was acknowledged within the focus group responses as presenting a confusing social situation which could lead to mistrust:

James*: "That's just banter"*
A few participants: yeah. "It's just banter"
Kenzie*: They portray it as a joke.*
Brea*: Yeah, but then it's like, ok, if it's banter then why am I not involved, you know, why yer having, why are yer, why are you joking about me, not with me.* (James, Kenzie, Brea, year 10)

Moreover, euphemistically labelling cyberbullying as banter was also discussed as a frequent occurrence between non-friends as a strategy to avoid retribution, as well as diluting responsibility of their own behaviour. When asked why some people say something is a joke that is really cyberbullying, one participant replies "I think it's to like, they want to say something to other people, but they don't want to get in trouble for it so they create an excuse to get themselves out of trouble" Charlotte (year 7).

4.3.2 *Popularity and social status*

Offensive banter that was deemed to be cyberbullying between non-friends was commonly associated with status and popularity. Having perceived higher peer status was

portrayed to enable an acceptable gateway to the choice of using offensive banter towards others. Individuals with higher amounts of friends online (i.e., followers) and offline were viewed as having greater popularity, protection and superiority. For example:

Kenzie*: Like at school, there might be someone that's not as like, social or popular, so like, if you're with your friends like, just hanging out you might feel like, prank call or something that might like actually hurt them or start doing something online* (year 10).

The rules of banter in this context have taken a shift enabling offensive banter to be socially acceptable for an individual or group with a higher degree of status. A joint discussion between Ben and Jordan demonstrates how euphemistic labelling would be utilised in this scenario:

Ben*: cause sharing that video will make you have more followers or make you more popular or whatever and then, because people don't even want to be bullying you they're just doing it for their own personal gain, in terms of "oh, erm I've got this video of somebody, follow me to look at the video".*
Interviewer*:… in a banter way or just in a mean way?*
Jordan*: A joke.*
Ben*: They try to pass it off in a joke.*
(Both year 9).

Social acceptance for offensive banter, which was also deemed as cyberbullying, was fundamentally related to being perceived being more comparable to others in their peer group. In some situations, those individuals who are different in some way are perceived as being in a lower status group and therefore more vulnerable to offensive jokes made at their expense. The power imbalance is prominently in effect in this situation as bad banter is used to divide higher status from lower status individuals:

Stephanie*:… someone else might not have the best things as you or they might look a bit different to you because that's not like, your like normal, cause that's not basic they're just gonna make fun of that because they've chose to be different and to you that's not good because you just want everyone else to be the same.* (Year 8).

5. Discussion

Reflexive Thematic Analysis yielded three salient themes from across the dataset: banter as a social interaction, online misinterpretation, and "bad" banter and cyberbullying.

5.1 Banter as a social interaction

Banter was generally described as a form of humorous social interaction which entails an aggressive, yet innocuous, playful behaviour directed at another individual. This perception falls in line with Mills and Babrow's (2003) definition of teasing being a challenging yet playful behaviour. Similarly, Dynel's (2006) definition of banter, as an interactional game that serves to unite friendships, also supports the participants' view that banter was perceived to generally occur between friends. Although not all banter or teasing involves a degree of aggression (Dynel, 2006; Mill & Carwile, 2009), the predominant description of banter by participants involved an element of play alongside aggression and antagonism. This suggests that adolescents' teasing and banter interactions are more likely to include aggressive behaviours alongside play.

Banter and teasing can be viewed theoretically in parallel with McGraw and Warren's (2010) Benign Moral Violation theory. McGraw and Warren posit for something to be humorous it must be simultaneously perceived as a moral violation and a benign situation. This aligns with participants' description of banter being offensive; a violation of social norms, but also a benign situation aided by the key context of friendship. According to participants, banter can be offensive and cross a line of acceptability due to several possible reasons (i.e., individual sensitivities, empathy and perception, and harsh subjects, or if the interaction was between non-friends). It was evident that this type of conflicting humour can be a complex social interaction that some young people may struggle to fully grasp and therefore may lead to causing offense, unintentionally. Therefore, young people may need additional support and guidance from older peers, teachers, or parents to understand the complex dynamics of banter to avoid instances of victimisation and any possible negative outcomes.

Participants described friendship as an important criterion for differentiating between a joke and cyberbullying. Supporting this, Vandebosch and Van Cleeput (2008), in their exploration of adolescent perceptions of cyberbullying, conceptualise friendships as relationships with an equal power balance. Specifically, the context of friendship enables banter to be perceived as harmless despite having aggressive connotations. Analysis of the current data indicated banter between friends of equal power could be interpreted as

cyberbullying if a joke had crossed the line of acceptability and was perceived to have negative intentions, therefore overlooking the importance of friendship. Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, and Evans (1998) consider crossing the line to be the point in the teasing interaction where the target believes the teaser has unvalued their relationship. This is supported by Betts and Spenser's (2017) focus group research held with young people outlining online banter as harmless fun between friends but also having the capability to escalate into cyberbullying. Therefore, the definitional criteria of intention, stated within the definition of cyberbullying (Olweus, 2013), may play a greater role than the power criteria within a friendship banter interaction that may be perceived as cyberbullying. Implications of an escalation from banter to cyberbullying could have negative consequences for the victim (Kowalski, 2000), as the initial behaviour could be unintentionally disregarded by practitioners in the position to manage and support those involved. Moreover, bystanders who witness the interaction are likely to have difficulty differentiating between banter and cyberbullying if the interaction occurs between friends. This could have an impact on how bystanders respond to an event in terms of passively ignoring it, supporting the target, or negatively encouraging the behaviour (DeSmet et al., 2014).

5.2 Online misinterpretation

Misinterpretation of online banter is a theme that demonstrates how young people perceive the difficulties of online communication and perceiving humour/banter online. Participants were able to accurately articulate experiences and beliefs about misunderstandings that occur online due to the unique environment which lacks the ability to display facial expressions, tone of voice, and provide relevant situational information. Literature refers to social indicators as redressive verbal and nonverbal messages (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967) and context as social context cues (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; 1991). Nonverbal redressive messages (i.e., tone of voice, facial expression, or body language), and social context cues are utilised in a social interaction, such as teasing (Dehue, Bolman, &Völlink, 2008), to mediate and clarify the intended interpretation of the initial communication (Baruch, 2005). Participants in the current study demonstrated an awareness of how online banter can be misinterpreted as cyberbullying with the absence of social indicators to help correctly interpret intentions. These findings suggest misinterpretation of online banter is more likely to occur than misinterpretation of face-to-face banter and therefore a greater

potential exists for perceived cyberbullying to occur. This issue could additionally be viewed in parallel with the ambiguity that arises with the contradictory nature of aggression and play displayed in teasing and banter behaviours (Kowalski, 2000), and the need for social indicators to indicate clear intentions in face to face interaction.

Supporting young people's awareness of their online communication behaviours is paramount to ensuring adolescents are communicating online with a sense of self-restraint. Low self-control and impulsive behaviours are highly prevalent during adolescent development (Casey & Caudle, 2013), and have been related to cyber perpetration (Holt, Bossler, & May 2011; You & Lim, 2016). Findings from the current study indicate that adolescents could benefit from interventions which facilitate awareness of the absence of nonverbal redressive messages and social context cues. Van Royen, Poels, Vandebosch, and Adam (2017) experimentally considered how self-censorship could be encouraged by reflective messages and a time delay presented prior to posting a hurtful online comment could reduce intentions to cyber harass. The time delay and reflective messages significantly reduced the participants' intention to harass online, reducing perpetration behaviours. These findings suggest tailored reflective messages or time delays could be a possible strategy to support adolescents to consider their online banter in relation to how it may be perceived without the benefit of having nonverbal redressive messages and social context cues.

Participants frequently discussed misinterpretation of online banter in parallel with using emojis as a potential strategy to overcome this issue. Emojis were described by participants as pictorial indicators placed within an online communication to reinforce the sender's intentions by displaying the direction of valence, positive or negative. Comparably, literature considers emojis as a similar concept (Medlock & McCulloch, 2016) with some research referring to emoticons which are typed facial expressions i.e., ;-). Emojis' and emoticons' overarching function has been reported to be a substitute for nonverbal redressive messages and context cues that are non-existent on the internet (Medlock & McCulloch, 2016; Skovholt, Grønning, & Kankaanranta, 2014). Use of emoticons has been suggested to facilitate the interpretation of online text (Dresner & Herring, 2010) and more specifically humour (Farnia & Kirimi, 2019). Research supports the current findings concerning the potentially unreliable aspects of using emojis within humorous online interaction such as banter. For instance, Miller, Kluver, Thebault-Spieker, Terveen, and Hecht (2017) found text using emojis can make emoji interpretation more ambiguous to perceive. This would suggest that although emojis can have a useful interpretative purpose for young people they cannot be

relied upon to provide full interpretation and can, in some instances, be confusing and hinder interpretation of the sender's intentions. Therefore, adolescents' strategy of attempting to avoid misinterpretation of online banter by using emojis is a low-level attempt to clarify intent that can have unintended negative consequences. The potential for unintended negative consequences when using emojis to signify banter should be viewed alongside the outlook that online banter can be ambiguous and difficult to perceive without the use of emojis. Practitioners supporting adolescents who experience the negative outcomes of misinterpreting online banter would need to consider if emojis were involved in the interaction and how to guide young people on the potential negative and positive effects of using emojis in this context.

*5.3 "*Bad" banter and cyberbullying

Focus group participants consistently described online banter as having the capability to be cyberbullying. An online social interaction of this kind could occur between friends or non-friends. Online banter that was perceived by participants to be cyberbullying involving a perpetrator directing an offensive humorous comment or action towards a victim that was intentionally or unintentionally offensive. Again, this contradicts some definitional aspects of the cyberbullying definition (Olweus, 2013), namely imbalance of power, harmful intentions, and repetition. Participants considered repetitive acts and harmful intentions to be clear indicators that online banter was cyberbullying. However, humour was described to have the ability to hinder the victims' evaluation of the perpetrator's intention, as reported by Baas et al. (2013). This indicates that if a perpetrator's intentions are unclear from an online interaction, due to using banter for instance, the subjective perception of the victim should be considered for a behaviour to be classed as cyberbullying (Dredge, Gleeson, & de la Piedad Garcia, 2014). Furthermore, participants described online "bad" banter as a form of cyberbullying that can occur between friends. Literature contradicts this finding and suggests that "bad" banter is likely to be cyberteasing (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2008) that is not categorised as hurtful, signified by the equal power relationship, and no intent to harm. The current findings highlight a grey area of interpretation between adolescents' perception of cyberbullying and the literature that guides policy, practitioners, and parents who manage young people involved in cyberbullying. Labelling humoristic aggressive behaviours as harmless cyberteasing could deemphasise the seriousness of a perpetration, promoting

reduced levels of support for a victim and reduced perpetrator management. Additionally, if "bad" banter is considered to be harmless cyberteasing, future research is likely to disregard participants who are labelled as targets of cyberteasing and not targets of cyberbullying. This could lead to variability across research findings as concluded by Schäfer, Werner, and Crick (2002) regarding teasing and traditional bullying.

Bad banter was described by participants as an ambiguous, aggressive social interaction that could be manipulated and portrayed by the perpetrator as less aversive and more humorous, euphemistically labelling the interaction as banter (Bandura, 2002). Avoiding trouble with authority figures and bypassing responsibility for causing offense was generally described as the explanation for downplaying banter. Support for this subtheme derives from moral disengagement (MD) mechanisms (Bandura, 1986; 2002). MD involves self-regulation processes that facilitate undesirable behaviours by enabling individuals to disconnect their internal moral standards from their actions in order to reduce tension caused by this situational incongruity. Euphemistic labelling is one of eight possible cognitive mechanisms, which include moral justification, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusions of responsibility, distorting consequences, attribution of blame and dehumanisation (Bandura, 1986). MD has been reported to be associated with cyberbullying perpetration (Bussey, Fitzpatrick, & Raman, 2015; Wang, Lei, Liu, & Hu, 2016). Further support stems from Baas et al.'s (2013) research that reports humorous online acts directed at others to be ambiguous within the cyberbullying context to the extent where perpetrators are able to deemphasise their actions, evidently mediated by euphemistic labelling. Therefore, it can be surmised that some young people may be using euphemistic labelling to downplay banter that is perceived by the victim as cyberbullying behaviour. In terms of the victim, the negative consequences of the perceived cyberbullying could be psychologically harmful and so the incident would need to be acknowledged as an act of cyberbullying, and not a joke, to be supported. The implications of these findings acknowledge support is needed for young people who are prone to MD behaviours that involves supporting mindfulness around the potential consequences and ambiguity of humorous, online behaviours.

Participants openly explained their perception of how online banter can be viewed as cyberbullying between non-friends. Banter of this kind was described to be a more socially acceptable interaction if the perpetrator had high status or popularity. For this scenario, a clear imbalance of power was described between the perpetrator and victim which was based on how many friends/followers the perpetrator had and how "normal" the victim was

perceived to be by the perpetrator. By default, this interaction would be viewed as having harmful intentions by the victim because the interaction is between individuals who are not friends as described in theme 1. Traditional bullies have been found to target rejected individuals with the aim to gain and cultivate social status (Pellegrini & Long, 2002; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009) and have higher peer assessed perceived popularity but less likeability (deBruyn, Cillessen, & Wissink, 2010; Sijtsema et al., 2009). Further relevant support can be drawn from longitudinal research that reported peer perceived popularity increased over a period of eight months for perpetrators of cyberbullying (Wegge, Vandebosch, Eggermont, & Pabien, 2016). These findings alongside the current study suggest that humoristic cyberbullying is (a) more admissible for those who are more popular and (b) an effective behaviour to enhance perceived popularity. Prevention and intervention programs should consider concentrating on changing normative beliefs which consider victimising others online using humour to be more acceptable based on status and popularity.

5.4 Future research and Limitations

As young people are having more access to the internet via various technologies and online communication becomes more accessible (Ofcom, 2018), findings from this study can inform how young people are supported to manage their online behaviour. Predominantly, future research should explore the evident grey area between cyberbanter and cyberbullying and how the interplay between these concepts is reflected in the definition of cyberbullying. Conceptualising a definition of cyberbullying that incorporates all forms of perceived online behaviours by young people will promote less variability in reported prevalence rates and enable practitioners to recognise acts of cyberbullying more accurately and manage them more effectively. Findings from the current study sheds light on how young people have difficulty recognising the intentions of online banter which can be misinterpreted and often easily perceived as cyberbullying.

This study contributes to the limited understanding of social interactions that involve banter or teasing and what these interactions mean to young people in relation to experiencing potentially harmful online behaviours. Reflexive TA allowed this study to add to existing research concerning cyberbullying that is related to banter and teasing by identifying three important themes and their respective subthemes. This is the first known

study to consider this specific area of research within cyberbullying literature with young people and therefore is unique and provides a platform for future research to further develop. Research should consider developing strategies to assist adolescents to overcome the absence of nonverbal redressive cues and social context cues. Specifically, scope may lie in enhancing strategies that are already being utilised, such as using emojis, ensuring online misinterpretation and cyberbullying behaviour are less closely linked.

While the focus groups successfully provided data that provided insight into an adolescents' perspective of cyberbullying and the context of humour, these findings are limited to the sample recruited from two schools. A gender imbalance within the focus groups is apparent in this study, with 8 male participants in comparison to 20 females. The number of males who were approached by the coordinating schools is unknown, as is the possible reason for the preference for females to want to take part. Future research should consider holding focus groups that are gender specific in order to provide further insight into any findings that are variable between males and females. Furthermore, participants were approached by school staff members who selected students based on their inclination and willingness to contribute in a focus group discussing cyberbullying. The commonality between the selected participant perceptions and the experiences of the wider population of younger people is unknown. Consequently, findings from this study indicate clear avenues for future qualitative and quantitative research to continue to investigate different aspects the role of humour within adolescent cyberbullying activity. The focus group format was able to encourage participants to openly discuss their viewpoints alongside their peers in a relaxed environment, as previously rationalised by Peterson-Sweeney (2005), which promoted descriptions of opinions, attitudes, and experiences. Scarcely any literature has considered young people's perspective on the role of humour or banter in relation to cyberbullying. The findings from the present study are therefore a valuable contribution to understanding how humour can be misinterpreted and manipulated online and a motivation to cyberbully others with less status.

6. Summary

This study demonstrates online humour or banter can be viewed as cyberbullying behaviour from a young person's perspective. Owing to the online environment having a lack of nonverbal redressive cues and social context cues, online banter can be misinterpreted and

perceived as targeted cyberbullying and therefore may occur more frequently. Findings also establish that humour can be a form of online aggression used to cyberbully others, motivated by the possible aim to achieve or maintain popularity and status. Aspects of these findings challenge two definitional criterion of cyberbullying, power imbalance and harmful intentions of the perpetrator. For example, the data suggest victims' perceptions of a perpetrator's intentions carry some weight in determining if an act of online aggression is cyberbullying behaviour. Overall, this study offers a unique perspective of how adolescents view humour and banter within the context of cyberbullying.

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