

Examining young peoples’ perceptions of humoristic cyberbullying behaviours using vignettes

Oonagh L. Steer, Lucy R. Betts, Thom Baguley, & Jens Binder
Nottingham Trent University

Introduction

Cyberbullying is an aggressive online behaviour that is defined by three criteria; intentionality, power imbalance and repetition (Olweus, 2013). A justification for perpetrating cyberbullying has been reported to be for “fun” or for a “joke” (Baas, et al., 2013). However, in terms of cyberbullying, recognising where humour or banter ends (Betts & Spenser, 2017) and where offensive perpetration begins can be ambiguous, which can lead to misinterpretation (Steer et al., 2020).

Limited Research has identified several factors which may mediate severity perception of cyberbullying victimisation; gender (Bauman & Newman, 2013), specific types of cyberbullying (Pieschl et al., 2015), public cyberbullying (Sticca & Perren, 2013), and repetition of an act (Pieschl et al., 2015). However, research has neglected to empirically consider an association between these factors in relation to the role of humour in cyberbullying and severity perception.

The aim of this study is to investigate participants’ severity perception of contextually humoristic cyberbullying by using hypothetical cyberbullying vignettes. Primarily, the vignettes are based on experiences of humoristic cyberbullying provided by focus groups held with young people (Steer et al., 2020). Four levels of humour were manipulated within the vignettes, starting from a lower level of banter, increasing to an offensive joke, joke cyberbullying (same as pure cyberbullying but begins with the text “For a joke...”), and the highest level, pure cyberbullying behaviour. Types of cyberbullying behaviours, gender, audience, and repetition were factors that were incorporated into the vignettes.

Method

Sample: 307 females and 110 males aged between 16-21 completed an online survey (N=417). Mean age = 17.14 (SD= 1.10).
Materials: Participants were assigned a set of 12 humoristic cyberbullying vignettes. Each vignette consisted of factors relating to severity of humour, gender, cyberbullying behaviour, the presence of an audience and repeated experience. Vignettes were rated 0-7 for two outcome variables, with lower scores indicating lower ratings of perceived severity. DV1= perceived offensiveness, DV2 = to what degree the vignette was observed as cyberbullying.

Results

Multi-level modelling, implementing a crossed random effects approach, was used to examine the multiple factors within the vignettes. The cumulative link mixed model (clmm) function of the ordinal package in R (R Core Team, 2020) was used to carry out analysis. For this study, the design was a fractional factorial design 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 4 x 3. This approach allows the analysis to view participant responses and the vignettes as random intercepts and the outcome variables as random slopes. Utilizing this model accounts for the variance between participants and the vignettes, and hence inferences generalize beyond the people and vignettes sampled.

Main effects suggest that on average females are significantly more likely to assign a higher rating for both dependant variables than males. Humour scenario and cyberbullying behaviour are both significant predictors in the model, suggesting that the manipulations in both variables have a significant impact on the outcome variables.

	Coefficients	df	χ^2	p
Rating type	1	21.63	< .001	
Gender	1	39.66	< .001	
Audience	1	15.48	.001	
Repetition	1	39.38	< .001	
Humour scenario	3	274.38	< .001	
Cyberbullying behaviour	2	69.36	< .001	
Rating type x Repetition	1	82.464	< .001	
Rating type x Banter	3	29.274	< .001	
Rating type x Cyberbullying behaviour	2	8.45	.014	
Gender x Audience	1	24.295	< .001	
Audience x Repetition	1	5.285	0.021	
Audience x Humour scenario	3	11.385	< .001	

Table 1. Wald Chi-square tests for main effects and two-way interactions and p value statistics

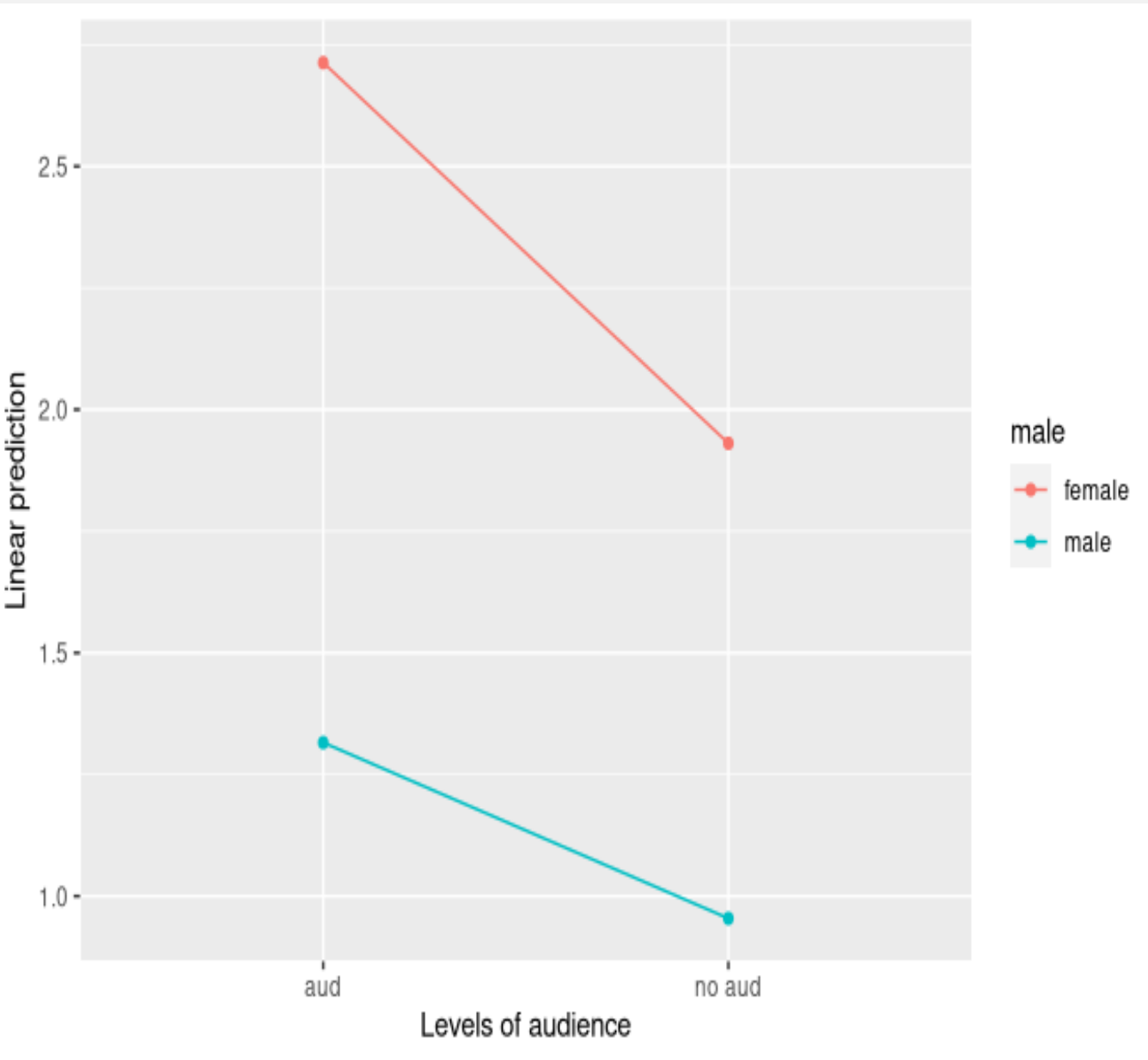


Figure 1. Gender x Audience interaction effect based on estimated marginal means on the fitted model.

As seen is table 1, statistically significant interactions are present in the model. Predictors are considered with simple main effects and interaction contrasts. There are three significant interactions between predictors and the DVs, as the effects of some predictors differ in relation to each outcome variable. These interaction will not be considered in the results or discussion section. However, if there are questions regarding these effect please feel free to approach and ask the presenter.

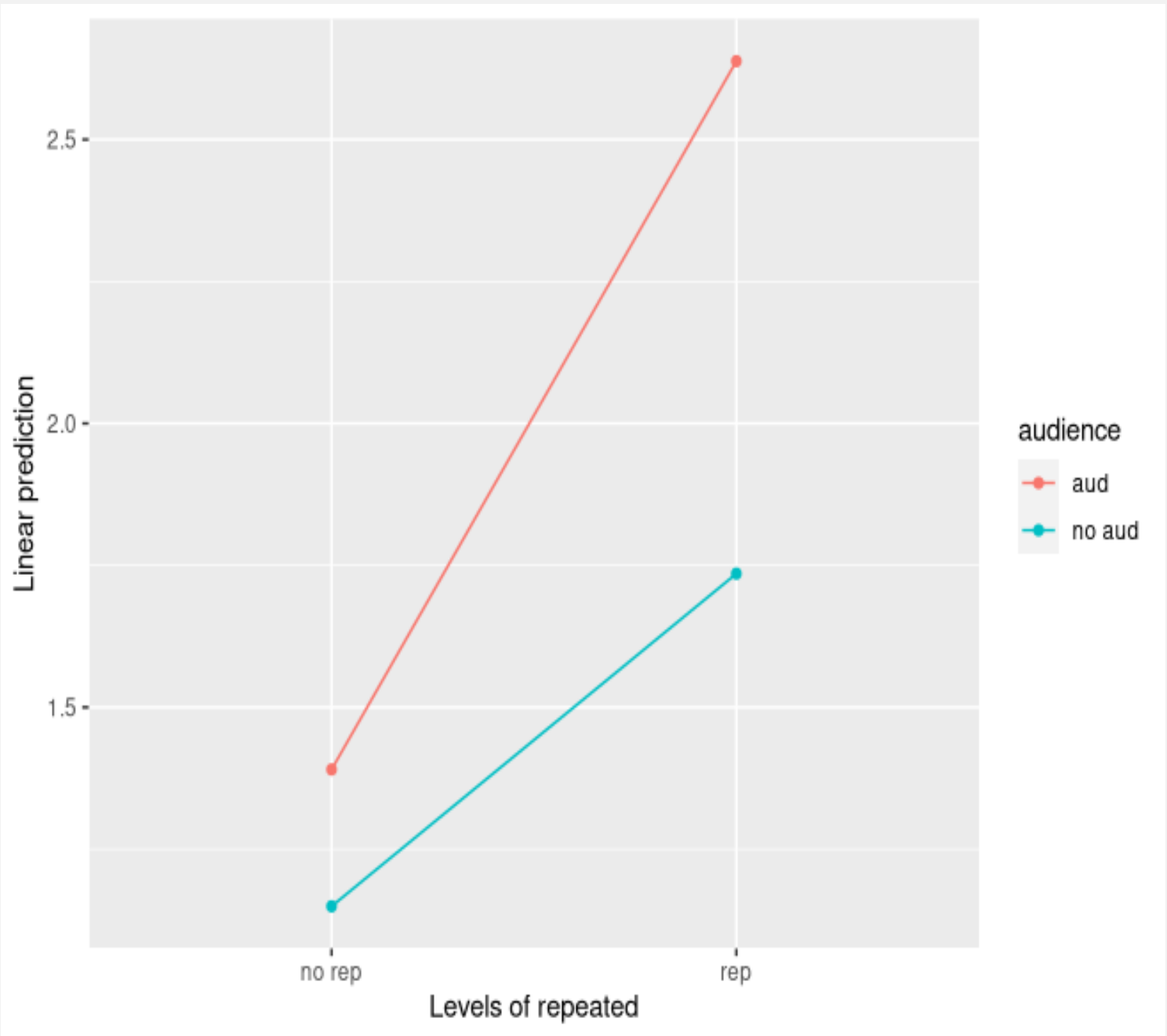


Figure 2. Audience x Repetition interaction effect based on estimated marginal means on the fitted model.

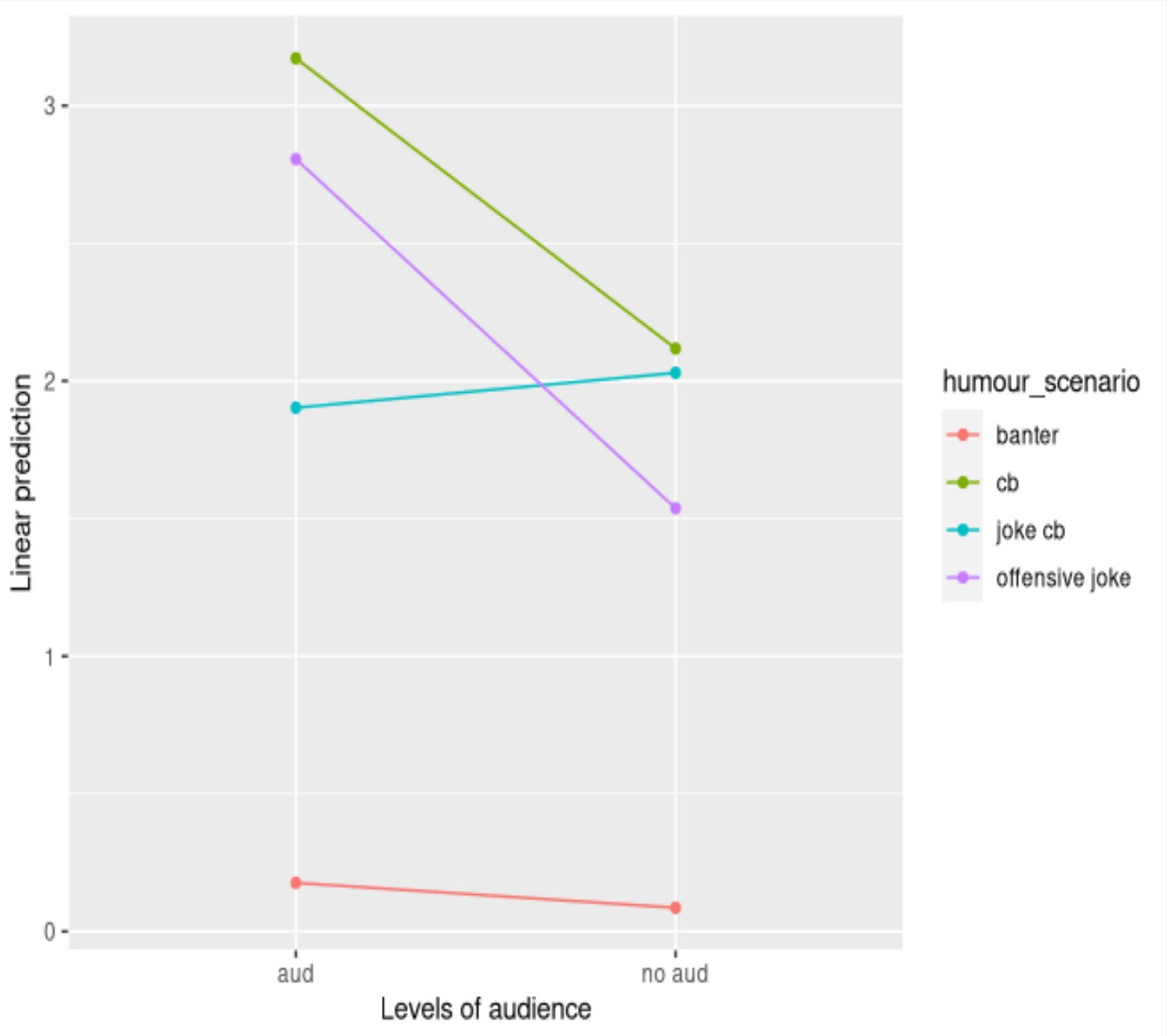


Figure 3. Audience x Humour Scenario interaction effect based on estimated marginal means on the fitted model.

- ❖ Figure 1 identifies a 2 x 2 *gender x audience* interaction effect. This interaction displays that females significantly ($p = <.0001$) assign higher ratings to both DVs than males overall, but also to a greater extent if an audience is present ($p = <.0001$). This suggests that the audience effect is primarily being driven by females.
- ❖ The 2 x 2 *audience x repetition* interaction depicted in figure 2 displays a significant audience effect when repetition is present compared to when there is no repetition ($p <.0001$). This interaction suggests that although repetition does has a significant effect on both the outcome variables without an audience present ($p <.0001$), the repetition effect is augmented when audience is present.
- ❖ Figure 3 outlines the 2 x 4, *audience x humour scenario* interaction which suggests having an audience present in the vignettes has a greater impact on the ‘offensive joke’ (2nd level) and ‘cyberbullying’ (highest) levels within the humour scenario factor compared to the other levels. These levels account for 96.8% ($p <.001$) of the deviance of the interaction. The remaining levels of ‘banter’ (1st level) and ‘joke CB’ (3rd level) are scarcely effected by the presence of an audience.

Discussion

Results suggest several important implications for the roles of gender, audience and repetition in relation to how severely humoristic cyberbullying can be perceived.

A significant gender difference suggest that females perceived the hypothetical vignettes more severely in general. This is supported by Bauman and Newman (2013) who reported significantly higher female ratings for perceived distress than for males for traditional and cyberbullying victimisation. This study’s findings are also supported by Sticca and Perren’s (2013) study which found that public cyberbullying is perceived as more severe compared to private cyberbullying. Furthermore, this study goes further to indicate that audience has a greater impact in terms of severity perception of cyberbullying (within the context of humour) for females than it does males. Additionally, although repetition of an behaviour does predict higher ratings of severity, repetitive behaviour is perceived more severely if an audience is present. Noncentini et al. (2010) have previously indicated this possible connection between audience and repetition, suggesting that one act of cyberbullying could be considered to be a multiple attack if perpetrated in public.

Audience also played a role within the humour scenarios, indicating that when an act is public, perceived severity may increase for offensive jokes and pure cyberbullying, but to a lesser extent for banter and joke cyberbullying (cyberbullying labelled as a joke). These findings serve to demonstrate the ambiguous role of humour within cyberbullying and how audience may mediate identification of humoristic cyberbullying.

Conclusions: In sum, humorous and offensive online interactions can be challenging to identify as cyberbullying, despite the severity of the behaviour.