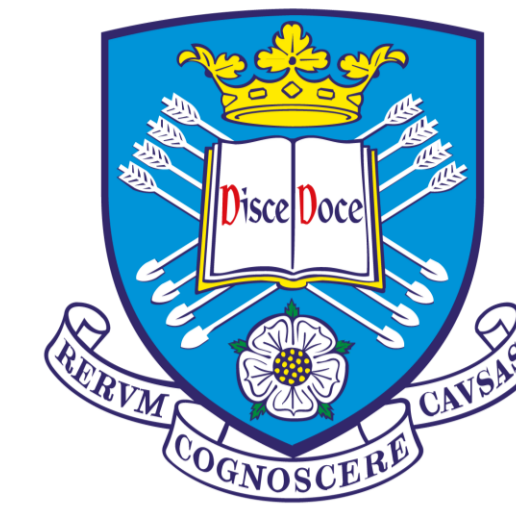


It's Just Bants

Exploring the relationship between banter and racism



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Summary

The aim of the study was to explore the relationship between banter and everyday racism within an educational context. In doing so, it explored how students perceive racialised banter and whether it is “just a joke”. It also explored students’ responses to racialised banter—how and if they react. The subsequent exploration of the relationship aimed to explore wider structural powers and underlying power hierarchies uncovering how white-dominant discourses and the veil of whiteness, or the relative invisibility of whiteness, can be reproduced and sustained. The study draws on the personal experiences of five students through semi-structured interviews, focusing on their perceptions, understandings, and reactions, as well as the broader perspectives. It broaches the disciplines of humour studies, Whiteness studies and Critical Race Theory.

Background

The rising prevalence of political correctness and cancel culture threatens the survival of comedy and humour arise. Are jokes just jokes, or are they indicative of a more complex power dynamic between majority and minority groups? The intrinsic nature of humour is entwined within social interaction¹; how we interpret it can vary from person to person. Banter can be understood as a playful exchange of teasing². The butts of teasing and ridicule are not limited to certain characteristics; however, sexist and racist joking are arguably the most common³.

Methods

The study sampled five students from minority ethnic backgrounds. It recruited through social media and snowball sampling. It adopted the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews. The study used new forms of analysis—live coding⁴—using NVivo to simultaneously code and watch video or audio recordings, annotating themes that developed throughout the interview and transcribing quotes to illustrate key themes.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate that the perception of light-heartedness can depend on the audience, the butt of jokes, and the joke teller’s status – where the framing or understanding of banter is influenced by socialisation. It also identified typical responses such as laughing along, objecting and ignoring akin to Kuipers⁵. In addition, some participants also actively participated, formed an affective alliance or laughed it off. Finally, findings indicate that participation in racialised banter sustains power hierarchies and white-dominant discourses by devaluing and subordinating individuals by repeated use of slurs, derogatory terms, and stereotypes, contributing to a colour-blind society normalising whiteness.

Overall, the findings provide an insight into students’ perceptions and experiences of racialised banter and the intersection of banter and everyday racism. It identifies the nonperformative nature of anti-racist policies within education and makes suggestions for further research to tackle broader issues that coincide with banter.

Citations

¹Kuipers, G. (2008) 'The Sociology of Humour', in Raskin, V. (ed.) *The Primer of Humour Research*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, pp. 361-398.

²Dynel, M. (2009) 'Beyond a Joke: Types of Conversational Humour', *Language and Linguistics Compass*, 3(5), pp. 1284-1299. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-818X.2009.00152.x>.

³Phipps, A. and Young, I. (2013) *That's what she said: women students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*, London: NUS.

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⁴Parameswaran, U. D., Ozawa-Kirk, J. L., & Latendresse, G. (2020). To live (code) or to not: A new method for coding in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 19(4), 630-644.

⁵Kuipers, G. (2011) 'The politics of humour in the public sphere: Cartoons, power and modernity in the first transnational humour scandal', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(1), pp. 63-80. doi: 10.1177/1367549410370072.

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