"It's all part of the culture": undergraduate students' experiences of banter in university sports clubs and societies

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Abstract

Recent research has focused on students' experience of banter in the general university setting. However, these experiences may differ when specifically focusing on university students' interactions in sports clubs and societies. The present study explored undergraduate students' understanding and experiences of banter in sports clubs and societies through five focus groups (n = 24; 18–23 years, 5 male, 19 female) at one UK university using semi-structured interviews and vignettes. Thematic analysis identified three key themes: "It's all part of the culture", banter to excuse inappropriate behaviour, and a question of boundaries. Discussions highlighted banter was accepted and expected, but there was a sense of 'banter fatigue'. There was awareness that banter could be used to mask harmful behaviour such as hazing and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Students also highlighted that boundaries were important when using banter, discussing how repetition can have a negative impact on the target of the banter. The study contributes to the limited literature exploring the use and perceptions of banter by students in extracurricular activities at university.

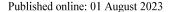**Keywords** Banter · Humour · Higher Education · Sports groups · Societies

Introduction

Banter is a form of humorous social communication which is typically seen as fun reciprocal exchanges between friends (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Dynel, 2008). University students use banter in their social interactions and largely view banter as a form of prosocial behaviour (Buglass et al., 2020; Culpeper, 2011; Phipps & Young, 2013). Banter may be regarded as a component of affiliative humour, which is used to strengthen relationships with others, solidify social support networks and reinforce affiliation (Kuiper & McHale, 2009; Martin et al., 2003; Oosthuizen, 2021) however an important characteristic of banter is the rapid addition of reciprocal retorts added by those involved, termed 'verbal ping-pong' (Dynel, 2008). Banter may also be used to excuse inappropriate communication and behaviour (Buglass et al., 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013) and is associated with 'Lad Culture', a 'pack 'mentality linked to sports,

heavy alcohol consumption, homophobia and sexualisation of women at UK universities (e.g., Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013). This present study develops research by Buglass et al. (2020) by focusing on university students' understanding and experiences of banter in university sports clubs and societies. Such extracurricular activities are student led with minimal supervision from university staff and may include participation in the extracurricular activity as well as social events. Therefore, this may provide a unique context in which banter may be used pro-socially to bond with the extra-curricular peer group but also to excuse inappropriate behaviour. This study will help to develop our understanding of students experiences of banter in their social spaces to ensure HEs, including student unions and university stakeholders, can provide guidance and support on appropriate banter communication and behaviour in sports clubs and societies.

The use of banter

Banter has been characterised as multi-turn teasing, indicative of affiliative exchanges of jocular humour that include mocking and insults (Haugh & Bousfield, 2012; Martin et al., 2003; Plester & Sayers, 2007) in both offline and

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online interactions (Dynel, 2009). Banter is often viewed positively as an 'interactional bonding game' (Dynel, 2008, p.246) and has been equated with conjoint humour (Dynel, 2008; Holmes, 2006) where the banter topic is co-produced suggesting equality in the exchange. Reciprocity, co-production, and equal status have been highlighted as important characteristics of pro-social banter (Culpeper, 2011; Plester & Sayers, 2007) with university students suggesting that the successful use and understanding of such banter needs reciprocity, humour, and closeness (Buglass et al., 2020). Banter may be used to relieve boredom but also has pro-social qualities such as enhancing group affiliations and helping to navigate social and cultural differences (Plester & Sayers, 2007; Winkler-Reid, 2015). University students have reported that the use of banter needs to be navigated depending on the social context in which they are in and that they may adapt banter with different audiences (Buglass et al., 2020). Indeed, Lampert and Ervin-Tripp (2006) reported how banter may be regarded as offensive or inappropriate if an individual attempts to engage in banter with someone unknown to them.

Banter may overflow into other interaction practices if it is used by individuals or in contexts where specific social skills and knowledge are lacking (Whittle et al., 2019) or may be used as a covert strategy to mask intentional negative behaviour. Banter may cross into aggressive humour which may imply threat, or ridicule, a type of disparagement humour, which can be an effective strategy as it makes retaliation inappropriate for the victim (i.e., 'they can't take the joke') (Janes & Olson, 2000; Martin et al., 2003). This may alienate or negatively impact others, particularly if the humour is targeted rather than the reciprocal 'verbal ping pong' that is important to defining banter (Buglass et al., 2020; Dynel, 2008). Labelling the humour as banter may then be used as a defence to mask aggression and legitimise inappropriate communication (Buglass et al., 2020; Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013; Steer et al., 2020). Banter can be challenging to manage through its ambiguous nature and intent hard to determine (Buglass et al., 2020; Steer et al., 2020) and may be deemed more ambiguous online (e.g., Miers et al., 2020). Indeed, university students have highlighted the difficulty of distinguishing between bullying and banter (Harrison et al., 2022) and suggest there needs to be an awareness of people's boundaries for prosocial banter to be perceived as such with banter becoming inappropriate when there is a lack of mutual reciprocity (Buglass et al., 2020). References to family members, appearance, or bereavement for adolescents (Steer et al., 2020) and remarks on personal characteristics rather than transitory actions for university students are deemed unacceptable (Buglass et al., 2020). Using humour to disparage someone through commenting on personal characteristics

may suggest a sense of superiority rather than an equitable exchange of humorous dialogue which is seen as enjoyable by all involved in the interaction (Banas et al., 2011; Martin and Ford, 2018).

Banter has been discussed under the term 'Mock Impoliteness' with banter being used as a politeness strategy to convey solidarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Through mock impoliteness, banter is used to convey politeness as the individuals in the interaction understand the banter dialogue to be untrue (Leech, 1983). Banter may also be used to enhance one's own social status through purposively deflating another person's ego (Gruner, 1997; Plester & Sayers, 2007) and may be used as a form of competition (Gruner, 1997) where individuals engage in progressively severe banter to see who may stop the exchange first. Banter may also share similarities with a 'sense of humour' in being conceptualised as a defence mechanism (Lefcourt & Martin, 1986) as engaging in banter or accepting banter in an interaction may allow individuals to save positive face (the need for the positive view of yourself to be approved of) (Brown & Levinson, 1987) which may help to retain or enhance social status and group membership. Indeed, university students have demonstrated a need for self-preservation when engaging in online banter (Buglass et al., 2020) with research on Instagram showing that the use of the hashtags #sorrynotsorry and #humblebrag allows users to balance their self-presentation needs with impoliteness (Mately, 2018a; Matley, 2018b).

Banter in sports clubs and societies

The healthy university approach recognises that university is a complex environment which not only incudes the academic context but also relationships with the community (Holt et al., 2015). University provides students opportunities to build such community relationships through involvement in sports clubs and societies alongside their academic studies. A lack of such social opportunities has been reported as a factor for students considering leaving university (Thomas, 2012) with integration into both academic and social spheres of university life reducing student attrition (Tinto, 1997). Student peer relationships, social engagements and feeling connected to the university are important for belonging and attachment (Ahn & Davis, 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Maunder, 2018) with students suggesting that enhancing student community can enhance their wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019).

Students who participate in clubs and societies report a greater sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012), greater academic success and report more positively about their wellbeing (Guilmette et al., 2019). Participating in sports clubs and societies may provide additional resources for social capital

through the relationships with fellow group members (Lee, 2010) and bridging social capital and peer support is related to university satisfaction (Bye et al., 2020). Banter in university groups may help to create this bridge through its role in developing and reinforcing social bonds and facilitating interaction (Fine & De Soucey, 2005; Winkler-Reid, 2015).

Banter can be used as a social acceptance strategy in forming friendships and can demonstrate the culture of an organisation or group (Plester & Sayers, 2007) which may help in creating group membership and social identity. Group membership can provide a sense of stability, with university students who report group identification at university having higher levels of wellbeing (Iyer et al., 2009). Identification with a new group, such as a sports group or society, may be particularly beneficial for students starting university. This new group identification may buffer against the negative effects of group membership changes (Iyer et al., 2009) such as transitioning to university or for students without group identification on their academic course.

Students who join a new club at university are often expected to complete a task or challenge to be socialised into the norms of that group, to signal commitment to a group and to maintain group hierarchy (Cimino, 2011; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). These tasks or 'rites of passage' vary in severity and, regardless of the willingness of the individual, may be designed to embarrass, humiliate, and degrade and may negatively impact on the individual's wellbeing (Campo et al., 2005; Hoover & Pollard, 1999). Such inappropriate initiation rituals are referred to as hazing (Hoover & Pollard, 1999) and can be considered an example of deviant over conformity (Waldron & Krane, 2005; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009) as students strive to find an identity within the competitive university environment (Cheeseman, 2010). The use of humour in such group activities can be an important strategy in manipulating boundaries between the group, and the new members trying to join (Holmes & Marra, 2002). Banter therefore may be an important component of group initiations as banter can be used to display culture, and highlight and define status (Plester & Sayers, 2007).

Banter can occur in same gender and cross gender interactions (e.g., Ferm & Gustavsson, 2021; Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 2006) but is often associated with men performing a form of masculinity in their social interactions (Hein, & O'Donohoe, 2014) through lad culture which is linked to activities such as heavy alcohol consumption, hazing, and sports (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013). Lad culture and banter may be particularly salient in sports clubs and societies at the start of the academic year given lad cultures association with initiations (Phipps & Young, 2013) and the importance of sport clubs memberships in creating masculine identities (Clayton & Harris, 2008). Banter may

be a covert way to enact lad culture through its use to mask ridicule or the humiliation of others which may be underpinned by the pervasive misogyny and sexism in university communities (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020).

Banter culture may sustain gender, sexuality, and class hierarchies (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020) and may also be used to legitimise hazing behaviours given previous research has demonstrated that banter has been used to label and legitimise bullying and cyberbullying, normalise sexism and disguise harm, abuse, misogyny, and racism (Buglass et al., 2020; Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013; Steer et al., 2020). Although individuals on the periphery of a group may be more likely to view banter as anti-social (Plesters & Sayers, 2007), it may be challenging for students who are striving for group acceptance to determine when group banter has become harmful. Indeed, research has demonstrated students may only be able to define extreme violent behaviour as hazing and view more subtle forms, such as those labelled as banter, as acceptable group behaviour (Campo et al., 2005) which aligns with research suggesting that the 'everyday' behaviours associated with lad culture are deemed invisible at HE (Jackson & Sundaram, 2021).

The present research

This current study extends previous research by Buglass et al. (2020) that explored banter in the more general university context by now focusing on the perceptions of banter use specifically in sports clubs and societies at university. To date, there is a lack of research focusing on banter at higher education institutions (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020) with research specifically focusing on lad culture (Phipps & Young, 2013) or initiations and hazing by sororities and fraternities at American universities (e.g., Allan et al., 2019; Keating et al., 2005; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). Banter can have a multitude of relational benefits including facilitating social cohesion, developing, and maintaining social bonds and celebrating differences (Alexander et al., 2012; Plester & Sayers, 2007). These social relationship enhancing characteristics of banter may be particularly important for university students as they navigate forming and maintaining relationships and their social identity in their sports clubs and societies. However, the label of banter may be used to mask harmful behaviour (e.g., Buglass et al., 2020; Phipps and Young, 2015; Steer et al., 2020) and to increase compliance to group norms (Fine & De Soucey, 2005). This may be exacerbated in HE social contexts such as sports groups and societies where there is less formal supervision and monitoring (unlike academic teaching sessions), pressure to gain group acceptance and build social capital, group norms such as initiation rituals (which are embedded

across cultures such as initiations in fraternities in the US) and the presence of lad culture which is associated with heavy alcohol consumption, and pack mentality in sports groups(Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Lee, 2010; Phipps & Young, 2013). It is likely that banter may be used prosocially and negatively by students in their sports and society groups. Therefore, a clearer insight into how university students understand the use of banter in their sports clubs and societies is needed, including where students perceive interactions to be harmful, inappropriate, or divisive. With this goal in mind, the present research explored university students understanding and perceptions of banter in face-to-face and online settings in their sports clubs and societies through five focus groups.

Method

Design

Focus groups were utilised which allow for detailed accounts of shared experience (Wilkinson, 1998) and are most effective when participants view themselves as belonging to the same social group, such as the social group of undergraduate university students in this study (Acocella, 2012). An inductive reflexive thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a), was applied to the focus group transcripts to analyse the participants' responses. TA was deemed appropriate as it allows the exploration of experiences and identification of common themes representing meaning and emotions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As this research aimed to explore participants' subjective experiences of banter in the context of university sports clubs and societies, a contextualist approach was adopted which considers that participants make sense of their experiences in their own social and cultural contexts (Forrester, 2010).

Participants

Five focus groups with 24 undergraduate students (18–23 years; 19 female, 5 male) were conducted from September to December 2019. The students were opportunity sampled via online adverts and posters around the university and received an online shopping voucher in return for their participation. Composition of the focus groups was determined by student availability, resulting in focus groups of differing sizes and gender compositions. Students were all current undergraduate students who were a committee member (n=6) or regular member (n=18) of a university sports club and/or society. Length of membership ranged from 3 months to 4 years with 14 participants in a society, 8 participants in a sports group and 2 who were members of both. Table 1 describes the characteristics of participants in each focus group.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule and six study-specific vignettes (including visual, text-based and video materials) were used to facilitate discussion during the focus groups. The materials for the study were co-created with the fourth author, a student research assistant, whose knowledge and experience of current university culture facilitated the creation of relevant materials for our sample demographic (Lushey & Munro, 2014). The materials drew upon the lad culture literature (e.g. Jackson & Sundaram, 2020) and situations observed by the student researcher such as tv shows and public social media posts (i.e., public posts in university groups) and you tube videos (i.e., initiations) which depicted banter-type situations at university. Participants read the six vignettes depicting exemplar digital and offline situations. Vignettes one and vignette three were discussed for both male and female interactions as banter may be used to achieve and sustain gender hierarchies (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). All vignettes were text-based but two vignettes included video prompts and two vignettes included pictorial prompts (memes). An overview of the vignettes used is provided in Table 2.

Procedure

Focus groups was facilitated by the fourth author (a student research assistant). Utilising a peer-led approach minimised perceived power imbalance between the researcher and participants and encouraged open and free discussions in the focus groups (Lushey & Munro, 2014). The focus groups (N=5) took place in qualitative labs located at the host university and were audio recorded using a digital recorder. Appropriate ethical procedures, in line with the British Psychological Society and institutional codes of ethics

Table 1 Participant characteristics of each focus group

Focus Group	n	Gender		M age	SD Age	
		n male	n female			Range
1	3	1	2	20.33	0.58	20–21
2	6	2	4	20.83	1.47	19–23
3	4	1	3	19	0.82	18–20
4	4	0	4	21.25	0.96	20–22
5	7	1	6	20.14	1.21	19–22

Table 2 Overview of study vignettes

Vignette	Contextual overview
1	Posts from a Snapchat drama society group that contains text and pictures. A student tells a fellow society member privately (offline) that he romantically likes one of the female members in the group. The other society member then covertly reveals this information through the use of memes (i.e. champion of the friend zone) in the group chat which is also seen by the female member the student likes. Note: participants were also asked what they thought if this happened with a female member revealed information about a male member of the society.
2	Facebook text-based post in a university confessions group posted by a student from a competitor university disparaging the participant's own university. The post has 19 comments and five shares. Note: participants were also asked if their opinion would change if the post was not anonymous.
3	Participants read the following text-based scenario: A group of teammates on the men's rugby team are talking in the pub after practice. The topic of women comes up and one of the teammates starts to brag about all the women he's slept with. This leads to more of the teammates bragging about various partners they have had. Eventually, they make a bet where the winner is whoever sleeps with the most people. Talk soon turns to those in the women's rugby team the men are aiming to take home. Note :Participants the read the same scenario but depicting a women's rubgy team having the conversation.
4	Participants read the following text-based scenario: Four members of gaming society are late to a social in a park. One of the more senior members of the society suggests that they must down as many drinks as they can and after that they will be accepted back into the society and forgiven. Participants then watch a video clip showing the new members drinking and getting ill.
5	Participants read the following text-based scenario: The last social of the year for the film society is a goodbye party at the house of the president of the society. One member of the film society, Joe, invited a friend on his course to this party who hasn't been to the society. Joe introduces him to his society friends as 'My friend, Tony.' Tony leaves them for a while to get some drinks, but Joe's friends realise that he isn't a member of the film society and begin to make fun of Joe. Participants then watched the freely available 'my friend' video clip from the inbetweeners tv show.
6	Participants read the following text-based scenario: While at a football game, one of the members of the women's football club accidentally scores an own goal and costs them being named the first team and being included in varsity. This teammate happens to be ginger and later, after the game, someone adds a new post to the group's Facebook page about ginger people.

(Approval Reference no.2019/157), were observed for all focus groups.

Each focus group session lasted approximately one hour and began with an outline of the aims of the research. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Discussions initially explored participants understanding of the term banter (e.g., "*Please could you start by describing what you understand by the term banter?*"), and personal experiences related to society and sports club banter in offline and online contexts (e.g., "*Have you encountered offline banter at university sports clubs and societies?*"). Focus group questions then progressed to asking students about their experiences of differences in banter (e.g., "*Are some societies more likely to engage in banter?*") and whether they have experienced banter going too far (e.g., "*Do you think people use the term banter as an excuse for going too far?*"). The six vignettes were then used as discussion openers to explore the participants' interpretation of different social interaction scenarios. Vignette-led discussions focussed on whether the participants believed there to be a clear distinction between banter and potentially problematic social interactions (e.g., "*Is this banter? Why?*", "*Do you think that has gone too far? Why?*") and how they thought such interactions should be addressed (e.g., "*What do you think should be done? Why?*", "*What do you think others should do*?"). Sessions were concluded once the researcher felt that all relevant issues had been covered and when participants indicated that they

had nothing further to contribute. Audio recordings of the groups were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

Reflective approaches focus on the development of themes from codes and recognise the role of the researcher(s) and their experience and research values that they bring in generating the themes (Braun & Clark, 2021b). Collaborative coding and analysis was conducted by the first and second author (both lecturers in Higher Education and experts in Social Psychology and Cyberpsychology) and they stringently followed the steps detailed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Both authors familiarised themselves with the data and separately generated and organised codes using NVivo 12. Initial themes were then generated and discussed and reflected on by the first and second author in regular meetings. The themes were then reviewed against the entire data set. Data analysis was collapsed across the vignettes and participants are identified by pseudonyms. Writing and refining this article determined the final stage of thematic analysis. The researchers depth of engagement with the data and reflexive practice, rather than measures of inter-coder agreement (Braun & Clarke, 2021) are important to quality in reflexive TA approaches. Meetings between the first and second author provided opportunities for discussion and reflection on the assumptions the two authors brought to the analysis of the data.

Below we define three themes that represent participants' experiences and present extracts that demonstrate these themes. Theme 1 explores how banter is part of the culture and how banter is to be expected in sports clubs and societies at university. Theme 2 explores students' experiences of banter being used as an excuse, discussing how banter is perceived to be used as an excuse for inappropriate sexual behaviour and hazing behaviour. Theme 3 explores banter and boundaries and how banter may cross boundaries through highlighting insecurities and through repetition of behaviour.

Findings and discussion

Theme 1: "It's all part of the culture"

Participants discussed banter as being ubiquitous and highlighted the expectation and acceptability of banter in sports groups and societies in both online and offline settings as well as in off campus social settings. Jack discusses how banter cannot be avoided when playing in a male dominated court sport. Jack (FG3, M, 23) "*er yeah my society there's a lot of banter going on err I'm part of the [sports club name] society erm there is no way of avoiding it like if like when you shoot and you miss you know there's something coming*". Jack highlights experiencing banter after a transitory action with previous research highlighting students perceived this banter is acceptable in contrast to banter about a personal characteristic (Buglass et al., 2020). They discuss the anticipation of banter suggesting that it is a group norm of their team to be a target of banter when making a mistake during a game. The expectation of banter may provide a sense of stability and help to solidify their group membership which may be important for sense of belonging in the group and at university (Thomas, 2012; Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Maunder, 2018).

Izzy discusses that online communication in their group is set up for banter. Izzy (FG6, F, 21): "*but yeah I think the whole society though is kind of built on everyone sort of takes pot shots at each other and it's just chill cos that's the way the chat's set up*." Izzy's response of "*it's just chill*" suggests there is no perception of conflict or concern over the use of banter in their online chat and suggests reciprocity of retorts between group members. This not only suggests that banter is expected and encouraged in this group's online chat but the online social space was created specifically to facilitate banter between group members suggesting this is an important norm of the group. This aligns with previous research showing that banter can be used to show the culture of a group (Plester & Sayers, 2007), is beneficial for group cohesion (Alexander et al., 2012) and can enhance affiliation and compliance to group norms (Fine & De Soucey, 2005).

While the use of banter was recognised to hold socially bonding and pro-social qualities, there was also acknowledgement amongst participants that while banter was to be expected as part of the student culture, the perceived acceptability of the banter was somewhat more complex. This was highlighted in focus group discussions prompted by study vignette three (see Table 2), as demonstrated by Sarah who discussed the acceptability of banter in university sports teams in an off-campus context. Sarah (FG6, F, 20): "*if it's a student pub it probably will be acceptable purely because this behaviour is acceptable at uni on sports teams generally but it's a shame that's true and that last bit is unnecessary and over the line.*" Here Sarah highlights how scenario three (rugby club members discussing sexual activities with women) is deemed acceptable in sports teams although reflects shame over this acceptance. This indicates a level of complexity with the acceptance of banter. Participants discussed banter being accepted and expected during sports games (i.e., the earlier extract highlighting banter about a teammate's mistake) but it would seem that banter about misogynistic sexual activities is also somewhat expected and seemingly accepted, although there is some acknowledgement that this is also problematic behaviour. The frustration of the acceptability of such conversations is reflected in research of lad culture where the everyday sexism is rendered invisible (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Sarah's account also suggests that the location of this social interaction is also important to the acceptability of the conversation as banter. Sexist and misogynistic behaviour is pervasive in the night time economy often perpetuated by the masculine drinking culture (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Sarah discusses the behaviour would be accepted at a student pub highlighting their perception that this behaviour is accepted by students but may be less acceptable in social environments outside of student spaces. Drawing on the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey, Oppes, & Svensson, 2002), a student pub is a space for in-group members (i.e., university students) reflecting group acceptance of such communication whereas out-group members in non-student venues may be less accepting of this interaction. This demonstrates the pervasive norms in student culture but also how the student perceives they may not hold in social spaces in wider society.

The blurred line between expected and acceptable banter-type behaviours saw some focus group discussions consider the role of university hazing (inappropriate initiation rituals, Hoover & Pollard, 1999) and banter. Steph (FG6, F, 19): "*it's the banter of hazing*". Sarah, Steph, and Izzy discuss the complexities around hazing and banter for new

members of groups. Hazing is banned at most UK universities (including the university the participants in this study attend) but the participant discusses it being an accepted activity, potentially due to it being masked as a humorous activity to facilitate group belonging. The participants were discussing a sports team requiring new members to drink three different bottles of alcohol. Sarah (FG6, F, 20): "*yeah it is meant to be banter and it's meant to be fun but it, it scares some people which is why some people just don't get involved in societies especially in freshers week at the beginning because if you join half way through they're not gonna go through that again so you miss out on all the hazing but you also miss out on all the bonding that happened at the beginning of the year erm so it's it's one to seriously consider when you join societies.*"

Steph (19, F): "*I think in some of them it's really normalised as well so.*"

Izzy (F, 21): "*it is it's just part of the society.*"

Steph (19, F): "*it's all part of the culture yeah and I can see how if someone was joining and they didn't want to get involved with that it would put them off joining the sport or society.*"

Here Sarah, Steph, and Izzy discuss hazing that occurs in clubs and societies at the start of the academic year and highlight the conflict of such activities being important for bonding but also exclusionary for some students. Sarah's account reflects how these initiation activities are labelled as banter and are expected and accepted. Hazing has been highlighted as having some similarities with bullying (Kowalski et al., 2020) with previous research suggesting labelling a behaviour as banter can be used to legitimise bullying behaviour (Buglass et al., 2020). With hazing, unlike bullying, the students are likely to be accepted into the group by the students engaging in the hazing behaviour (Kowalski et al., 2020). Labelling hazing as banter could be seen as framing it as prosocial acceptance strategy to demonstrate group culture and form friendships (Plester & Sayers, 2007) and may mask any perceived negative intent or behaviour (Buglass et al., 2020; Phipps & Young, 2015; Steer et al., 2020) which helps the behaviour to be deemed more acceptable. Previous research has shown that a joking culture can enhance affiliation and norm compliance (Fine & De Soucey, 2005) and the contrived threat of not becoming a group member may actually strengthen affiliative bonds and group identity (Keating et al., 2005). Sarah, Steph, and Izzy state how the initiation behaviour at the start of the academic year are normalised and accepted. Izzy states it is part of the societies culture whereas Steph suggests that it is accepted and expected in the wider (student) culture as well as aligning with Sarah's response discussing acceptance in student pubs. This suggests that such behaviour is part of an embedded social norm for undergraduate students.

The previous accounts discuss the pervasiveness of banter in specific contexts including contexts that are specifically set up for banter (Izzie's extract) suggesting banter can be bound to specific spaces which may be important in the acceptability and expectations of banter. However, Oliver extends this and discusses the constant pervasiveness of banter across offline and online student contexts in reference to another male dominated team sports club. Oliver (FG1, 20, M): "*But like, I go home to a house with people who I don't play sports with and then that's just like a time to relax. But then I know some mates who play [sports club name], who, they're giving each other like banter at training, chatting on WhatsApp, and then go home and they're with the people, they're with the people they're giving stick all the time. There's literally like no space for themselves, it's like constant, like 24/7 365. Like you'd get up, and you'd go into the kitchen to get, I don't know, a glass of water and you're instantly like given sh*t in the morning, at like 9am.*" Here Oliver discusses the ubiquity of banter which resonates with the pervasiveness of lad culture at HEs (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020). Furthermore, the participant refers to the "*24/*" nature of banter which aligns with other aggressive behaviours such as cyberbullying which is not restricted by time and space and can occur across multiple platforms and devices (Betts, 2016). Oliver discusses both banter being pervasive online and offline in multiple social spheres which may exacerbate the negative impact of experiencing "*no space for themselves*". Although both Oliver and Jack's previous sports related comments suggest banter is integral to social identity, and perhaps integral to a masculine identity in their male dominated sports team which may be important for sense of belonging (Clayton & Harris, 2008), the pervasiveness may create challenges for students' personal identities. Collectively the participants' accounts reflect that while there are expectations of banter in HE contexts, they may not be prepared for the amount of banter across different contexts. Previous research has shown university students navigate banter interactions through gauging tolerance levels to help them with the content of the banter (Buglass et al., 2020) but participants here are discussing how the amount of banter across different social spaces has surpassed their tolerance levels. Furthering the findings of previous research, Oliver's account suggests the pervasiveness of banter may be crossing student's boundaries and impacting on their own personal space suggesting a sense of fatigue with the pervasive use of banter.

Theme 2: excusing inappropriate behaviour

Participants across the focus groups described banter being used to excuse problematic behaviours, including inappropriate sexualised behaviour, sexism and hazing, excessive

drinking, and initiation rituals for sports clubs and societies. The term banter seemed to be used as a 'catch all' to euphemistically label and excuse behaviour including labelling hazing as banter to justify their involvement in a university club and labelling misogynistic sexual behaviour as banter. This complements previous research that has indicated a widespread adoption of the term banter in sports and general society to excuse potentially problematic behaviours (Lawless & Magrath, 2021; Morris et al., 2020).

Ellie discussed banter being used to label inappropriate sexual behaviour in a competitive contact-sport club based on interactions they have had with other students. Ellie (FG1, F, 21): "*not to out people but they should be outed because it's ridiculous, but like, I know a society, like, not even a specific society but like a group of guys at uni [sports group name] guys who told my friend, like bragging about how they had this book and they'd written down every single girl that each of these people had slept with, and who they'd got with. And they've written it all down and like marked themselves ticks and like tallies of who'd got with who. And they'd try and get with each other's girls. And like, I know one of these guys and he was like "I actually, we get upset by it because, you don't want someone to get with your girl, do you, or someone you've got with before," but they'd all like think it's like a competition and like banter and if anyone got upset they'd say "oh but it's just banter, though.*"

Ellie's account highlights banter being used to euphemistically label sexist behaviour with masculinity being performed by students in the club through sexist behaviour masked as banter. Phipps and Young (2013) suggest that banter can be used to disguise sexism through labelling as a joke, and to shame others who may feel offended. Belonging to sports clubs are considered important in creating masculine identities (Clayton & Harris, 2008). Banter in male-to-male interactions is underpinned by ego protection (Rivers & Ross, 2019) with masculinity asserted through banter to disguise misogyny (Nichols, 2016). Such labelling may make it difficult for others to call out as sexist behaviour (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020) and, as in this extract, shame the person speaking out, through 'othering' as they are not in on the 'joke' as "*it's just banter.*" This has similarities with ridicule, a type of disparagement humour, where if the target speaks out, they may be 'othered' as not being able to take the joke (Janes & Olson, 2000). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1974) Ellie's account suggests an 'othering response' through the euphemistic labelling of the behaviour as banter. The defence of humour is being used in attempt to manage tension (Holmes & Marra, 2002) in intragroup conflict. This suggests there may be a subgroup or a hierarchy within the group with those engaging in the behaviour having higher status and setting the group norms of acceptable and expected behaviour. This 'othering'

response further supports previous research where students reported a lack of active intervention in banter that they perceived had gone too far due to concern over their reputation or being perceived as not conforming to social norms (Buglass et al., 2020). Students therefore may be complicit in this culture of labelling inappropriate behaviour as banter due to the fear of repercussions for their own group membership or status in the group. Protection of masculine identity may be particularly important for men in sports clubs with Jeffries (2020) study suggesting banter may be a 'social glue'. The labelling of this shared behaviour may be used to provide a 'social glue' through a shared masculine identity to maintain gender power dynamics through 'othering' women through misogyny and sexism.

Ben discusses the acceptability of the activities for new members joining university groups. Ben (FG4, M, 19): "*yeah and as well I think it's like it's kind of part and parcel of what you do when you join sort of thing so it's like cos that's been in a tradition and they've obviously they must have done that all throughout you kinda might feel like if I don't do it then I won't feel a part of the society so although it is banter in a way it can be seen as a bit of bullying because you might not want to do it but the only way to be in that part of that society is to go through it sort of thing.*" Ben discusses how a ritual to join a university group is labelled as banter despite being perceived as involving inappropriate bullying behaviour. Previous research has shown that the term banter can be used to legitimise bullying which may be complicated if there is ambiguity in intent (Buglass et al., 2020). Ben highlights how the initiation task is a tradition and a group norm to adhere to which may facilitate a group identity (Allan et al., 2019; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). This may help strengthen students' sense of community which is beneficial for wellbeing (Baik et al., 2019). In the previous extract, Ellie discusses how the term banter is being used to justify the inappropriate actions by those directly engaging in the behaviour whereas in this extract Ben is discussing justifying engaging in an activity labelled as banter by other group members. Ben is experiencing conflict on whether there's positive intent or negative intent for the initiation task. Drawing on Festinger's (Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959) theory of cognitive dissonance the potential negative consequences from taking part in the task may be justified by achieving group belonging. Deciding to participate in initiation rituals may be strengthened if the activity is labelled as banter to potentially mask any concerns of harm.

In response to being asked to give examples of (offline) banter in their societies and sports clubs, participants Hollie, Rosie, Steph, and Sarah discussed banter being used in inappropriate ways when members did not follow the rules of the society. Hollie (FG6, F, 19): "*so I was in a society and*

I er and er you have to dress by er dress code and if you fail they do like kind of bullying type of thing."

Steph (F, 20): "*oohh hate that.*"

Hollie: "*that you er just go around and spill your drinks and if you fail like to dress up er according to dress code you have to drink like mashed things.*"

Sarah (F, 20): "*oh yes fishbowl.*"

Hollie: "*I think it's kind of bullying and it's not fun so it can be like not great if you have to drink that.*"

Rosie *(F, 19):* "*I think it's fine if it's common in the uk but for example I think cultures should also be taken into account because it's not appropriate for something.*"

Here Hollie's account discusses how if members do not abide by the dress code of the society they experience inappropriate repercussions from other group members under the guise of banter. Banter, or the pretence of banter, may be being used to demonstrate the culture of the group (Plester & Sayers, 2007) both in terms of the social norms and the consequences of not following these. Banter can be used as a strategy in manipulating boundaries (Holmes & Marra, 2002) and in this account banter is being used to 'other' those who have not conformed but through the label of banter this would be viewed as humorous. However, banter requires equality of status (Culpeper, 2011; Plester & Sayers, 2007) and this behaviour is targeted which may actually be exclusionary and disparaging (Banas et al., 211; Buglass et al., 2020; Martin & Ford, 2018) and may elevate the status of the students leading the banter whilst excluding the targets. Such behaviour may be used to encourage conformity to the social norms of the group and enhance cohesion (Alexander et al., 2012). Hollie discusses how they perceive this behaviour to be bullying which aligns with previous research showing university students perceive a fine line between banter and bullying that needs to be navigated (Harrison et al., 2022). Similar to Ben's experience, Rosie is justifying the actions of others to themselves as being acceptable, perhaps due to their shared student identity. Furthermore, Rosie also mentions the acceptability of this behaviour in the light of culture suggesting this banter behaviour may be deemed acceptable in the UK student culture but not in other cultures, complementing research that suggests more aggressive humour may not successfully transfer across cultures (Gregory et al., 2019). The discussion of acceptability aligns with the invisibility of everyday sexism and lad culture at UK universities (Jackson & Sundaram, 2021) and the discussions in the first theme regarding acceptability of (inappropriate) banter in UK student pubs. Banter may be used to navigate social and cultural differences (Plester & Sayers, 2007; Winkler-Reid, 2015) but in this example it could suggest that it may also be culturally divisive.

Theme 3: a question of boundaries

Participants discussed the role of boundaries with banter including the role of repetition and personal boundaries being crossed. Millie and Emma's accounts focus on how repetition of a comment that was initially humorous to having a negative impact on them, describing the repeated interaction as '*Painful*' as the comment is no longer funny. Millie (FG5, F, 22): "*I think so yeah because it's not only not a fun joke it's like painful and boring cos you keep bringing up the same joke like we get it we get what point you're trying to make it's no longer funny it's like painful now.*"

Emma (FG5, F, 22): "*I think with the [name of language society] society and like other like gaming and like anime, book society type things, banter is, it goes too far when it's like a little thing that if you don't know what it was then everyone will be like oh you don't know what it is and keep going down that rabbit hole you're, you're, just I don't know one thing I know other things and then like because generally people remember the joke so you'll forget about it and then two weeks later somebody else will bring it back up and you're like oh you're here again and it cycles in a sense it's no longer funny it's actually hurting now like you've gotta stop making this joke but people don't get it sometimes.*" Millie and Emma discuss how banter loses its humour when the same joke is repeated which aligns with previous research that found banter needs reciprocity in the exchanges (Buglass et al., 2020), however, in this extract the recipient of the banter is not an active part of the retorts, but a target of repeated behaviour labelled as banter by other group members. As the banter is repeated participants note how through the repetition their view on the joke shifts and discuss how it then has a negative impact on them. The banter is no longer following the rules of successful banter for the recipients. This could be further exacerbated by other group members also repeating and targeting the joke. This would suggest that the social movement of the 'humour' and the involvement of multiple group members can therefore also be problematic alongside the repetition of the joke. Millie suggests there is a lack of awareness of the group members that the joke is no longer funny to them. The targeted and repetitive banter has crossed the boundary from being humorous and creating cohesion to being used in a socially exclusionary and disparaging way (Banas et al., 2011; Buglass et al., 2020; Martin & Ford, 2018). Emma's account discusses how the same joke is repeated by different members of the group, which may help with cohesiveness (Alexander et al., 2012; Plester & Sayers, 2007) for those members, but it may also exacerbate the exclusionary way the banter is being utilised for the target.

Ellie and Ben discuss how banter can cross a personal boundary but they do not vocalise this to their group

member(s) in the interaction: Ellie (FG1, F, 21): "*And so a lot of the time, if someone takes, I, as a defence mechanism, I will never, people will tease me about something, I laugh it off. Even though deep down, it might actually hit something, or hit a nerve, I would never tell someone that, because then they talk about it more and it becomes a more of a thing.*"

Ben (FG4, M, 19): "*especially if it's an insecurity as well someones getting on to you about that you feel like something you're not really comfortable with and then people take the mick out of it erm you don't want people to know that you have that insecurity so you kind of they say it's banter you kinda play it off that way as well but when you get home you're a bit like I'm not really sure why he said that sort of thing if that makes sense.*" These accounts align with previous research that showed banter that is focused on a personal characteristic is perceived as unacceptable by undergraduate students and adolescents (Buglass et al., 2020; Steer et al., 2020) and that students may not vocalise their concerns due to reputation preservation (Buglass et al., 2020). The participants here discuss how the banter is hurtful yet they appear to reciprocate the joke. As humour can be used to construct social identity (Holmes & Marra, 2002), the appearance of being accepting of the targeted banter may allow the participants to save positive face (Brown & Levinson, 1987) through conforming to the social norms of their group.

Research has also shown that for men using banter may be used to hide vulnerability (Williams, 2009) and thus appearing to reciprocate banter may also have the same function of concealing vulnerability from group members. Indeed, one participant highlighted how they tried to prove that the banter they were a target of in their group was untrue. Oliver (FG1, M, 20): "*I was getting called short all last year because all my mates are like 6ft and I'm literally 6ft which is fine, but like I'd be getting short all the time. And I literally went to [shop name] to buy a tape measure to prove that I was 6ft. It was so tragic.*" Here, the extract suggests that Oliver's height is an insecurity to them and that by proving that the participant is as tall as their other group members they may stop engaging in the repeated banter on the topic. This also shows the importance of group belonging to the participant and their need to prove their belonging, and potentially, their masculinity to their other group members.

Limitations and future research

The present study is not without limitations. Firstly, the sample was limited to largely female undergraduate students from one UK-based university. Men and women experience lad culture (Phipps &Young, 2015) and men who identify as 'lads' suggest they perform masculine 'laddish' behaviours particularly at the start of friendships (Jeffries, 2020).

This may impact on the dynamics of banter particularly with masking inappropriate sexual behaviour, therefore future research should be longitudinal with a more equal gender distribution. Longitudinal qualitative research will allow the exploration of whether the perceptions of banter changes from freshers to the end of the academic year. The power imbalance between new members and established members may be particularly heightened at the start of the academic year which may be reflected in how banter is used and perceived. Similarly, banter may have specific purposes for sports teams during large events such as BUCS (British Universities and College Sports) nationals where group cohesion is particularly important for team success (Carron et al., 2002) therefore the use of banter at these specific times should be explored. The authors also note that the vignettes depicted in these scenarios focused on heterosexual interactions. Future research should explore experiences of LGBTQ + students as research has shown that homophobic banter has been used as a form of humiliation in initiations (NUS, 2012). Finally, the student researcher conducted the focus groups and created the vignettes through their own observations and influence from the popular press. Therefore, they maybe be context specific. However, this peer approach helps to ensure vignettes were more realistic for the students and decreases power imbalance as well as encouraging more open discussion (Lushey & Munro, 2014).

Implications

The findings suggest that banter is being used as a 'catch all' to euphemistically label and excuse inappropriate behaviour in sports clubs and societies and their associated social events. Students have become complicit in this culture and discuss being 'othered' if they speak out. This in particular has important implications for equality, diversity, and inclusion for universities, student unions and stakeholders working with universities such as National Union of Students and Universities UK. (e.g., Barnard, 2017). These findings also have implications for university and stakeholder policies on sexual violence and consent as the findings suggest banter is being used as an excuse for inappropriate sexual behaviour. There are currently resources available for lad culture, initiations, and sexual harassment but there is little discussion on the role of banter within these three domains and its role as a 'catch all' excuse for inappropriate behaviour at university. At a more local level, student unions could incorporate a banter policy or framework focusing on banter, including its role in masking harmful behaviours, into their training for society and sports club committee members.

Conclusion

The present research explored UK undergraduate students' perceptions of banter use in sports clubs and societies. Participants discussed how banter is a prevalent part of the university culture but there is a sense of 'banter fatigue' with the ubiquitous use of banter. Participants discussed how banter can be used to mask behaviour such as hazing and sexist sexual behaviour aligning with literature on lad culture (Jackson & Sundaram, 2020; Phipps & Young, 2013, 2015). Participants discussed their understanding of banter being used to defend inappropriate behaviour but felt complicit in the inappropriate use of banter due to the use of 'othering' when speaking out. Banter seems to be used as a 'catch all' term to label (inappropriate) behaviours that do not actually follow the rules of banter engagement. The study also complements and furthers research by Buglass et al. (2020) and highlighted the role of boundaries, with students discussing how targeted repetition of communication labelled as banter can be problematic, particularly when the 'humour' moves through the group and other people join in with repeating the targeted 'joke'. The findings are important to universities, in particular student unions, with regards to policies and practice on inclusion and respect as well as contributing to the literature on students' perceptions of banter in their social interactions in societies and sports groups.

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