Bullying is one of the largest social problems facing today’s youth. With the newer and more advanced forms of technology available today, this problem is increasingly transitioning from face-to-face bullying into cyberbullying, or repeated aggressive acts carried out toward a victim using forms of electronic contact (Smith et al., 2008). One of the key features of bullying is a power imbalance between the bully and the victim. Although this imbalance is present in both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, there are some factors that differ between the two. In this essay, mobile phones and Internet will be used as examples to argue that anonymity, constant possibility of threat, and potential for a large audience are three factors that contribute to the power imbalance in cyberbullying. From examining relevant research, it is apparent that media enables bullies to be more powerful, gives victims less power to control the situation, or reduces the threshold difference in power needed for victimization (Dooley, Pyżalski & Cross, 2009; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). This altered power imbalance contributes to cyberbullying often being considered as worse and more severe than traditional bullying (Hay, Meldrum, & Mann, 2010; Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012). Strategies for prevention and intervention are also discussed.

Traditional bullying, defined as an aggressive act that is repeated towards a victim of lesser power (Olweus, 1993), is a prominent issue in the lives of many adolescents. In a multi-national survey administered in classrooms in the 2005-2006 school year, 35.6% of Canadian boys and 34.7% of Canadian girls aged 11-15 years old reported that they had recently been victimized occasionally (Molcho et al., 2009). The definition of cyberbullying extends from that of traditional bullying. It specifies that the aggressive acts are carried out using forms of electronic contact (Smith et al., 2008). In a recent study among a large sample of middle and high school students from a large Canadian urban centre, 49.5% of students reported being bullied online and 33.7% reported bullying others online (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Like traditional bullying, one of the features characterizing cyberbullying is a power imbalance of a physical, psychological or social nature (Monks & Smith, 2006) between the bully and the victim (Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008).

Consequences of cyberbullying are often similar to those of traditional bullying (Tokunaga, 2010), with the exception that depressive symptoms are associated more with cyberbullying than with traditional bullying (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012). Cyber-victimization also has more of an impact on suicidal ideation, self-harm, and delinquency than traditional bullying (Hay, Meldrum, & Mann, 2010).

In this paper, it is argued that the power imbalance present in traditional bullying is altered and more pronounced in cyberbullying. Specifically, anonymity, the constant possibility of threat, and a potentially larger audience are qualities of online technology (e.g. the Internet and mobile phones) that contribute to this difference in power. It will be argued that these factors influence the power imbalance, and thus, these technologies give power to bullies and take power away from victims. As a result, cyberbullying is often considered to be worse than traditional bullying.

Nicole Dordolo
Anonymity

Most students in a focus group who admitted to cyberbullying via the Internet or mobile phones reported that they had done so anonymously or disguised as a different name (Vandeboesch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Anonymous cyberbullying is often perceived to have more negative consequences than bullying that is not anonymous. For example, seventh and eighth-graders were more likely to rank anonymous hypothetical bullying situations as worse than those that were not anonymous (Sticca & Perren, 2013). In another study, students who reported that cyberbullying was worse than traditional bullying cited the anonymity of the bully as one of the most common reasons behind their negative rating (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013).

Anonymity and reduced face-to-face contact facilitate three aspects of cyberbullying: increased fear and helplessness of the victim, reduced power needed to be a bully, and lower levels of guilt and remorse for the bully (Slonje et al., 2013; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012; Vandeboesch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Anonymous cyberbullying may lead to the victim's increased levels of fear, frustration and powerlessness due to the fact that the bully could be anyone (Sticca & Perren, 2013; Vandeboesch & Van Cleemput, 2008). It may seem unlikely to an adolescent victim that the cyberbullying could ever be stopped because it is anonymous and difficult to track down the bullies (Smith et al., 2008). The victim may thus not know how to respond or how to appropriately judge the situation. It can become even more difficult for a victim to judge the situation appropriately when the fear, frustration, and helplessness are combined with other factors. For example, it often becomes more difficult for a victim to escape cyberbullying due to the presence of media in everyday life. Victims may be hesitant to report incidents that do not take place within school grounds to school administration. As a result of these combined factors, the situation can become more stressful (Vandeboesch & Van Cleemput, 2008).

Increased feelings of helplessness often lead victims of cyberbullying to lose their sense of perceived control over the situation, which is associated with an increase in depressive symptoms (Machmutow et al., 2012). In one study, self-report measures were administered to seventh-grade participants regarding their experiences with traditional bullying or cyberbullying, depressive symptoms, and coping strategies (Machmutow et al., 2012). The researchers show that the status of a cyber-victim predicted future increases in depressive symptoms, and that being victimized online may be more strongly related to depressive symptoms than traditional victimization (Machmutow et al., 2012). Cyber-victimization has also been found to be positively associated with internalizing measures such as self-harm and suicide ideation (Hay et al., 2010). The anonymous quality of online and mobile phone interaction can lead victims of cyberbullying to feel a loss of control over the situation, making them feel powerless easier than victims of traditional bullying (Sticca & Perren, 2013). The power imbalance present in traditional bullying (Olweus, 1993), is thus enhanced by anonymity in cyber-victimization. The perceived power of control is taken away from the victim, making him or her more vulnerable to further victimization.

Anonymity may also decrease the need for bullies to have power, empowering those who would otherwise not be bullies. In one study, one of the biggest risk factors of being bullied online was the previous action of bullying others online (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). This suggests that despite having lower levels of power, as indicated by their earlier status of victim, anonymity still allows bullying. Anonymous bullies therefore do not need to be much more powerful than the victims, making cyberbullying easier and more likely to occur.

Finally, the ability to remain anonymous or have reduced face-to-face contact makes cyberbullying more difficult to prevent in comparison with traditional bullying. Some methods of bullying prevention suggest that to prevent a bully from acting again, he or she
must understand the consequences of his or her actions and feel remorse (Pikas, 1989). In his deindividuation theory, Zimbardo (1969) postulated that the inability to identify with another person may lead to lower levels of internalized emotions, such as guilt and remorse. These emotions help inhibit negative behaviour towards others. Cyberbullies may also find it easier to engage in bullying behavior when there is no face-to-face contact, because these emotions are not as present. The reduced presence of these emotions may therefore make it more difficult to prevent cyberbullies from bullying, and from repeating their actions again in the future.

Constant Possibility of Threat

Another key issue in cyberbullying is the constant possibility of threat. In one study, students who reported that cyberbullying was worse than traditional bullying believed that the widespread nature of cyberbullying made it more dangerous as it could occur at any time or place (Slonje et al., 2013). One of the key components of the Internet and mobile phones is that they are constantly accessible. Data collected in 2012 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project suggests that 95% of American teenagers use the Internet, 93% have a computer or have home access to a computer, and 78% have mobile phones (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). The Internet and mobile phones are increasingly portable, and easily accessible to children and teenagers. Thus, there is a constant threat for a victim of cyberbullying to be targeted online because these virtual communications are pervasive in daily life (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Thus, the bullying does not have to stop at school, as it may in traditional bullying.

Victims of cyberbullying, compared to victims of traditional bullying, will find it difficult to escape the perpetrators due to their ability to act anywhere and anytime through online communication (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Victims of traditional bullying can often take control of the situation by breaking negative contact with the bully, for example, by leaving school and going home, or by speaking to a trusted adult. Long-term bullying can at least temporarily be stopped in this manner, and a victim of traditional bullying has the feeling of this control. In contrast, there is often “no safe haven” for a victim of cyberbullying which leads victims to feel a loss of control and powerlessness (Slonje et al., 2013; Sticca & Perren, 2013). In this case, the power balance is different from that in traditional bullying because, like victims who feel powerless due to not knowing who their bully is, cyber-victims may feel like they have lost control of the situation because they have no method of escape.

Another related aspect of the constant possibility of threat due to lack of control is the victim’s impression that adults may not be able to help, so they may not report the incidents to their parents or teachers. They also may not know who should be told about the incidents. For example, victims who are bullied online may be hesitant to report the incident to school administration if it does not happen within school groups. In a study, high school students reported that they would not tell adults about cyber-victimization. They believed adults lacked the technological skills to help them, and they feared that they would have their technological power taken away by their parents in attempt to solve the problem (Bauman, 2010). Victims of cyberbullying therefore do not have as much of a feeling of control as do victims of traditional bullying, because they may not believe they have the power to stop it by reporting the incidents. This alters the power imbalance, granting the victims less control. As a result, bullies need less power to do harm.

Large Audience

A third quality of virtual communications is a potentially large audience for content posted online. This is also true of mobile phones in the sense that information through messages (voice or text) can easily be recorded and forwarded to an additional audience,
or there may be hidden listeners on each end of the conversation. In response to questionnaires, 39% of cyberbullies admitted to showing bullying content to others, and in 16% of cases, reported uploading it onto the Internet (Slonje et al., 2012). Posting bullying content online allows a fast, widely accessible way of distributing information, resulting in negative consequences for victims of cyberbullying more so than traditional bullying (Dooley, Pyżalski & Cross, 2009). In contrast, the audience of traditional bullying is usually limited to the number of students at school (Dooley et al., 2009). Therefore, there is often a larger audience or imagined audience in cyberbullying than in traditional bullying.

In all cases, it is not just the actual audience that is important, but also the imagined audience for both the bully and the victim. Students ranked public bullying (either cyberbullying or traditional bullying) as much worse than private bullying (Sticca & Perren, 2013). The authors of this study suggested that this is an indication that students may fear public attacks against their social status, due to the possibility of the entire group discovering the bullying content very quickly and passing it along. A victim therefore feels like he or she has less control over the situation, and may therefore feel powerless or helpless, which may lead to depressive symptoms (Machmutow et al., 2012). In this case, since the victim is losing control, the power imbalance between the cyber bully and the victim is thus increased and cyberbullies may need less power than traditional bullies to be effective.

**Strategies for Prevention and Intervention**

With realization of the power difference between the cyber bully and the victim, there is hope that some strategies for prevention and intervention can be used to reduce the severity and impacts of cyberbullying. Since anonymity, the possibility of constant threat, and the potential for large audiences are features of the Internet and mobile phones that allow the power imbalance to be increased, potential strategies can be targeted at these features to reduce the power imbalance.

The potential for cyberbullies to remain anonymous online may lead to increased fear and feelings of powerlessness for the victim because the bully may be difficult to respond to if no identifying context is given (Sticca & Perren, 2013). The bullying behavior may appear to be difficult to stop due to the inability to track down the bullies (Smith et al., 2008). To combat these feelings, strategies could be used to inform all adolescents, including victims, that online anonymity is not truly anonymous (Sticca & Perren, 2013). It is nearly always possible, for example, to track down owners of IP addresses, mobile phone numbers, and Internet user history. Informing adolescents about these possibilities will make the victims feel less powerless in a cyberbullying situation since they may feel that there is a possibility that the bullies can be punished. It may also decrease the possibility of bullying behaviour as the potential bullies may reconsider their actions due to more inescapable consequences (Sticca & Perren, 2013), thus feeling less powerful.

One of the highest predictors for being bullied online is the previous action of being a bully (Livingstone et al., 2011). This may demonstrate that one motive for cyberbullying is for a victim to retaliate against previous bullies. Victims of cyberbullying may be taught strategies of prevention such as seeking support from peers and family rather than retaliating back against the bully. If a victim carries out these prevention strategies, they may also be less likely to experience depressive symptoms. In a longitudinal study investigating the impact of coping strategies on depressive symptoms of cyber victims, participants who recommended seeking support from peers and family members showed decreased levels of depressive symptoms (Machmutow et al., 2012).

The reduced face-to-face contact of cyberbullying may make it more difficult for cyberbullies to be able to see the effects of their actions on victims, which may cause them to feel less remorse (Slonje et al., 2012) and to become more likely to repeat their actions in
these incidents to parents and teachers. School administration should emphasize that cyberbullying is still a type of bullying, and that it should be reported even if it takes place outside of school. Children should also be made aware that cyberbullying can be stopped much more easily if it is reported to parents or teachers.

The final component of cyberbullying discussed in this essay is the potential for a large audience, driving victims’ fear of many people finding out about the bullying or bullying content very quickly (Sticca & Perren, 2013). Although this is a key component of technologies that cannot be changed, the audience’s reaction to the content can be changed. Bystanders’ reactions to bullying content may influence the feelings and actions of the victim and the bully (Sticca & Perren, 2013). Bystanders in both cyberbullying and traditional bullying have a choice in how they treat an observed bullying situation. Bystanders can help by either standing up to the bully, offering encouragement to the victim, or by reporting the incident. In this way, they can help to either make victims feel less powerless since they have more support, or to avoid increasing the power of the bully which they would otherwise do by repeating the bullying.

**Conclusion**

There is a greater power imbalance between the bully and the victim in cyberbullying than in traditional bullying. This increased power imbalance may come from either the bully having more power or the victim having less power (or feeling that they have less power) in the situation. The Internet and mobile phones contribute to this power imbalance by facilitating certain abilities of bullies that would not be as available or possible in traditional bullying. These qualities include the ability of the bully and victim to remain anonymous, the potential for constant threat to the victim, and the potentially large audience. These qualities may make it easier for bullies to take negative action against a victim, or they may make it easier for a victim to be victimized.

As a result of the constant possibility of threat and the types of new technology used for cyberbullying, victims often feel a lack of support from adults (Bau- man, 2010). In one study, self-report surveys administered to eighth-grade participants revealed that 29% of students who reported being cyberbullied in the past year did not report the incident. Of these, 57% did not report the incident because they didn’t think it was severe enough to report or that they could handle it alone, and 29% did not report the incident because they were scared that reporting would make it worse or because they were afraid (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Thus, in addition to feeling a lack of support, students may not feel that they need to report these incidents, and they may feel that reporting will actually make the situation worse. To increase adolescent victims’ faith in an adult’s technical ability to help, parents and teachers could be trained to use the methods of communication that are often used for cyberbullying, and adolescents should be made aware of the technical abilities that adults possess. This strategy would give victims of cyberbullying the power to escape and encourage them to report bullying incidents. Additionally, fostering open communication between children and adults can help to build a child’s trust in adults and their ability to help. It may be beneficial to raise students’ awareness of cyberbullying so that children will be more at ease speaking about
Although certain qualities of the media addressed here may make cyberbullying more severe than traditional bullying, there are also ways of preventing cyberbullying and helping cyber-victims that work specifically to address issues stemming from these qualities. In theory, the strategies for prevention and intervention raised in this essay address the anonymity of cyberbullying, the potential constant threat, and the potentially large audience. They could work to reduce the power imbalance between the bully and the victim by either empowering the victim or taking power away from the bully. It would therefore be beneficial to research and possibly implement some of these strategies in the near future.

References


