'There's a bit of banter': How male teenagers 'do boy' on social networking sites

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Abstract

This chapter discusses teenage boys' use of banter on social networking sites such as Facebook by presenting data collected via semi-structured interviews and focus groups with boys and girls aged 11-16 from three schools in England. For male teenagers utilising social networking sites, banter is a common form of social interaction within peer groups and is a means of othering, and of performing and constructing hegemonic masculinity. Banter is characterised by the use of confrontational exchanges used to explore social boundaries and values amongst friends, and is strongly involved in male bonding rituals. It is employed as a means of negotiating status and of in-group inclusion and out-group rejection. We present findings which focus on: male teenagers learning to banter; the relationship between banter and bullying; and how banter overflows into other distinct but related practices.

Introduction

Young men's experiences with digital technologies are still relatively underexplored despite the acknowledgement that technology is gendered and implicated in gender relations (Light, 2014). In this chapter we add to studies of youth, masculinity, and digital media by focusing on the use of banter as a form of gendered talk by male teenagers on social networking sites. Despite previous studies on the use of banter by men in work and organizational settings (Hawkins, 2013; Plester and Sayers, 2007; Sollund, 2007; Decapua and Boxer, 1999), as part of university 'lad culture' (Phipps and Young, 2015), and also its use by women (Lerum, 2004; Sanders, 2004; Pollert, 1981), scarce attention has been paid to banter in youth or teenage interactions in online and offline contexts (with exceptions: Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014; Harvey et al. 2013; Kendall, 2002; Willis, 1977). There has also been a plethora of studies on young people's use of the internet and social networking sites (i.e. Livingstone, 2015; Marwick and boyd, 2014; Buckingham, 2008), however the role of banter in framing social interactions in these spaces has not been fully explored.

This chapter argues that banter is a means of performing masculinity, male bonding, and creating boundaries to inform in-group acceptance and out-group rejection. Decapua and Boxer (1999: 5) define banter as 'an exchange of light, playful teasing remarks; good-natured raillery', while Hein and O'Donohoe (2014: 1303) view the term as 'quite elastic, incorporating insults, teasing, competing, contesting and caring for one another…' Banter, like humour, can thus be viewed as a means of performing and constructing gender and social identity and as a means of 'disciplining' individuals to 'routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu' (Billig, 2005: 2). Banter plays a crucial role in the construction of masculine identity and group identities for young male teenagers in the digital world, which is further

mediated, reinforced and regulated via offline relations (Harvey et al., 2013). We explore the deployment of banter by male teenagers on social networking sites such as Facebook, and the ways in which it facilitates the performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) and male bonding via the creation of in-group and out-group boundaries (Goffman, 1963). We argue that banter, in contrast to bullying, is a more ambivalent phenomenon which provides opportunities for both protagonist and target to positively or negatively affect social status.

We begin by reviewing literature on gender and the performance of hegemonic masculinity by teenage boys, including recent work addressing online contexts, and literature on gendered talk and banter. After outlining the methods, we present findings from qualitative interviews and focus groups with teenagers in England, discussing: male teenagers learning to banter; the relationship between banter and bullying; and how banter overflows into other distinct but related practices. We conclude that banter is central to how these young people perform and construct masculinity, and that banter operates to establish and create boundaries of acceptability via in-group and out-group norms and expectations (Goffman, 1963). Digital interactions which young men engage in on Facebook mediate and reinfoce offline hegemonic constructions of masculinity.

Gender and the performance of teenage masculinities

Masculinity is a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality and culture. For Connell, 'hegemonic masculinity' is a particular set or style of masculine practices that contributes to institutionalising

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men's dominance over women (Carrigan et al., 1985). Hegemonic forms of masculinity emphasise, in particular, aggression, competitiveness, invulnerability to emotion and disregard for the emotions of others, and men are judged and classified on the basis of how far they conform to these ideals. However, few men can achieve the full standard of hegemonic masculinity. As Connell (1990) points out, a man attempting to display prowess through sporting achievement, for example, may have to forgo many other hegemonic male activities (like drinking or smoking), which could affect his performance. To some men, despite his athletic achievements, refusing these activities would render him less 'manly'. Given such complexities in the negotiation of gendered identity male teenagers face significant challenges in learning how best to 'do boy' (Buckingham, 2008). Through participating in normatively approved behaviours, individuals seek to place themselves within a group (Goffman, 1959). This involves being socialised by others, through negative and positive reprisals, into the correct form of masculine behaviour (Connell, 1990).

Butler (1990) and Connell (1990) envisage masculinity as a series of acts which often work to subordinate others. For Butler, the subordinated 'others' are women, whilst Connell (1990) includes women but focuses on the targeting of other men. Hegemonic masculinity, for example, is heterosexual and thus involves the subordination of homosexuality (Carrigan et al., 1985). As Renold (2004: 249) notes: 'boys define hegemonic masculinities in relation to and against an Other through techniques of domination and subordination'. For example, some acts which promote an individual's grasp of masculinity may be performed at the expense of women (through derogatory gender judgements) (Hawkins, 2013), or they may utilise apparent weaknesses in other men to display dominance.

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Networked masculinities

Light (2014: 245) suggests that despite influential work on masculinity and digital media over the past two decades, we still need to do more to consider the rise of 'networked masculinities' – 'those masculinities (co)produced and reproduced with digitally networked publics.' In an update to his work on masculinity, Connell (2012) argues that masculinity studies need to be cognisant of the institutions in which gender relations are embedded. For young men today this must include the institutions of digital media.

For example, studies of masculinity and digital media have demonstrated how hegemonic masculinity is not unchanging or universal in form. Siibak's (2010) study of young males' performances on Estonian social networking sites demonstrates how digital platforms provide adolescents with a vehicle to represent current cultural trends and styles that might portray them as popular. In his study the representation of a male image shifted in line with changes to what was culturally accepted as 'masculine' (Siibak, 2010). Some representations were more in keeping with aspects that had previously been defined as feminine.

Harvey et al.'s (2013) study of the use of social networks by young people during the 2011 London riots demonstrates that designer goods and labels which symbolised wealth were used to embody 'cool masculine swagger' and attain popularity 'ratings' in social networks. 'Ratings' were a gendered form of social and cultural capital, commonly conferring safety and movement around the boys' local area. The circulation of images through mobile online technologies enabled the construction of

'particular classed and racialised norms of popular masculinity' (Harvey et al. 2013: para 1.5). Social networking produces new ways for value to be acquired and circulated (eg via 'likes' on Facebook). However, online value must also be verified offline leading Harvey et al. to argue that 'an analysis of symbolic value in digital contexts and in embodied everyday life helps in understanding new regulative formations of gender and masculinity' (2013: para.1).

Kendall's (2000, 2002) participant observation of BlueSky (an online interactive text-based forum) explores participants' understandings of themselves as 'nerds', and the relationship of this identity to hegemonic masculinity and expectations of heterosexuality. The BlueSky participants enacted a form of masculinity related to computer culture. Joking within the BlueSky community, particularly in the form of 'obnoxious bantering' (Kendall 2000: 271) about women as sexual objects, was also important for the construction of group identity and reaffirmed hegemonic masculine values. Kendall (2000: 271) notes that the enactment of a 'white nerd masculine identity', demonstrates its divergence from, and convergence with, hegemonic masculinity.

These studies illustrate how men, within a digital landscape, go about negotiating and creating new masculine values as well as following more traditional roles (Siibak, 2010). They also show how complex and intricate the process of compliance with hegemonic masculinity and its evolving standards can be. Finally, studies such as these are sociologically important for demonstrating how social networks have become a valued platform on which young males can explore social norms and

produce their own performances in line with, or in conflict with, hegemonic masculinity.

Gendered talk: banter and bonding

Banter is an example of gendered talk which:

> …functions [...] to perpetuate and enforce asymmetrical gendered behavior by means of reconstructing social relations between and among females and males in countless ordinary daily conversations over a lifetime. (Sheldon 1990: 6-7)

Billig (2001: 33) reminds us that: 'Teasing can be an inherently ambiguous activity, whose meaning is often contested by the participants. There is evidence that teasers consider their actions to be friendly and more humorous than do the recipients of their teasing'.

Previous studies of banter have demonstrated how it helps to forge organizational cultures and have focused on its use by men in workplace settings (Hawkins, 2013) such as IT companies (Plester and Sayers, 2007), police 'canteen banter' (as sexist and racist) (Sollund, 2007), and male bonding in brokerage firms (Decapua and Boxer, 1999). In these male-dominated contexts banter and forms of 'male posturing' involve aggression being '(often playfully) distributed within the group, drawing in all men present to defend themselves against personal sleights' (Tolson, 1977).

Although the literature tends to take a critical stance towards banter, Williams (2009) has identified some more positive features of banter in a study of discussions about health care between fathers. For these fathers, 'having a laugh', 'banter' and 'taking the piss' were 'pleasurable and important aspects in which fathers talked about their health experiences' (Williams, 2009: 74; Coates, 2003: 53). Williams also highlights the humour that characterises many of these experiences (and which is also evident in our study). Williams observed a link between banter and humour, as both framed the interactions between men as an enjoyable pastime, where experiences and ideas could be discussed in a way that displayed masculinity. Thus, humour was vital not only in creating interactions that were enjoyable, but also as a method of performing the role of an 'accepted' man (Williams, 2009: 77). However, Williams (2009) found that it could also produce isolation, when it targets individuals through ridicule or uses humour to mask the true feelings of those involved. Rather than expressing important information about how they felt, humour could be used to conceal embarrassment and vulnerability (Coates, 2003: 55), thus demonstrating that 'they were "normal" or "proper" hegemonic men' (Williams, 2009: 79).

More critically still, banter has been seen as a means of expressing sexual aggression (Eder, 1995) and as a form of sexual harassment which targets both men and women (Lerum, 2004). In a study of teamwork amongst colleagues in an office, Hawkins (2013) notes that banter (which in her study is dominated by the sexualisation of women) is used to create '…a pecking order amongst consultants. Rankings in teams are informed by the extent to which individuals demonstrate their commitment… by embodying masculinist team values…' (Hawkins, 2013: 122). Through the subjugation of women using language which marked them out as 'playthings', and the

subordination of other men, these men could attempt to build their social status. Eder (1995) also views banter as an expression of gender tension and sexual aggression manifested through teasing and insults (Willis, 1977). Phipps and Young (2015: 311) observed how male university students in England used banter as a means of defending irony or covering up behaviours with humour, which risked 'normalising problematic attitudes and behaviours'. Therefore in these studies there is a 'link between sexual aggression and bullying behaviour in which boys as well as girls [are] targeted' (Eder and Nenga, 2006: 169).

While the literature tends to suggest that for men, banter is a 'form of aggression and dominance', it has also been argued that there are gendered variations in the use of banter and that, like humour, banter can establish intimacy for women (Decapua and Boxer, 1999: 5). Pollert (1981) found that women factory workers were equally capable of taking part in sexualised, 'masculine banter' as a means of expressing resistance to managerial staff. Lerum (2004) also notes the function of 'sexual banter' in female-dominated service environments (including strip-clubs, diners and a high-end restaurant in the USA), as a means of facilitating camaraderie and empowerment. Powell and Sang (2015) argue that for women in the workplace, 'sexist banter' is difficult to challenge (see also Lumsden, 2009). Sanders (2004) highlights the banter which takes place between female sex workers and professionals as a means of protecting personal and emotional wellbeing.

Banter has been observed to strengthen relationships bonds between men (Williams, 2009) by asserting the value of specific norms like heterosexuality, but also as alienating others who do not adhere to these norms, or who do not participate in

banter (Decapua and Boxer, 1999). As Hein and O'Donohoe (2014: 1308) note: 'Banter among smaller groups of friends seem[s] to reflect, and perhaps produce, a stronger bond.' This is the inclusive side of establishing group boundaries but such bonding may also exclude a marginalised group who lack the ability to take part (Goffman, 1963).

The above studies explore how banter facilitates interaction but much of the work that has been conducted on banter has related it to bullying (Eder and Nenga, 2006). These accounts often explore banter from an outsider perspective, which focuses on the effects these male interactions may have on victims (intended or otherwise). This study, by contrast, presents the perspectives of the participants themselves, giving them a voice to discuss the role of banter in peer-group interactions on social networking sites such as Facebook.

Methods

The discussion is based on data collected during a study into teenagers' social media use and its relationship to friendship and identity formation in an English town in the East Midlands over the course of two years. 10 semi-structured interviews and 7 focus groups were conducted by the first author across three secondary schools which taught a range of children (aged 11-16) from varying ethnic and economic backgrounds. This includes individuals who identified as being from Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh backgrounds, and from working, middle and upper class families. Semi-structured interviews also took place in local homes. The research involved 98 participants in total, of whom 20 were girls and 78 were boys.

Thematic analysis and an iterative-inductive approach were adopted in order to analyze the data, with the intention of 'allowing the data to speak for themselves as far as possible' (O'Reilly, 2005: 27). This enabled the identification and analysis of key themes and patterns emerging from the transcripts. Gender, and specifically the role of banter amongst male participants, emerged as a pertinent theme during the data collection phase. Once banter had been identified as a theme, the researcher incorporated specific questions which would prompt further discussion of this in the interviews and focus groups.

The project received institutional ethical approval. The identities of the participants have been fully anonymised, using pseudonyms selected by the participants. Allen and Wiles (2016: 162) note that allowing participants to choose their own pseudonyms gives participants the opportunity to direct how they will feature in an academic study whilst also ensuring that the privacy of those who take part is upheld. It also encourages participation by making the process more informal for teenagers (for instance some of them elected to choosing a comical pseudonym).

'There's a bit of banter': learning and performing masculinity

Learning to banter

For the male teenagers in this study, bantering on social networking sites such as Facebook was an important rite of passage for socialising them into masculine norms and values, and particularly the performance of hegemonic masculinity. For instance, the focus group extract below includes an exchange related to a horror video on Facebook. We can see how David, through his response that the video was 'scary'

and his agreement with Anna, prompts derision from the other boys for not adhering to typically masculine traits such as strength and stoicism:

Anna: There are so many videos on Facebook that come up now, like scary things, that I like, don't think other people should click on. But so many people sort of do it anyway.

David: Yeah like also I realized, I saw a video, like it was meant to be an illusionist. And they made you stare right into this little dot.

[The other boys chuckle]

David: And then it turns into this scary face, screaming at you and…

Juan: And that's funny!

David: Yeah it is…

Juan: What it did to you is like when you take a little kid to do it…

(Focus group with Anna, David, Paul and Juan, 12-16 years old)

The opening lines between Anna and David were typical of interactions during the session, in that it appeared that David was somewhat in awe of Anna. Often, after she had spoken, he would be quick to agree and show his support. Up until this point this had little impact on his standing in the conversation, yet on this occasion it placed him into a vulnerable position with his male peers. Through engaging with her sentiments and mirroring the language she used, he incites derision from the other boys. When he expresses his view of this video as 'scary', the others are quick to contradict this and instead define it as 'funny'. This technique of conflicting opinion is used to imply that David, by finding the video shocking in the same manner as a girl, is less masculine than his peers, who found it humorous. This is supported moments afterwards when

Juan openly compares David and his reaction to that of a child. During this small focus group, Paul was fairly quiet and hesitant to offer strong views. Yet he was a participant in the banter through his role as a member of the audience. The reactions he expressed, both to Juan's masculine dominance and David's attempt to reclaim his masculine capital, are critical to these interactions. As he was not engaged in either 'confrontation', he was perfectly placed to judge on the success of these exchanges. Although not necessarily an impartial judge, for the boys within that exchange, his reactions (and also those, in part, of Anna) were the deciding factor in who was the banter victor.

This is an example of how social norms create boundaries that can divide groups (Goffman, 1963). These boys are performing their own hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1990). As the other boys are older than David, it is also likely that this interaction is evidence of the younger teen being socialised, through a series of negative responses (McGuffey, 2011). This is supported by David's attempts later in the conversation (not included in the extract above) to reassert himself and show through his behaviour that he belongs to the same group as his peers through acting in a way that is similar to them. In his justification he appears to alter his reaction to agree with the humorous response that was reported by the other boys. We observe a moment of gender socialisation, via the 'mocking' of feminised behaviour in a younger male adolescent (Butler, 1990; Connell, 1990). David is being exposed to the influence of the 'norm circles' for banter and for a certain style of masculinity (Elder-Vass, 2010). He is coming to learn that certain ways of performing masculinity are more likely to be endorsed by his teenage peers than others, and even within this short conversation we see evidence that he is responding to this pressure.

This is not a social phenomenon that is confined to a single platform, or encountered solely offline or online. The participants rarely distinguished relationships and interactions as being bounded by a specific digital device or application. Indeed, the excerpt above centres on an online activity which then becomes relevant in face-to-face discussion. Online or offline, however, for many male teenagers, performing their masculinity includes normalised forms of conflict with other boys, through which they are able to manage their social status and group identity. However, the norms of banter also discourage boys from reacting emotionally or honestly if they are upset or angered. To do so would be to act in a feminized manner that conflicts with 'emotional restraint, one of the key values inherent in hegemonic masculinity' (Coates, 2003: 47). Being socialised into banter is a step towards the adult masculinity that Williams (2009) observed, in which banter, although useful for facilitating bonding and social ordering, also often prevented his group of fathers from being able to openly express how they felt.

It was also often difficult to establish how boys truly felt about the insults and jibes that they received and traded. Although discussions like the one between David and Juan were framed as humorous and good natured exchanges, there were often signs that individuals were unhappy. This was displayed through muted responses, pauses in communication as individuals worked to control emotions and reply suitably and defensive or tense body language. David exhibited some of these characteristics as he worked to control his reactions to the comments from Juan.

Unlike the female participants, who had no issue talking about the emotions that similar confrontations had evoked, the boys were always reticent to reveal how they felt, especially when it was related to how banter might affect them. Through claiming that insults are harmless, or by downplaying the emotional impact it might have, these boys are aligning themselves with hegemonic ideas about what it means to be male.

Banter or bullying?

The teenage boys frequently expressed derisive judgments of their male peers. Although at first glance these jibes resemble bullying, we suggest that they represent a distinct and consciously different process, at least in the eyes of these participants. One of the crucial differences is the manner in which such interactions are publicly framed and how this relates to masculinity. In the excerpt below, we can see how male teenagers reference banter and justify its use in social interactions with peers. They take care to distinguish banter from bullying:

> Interviewer: In terms of social networking have you experienced times when there has been conflict?
>
> Mark: There's a bit of banter.
>
> Interviewer: What do you qualify as banter?
>
> Mark: Something that both people find funny.
>
> Interviewer: Ah right, so you've made it clear there that it is not bullying…?
>
> Mark: Yeah.
>
> Steven: Yeah.

Interviewer: So how often do you think, something crosses over from banter to bullying? Or how much is there of either?

George: I don't think I often see bullying. There's not really much of either. There's a bit of banter between friends.

George: Not really bullying.

(Focus group with Mark, Steven and George, 14-15 years old)

Although Mark identifies banter as a form of conflict, he and his peers – even after prompting by the interviewer – continue to distance this behaviour from an act that might be classified as harassment or as harmful to the recipient. In their study of 'lad culture', Phipps and Young (2015: 311) discovered that male university students used banter as a means of defending irony or covering up behaviours with humour, which risked 'normalising problematic attitudes and behaviours'. By reframing their verbal exchanges, the boys continued to engage in an activity that to an outsider might seem detrimental to their friendships. Their perception of banter is linked to masculine norms such as competition, conflict and strength. This is also perhaps why it was difficult to ascertain whether any teenager had experienced their inclusion in banter as bullying. Maintaining 'face' (Goffman, 1955) in these interactions was a vital strategy for ensuring acceptance by the male peer group.

In another focus group, Dash described a typical piece of 'online banter'. This involved tagging male friends in online photos. Tagging is a function on certain social networking sites, which alerts the tagee and friends to the presence of a photo of the tagee. It is used to show who was present in the picture, share events that friends had experienced together and allow peers to witness the photos and the relationships they

represent. However in the cases discussed below it is used to 'tag' a photo of another person with the name of the target of the banter, suggesting that the target shares some feature with the actual individual in the photo. In this instance, the photo used is that of a man considered 'skinny' with the words 'He lifts' typed below:

Interviewer: What do you think boys do on social networking?

Dash: Taking the mick out of each other.

[The group agrees with a chorus of 'yes'.]

Dash: There are a few pictures with like… We tag a few of our thin friends in, say like, 'He lifts' and stuff.

[Laughter from the group].

(Focus group with Dash, Michael and Charlotte, all 15 years old)

By hegemonic standards of masculinity, men who lack muscle or do not engage in physical activities are viewed as inferior (Connell, 1990). There is still a strong argument that a powerful physicality is part of the projection of the hegemonic man (Connell, 1990). By tagging his friend in the photo of the skinny man, Dash is appealing to this gendered ideal. He aligns his friend with this inferior image whilst positioning himself in opposition to it.

The use of the words 'He lifts' further undermines the 'tagee's' 'masculine capital'. 'Do you even lift?' is a common male insult that alludes to an individual's physical weakness. This is not a positive comment for those boys who are in search of social acceptance and Dash's choice of phrase –'He lifts'- is arguably as damaging. The phrase implies that the individual has exercised but still failed to develop muscle. This

can increase the negativity associated with the image and the 'tagged' recipient as it demonstrates a failure of masculine control and dominance. The recipient of the sleight is represented simultaneously as weak and as unable to effect a change regardless of their efforts.

Amongst these boys, banter is part of the cultural process of defining masculinity through and against derogatory representations of both women and other men by constructing them as 'Other' (Renold, 2004), but their motivations for taking part in this process are complex. On the one hand, such insults were seen by male teens as part of a competitive jostling for status in the peer hierarchy, demonstrating that 'men's talk' is competitive (Hein and O'Donohue, 2014). There is a sense of this in the example above where the reputation of the boy is diminished by associating him with feminised characteristics (such as lack of muscle). Such insults both appeal to and reproduce prevailing standards of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1990).

Overflowing practices and failed banter

Despite the frequency with which banter and humour were reported together, there were also occasions when it was not well received. In the focus groups and interviews, boys seemed loath to bring up accounts where they had experienced, or knew of, occasions where banter had taken a more serious turn. Yet it was clear that there had been occasions were insults had led to more serious provocations. In one focus group, a respondent called Lionheart (aged 14) described an interaction which 'just kicked off' in response to a comment on Facebook, leading to physical violence between the two parties, an outcome that was perceived by onlookers to be 'ridiculous':

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Interviewer: Was that offline, like a proper fight?

Lionheart: Yeah.

Kesha: Owen's an idiot.

Lionheart: That's just on Facebook, but this guy Michael is like a complete muppet and Owen said something and it just kicked off from there. I was with Owen at the time and we were just laughing loads, because it's just funny… I got started on but I didn't do anything and neither did Owen but then people started saying other stuff and Owen got annoyed. But it's just ridiculous.

(Interview with Kesha and Lionheart, 14 years old)

These interactions and their interpretations by the individuals involved highlight the complexity of male-versus-male interaction and its navigation. Despite many adolescents appearing to endorse the ideal of male physicality, in examples when a fight does ensue it is perceived negatively as an exchange in which banter failed. Rather than continuing with a witty response, the target steps outside the bounds of banter with an aggressive over-reaction. Part of the culture of banter is that derogation is humorous, and although it is humour at someone's expense, it is not continuous with aggression or violence, which are to be directed at outsiders, while banter is directed at insiders (Goffman, 1959). Equally, an aggressive or hostile response that is not camouflaged with humour represents unfamiliarity with the tactics of banter. Whether it is the original comment or the response, this shifts the participants out of the banter ritual and into the sphere of bullying. This does not mean that banter is a form of violence or bullying, but rather, that banter may overflow into other

interaction practices when it is conducted with insufficient skills or knowledge, or when the participants are ambivalent about their intentions.

Evaluating exchanges as either banter or bullying is challenging for outsiders, partly because ambiguity may be used as a shield for verbal bullying – 'it's just banter, innit'?' – if the boy is called out for their behaviour.. On the one hand, participants may not speak freely about their feelings due to the relationship that such practices have with masculinity and the masking of emotions. 'Display rules' specify appropriate overt expressions of emotion in response to banter. Following these rules involves an element of 'surface acting' as part of the boys' 'emotion management' in relation to gendered expectations (Hochschild, 1983). On the other hand, statements that seem cruel and hostile to outsiders may be received more positively as part of an ongoing bonding ritual by the participants.

Banter failures can arise from the unsuccessful deployment of banter. The target of banter must always evaluate whether the intent of the initiator is inclusive or if such comments trespass over acceptable lines. As the literal verbal content takes the form of an insult in both cases there is always the possibility that the target might not respond verbally, but physically. A statement intended as banter may thus be taken as aggression instead, and not only because the target is unskilled but also if the initiator fails to provide enough contextual clues to show that banter is intended. In a focus group, Colin reported that a member of their peer group would often try to banter with others over their apparent mis-use of grammar through pointing out their flaws and displaying his own dominance through 'correct' forms. However his persistence in

doing this, and his apparent lack of social mastery of the appropriate clues and inter-personal boundaries had resulted in a number of altercations:

> Colin: Oh the one with Jamie Kind, there is always one with Jamie Kind. Because he always corrects people's grammar and they get REALLY angry.
>
> Interviewer: Is this a boy in your year?
>
> [There is a chorus of 'yes' and angry muttering from the whole group].
>
> (Focus group with 15 year old boys)

In this example, Jamie had alienated himself from a number of peers because, despite actively engaging in this male pastime, he had failed to meet the humour requirement for successful banter.

A further difficulty with executing banter online is that the contextual clues distinguishing banter from bullying are also more ambiguous. Tone of communication, timing, facial expression, and body language clues from both the initiator and the observers are absent. The recipient must decide how to interpret the insult based on how it is embedded in the context of communication and in the history of the relationship between initiator and target. When 'online banter' is executed between people who also have offline relationships, this context and history may be well developed, having benefitted already from the much richer contextual clues available in face-to-face interaction. The social actors, in other words, have had the opportunity to build up a level of trust that informs their interpretations of each other's remarks. Lacking this context, 'online banter' can be more difficult to execute competently and constructively than 'offline banter'.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on male teenagers' use of banter on social networking sites such as Facebook and its role in constructing a form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). We argued that banter is a more complex practice than has previously been suggested and that it has connections to various aspects of masculinity and social inclusion. It has certain characteristics which appear to set it apart from bullying. One key difference lies in how the comments are interpreted. Through accepting the banter that is levelled at him/her, and not reacting in an open and aggressive way to what has been said, the individual is able to mitigate the chance of being viewed as a victim, or in the case of a boy, as a weaker male, and thus 'losing face' in online interactions with their peers (Goffman, 1955). Banter offers an opportunity to later reclaim both status and image, by deploying similar verbal tactics in the same manner. This is not to suggest that the comments which are exchanged by these teenagers cannot be hurtful and/or received negatively. As many insults in banter exchanges are deliberately styled to irritate, part of their purpose is to offend and provoke a response from an appropriate target. These insults may be similar in content to those employed in cases of bullying, but the response structure is different.

In a bullying interaction, individuals are usually selected that are already excluded from a set in-group, and the derogatory comments further enforce this boundary. By contrast, banter invites a verbal retort which is actively considered by all involved, while also including peers in the group and marking off boundaries to distinguish those deemed to be outsiders. Thus whilst bullying could be compared to a one-sided battle, banter is a contest utilising verbal assaults that are judged by peers. The role of

third party witnesses in banter resonates with the work of Goffman (1959), who argued that our portrayals of self depend on appealing to an audience. The value of the responses and comments that constitute banter will be judged against the groups' beliefs with regards to masculinity, humour, verbal skill, etc. and the mastery of how these aspects are combined.

As it is an interactional style that is bounded by the norms of masculinity, one of the most crucial aspects for those involved is to be able to mask any effect that they feel from the banter. One of the issues that make banter so complex is that each exchange is a constant test of control and verbal dexterity, pitching insults that will offend the target just enough without crossing into territory that might be viewed as too offensive by other males. As we saw above, this can result in a physical confrontation that damages the credibility of all involved through displaying a weakness of self-control and thus 'losing face' (Goffman, 1955). Avoiding this outcome is one reason why the presence of humour is so valued during these communications. For the participants in banter to maintain face, they must co-operate to preserve a definition of the situation as humorous and comradely, and it is this co-operation that distinguishes banter most decisively from bullying. It is partly because in learning to banter boys learn to co-operate in preserving such a definition that banter can be a useful tool in promoting bonding amongst group members (Hay, 2000). This is a form of interaction in which the participants exchange not only insults but also recognition (Coates, 2003: 2-3). The frequency with which banter was mentioned by our participants, and the emphatic care that was taken in setting it out as both good natured and non-threatening on all sides, seemed to place this mechanism as a vital part of being masculine. To 'do boy' (Buckingham, 2008; Butler, 1990) for many

participants (stated by both boys and girls in this study), centred on being able to hold one's own in the swift and brutal exchanges of verbal word play.

Attempts to banter online with people who do not share an offline relationship (such as friendship) with the initiator are risky, since it is more likely that insults will be interpreted as hostile, as in cases of 'trolling', for example (cf Lumsden and Morgan, 2017). It seems likely that *some* behaviour that is experienced as 'trolling' by its targets is seen as an attempt at banter by the initiator. This, in turn, seems more likely when the initiator is an inexperienced or unskilled 'banterer'. Some cases of 'trolling' are carried out by those with poor social skills who have difficulty distinguishing the subtleties of different forms of communication. As we noted earlier, Billig (2001) shows that 'teasing' can be an ambiguous activity, with meanings contested by participants, and in online banter this ambiguity can be amplified.

By exploring the use of banter online by teenage boys we have seen how it can be used to order both social status and individual identity within peer groups. We have also noted how banter offers an opportunity for all involved to engage in 'online othering' in order to negotiate their place within a male group in a way that is not present in exchanges that can be classed merely as bullying or victim-focused. Through accepting the 'bantering' jibes or insults, rather than responding aggressively or appealing to authority figures that might intervene, the recipient is later able to claim some credibility back if they effectively retort and are judged successful by their peers.

We recognise that we have mainly explored the use of banter within male peer groups in a very specific socio-cultural setting, and therefore have not drawn attention to its use to subordinate girls and women in certain (online) settings such as via 'sexist banter' (Lerum, 2004; Phipps and Young, 2015). There are also important needs for research on many other intersections of gendered, classed, and raced identities, and their performance in the complex negotiations of conflict, gendered identities, status and hierarchies, that are so crucial for teenagers in their everyday lives. The focus of this paper, however, has been to make the case for seeing banter as a complex social practice in its own right, with both positive and negative roles in the socialization of contemporary male teens.

In this chapter we contributed to the sociological study of youth, masculinity and digital media. We highlighted the need to explore the construction, enactment and reproduction of masculinities in digital media spaces in order to account for the ways in which gender relations are embedded in social institutions and structures (including digital/social media), and in a global context (Connell, 2012). We also add more specifically to sociological studies of 'networked masculinities' (Light, 2014), and the study of banter in online settings. An exploration of banter and masculinity reveals how male teenagers feel about its role and the exchanges they share, and how hegemonic masculinity's power is further reinforced via digital media exchanges between young boys, at such an early age. Thus learning to banter both offline and online plays a crucial role for our male teenagers in socialising them into the norms and values of hegemonic masculinity.

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