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Bullying on Teen Television: Patterns across Portrayals and Fan Forum Posts

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**BULLYING ON TEEN TELEVISION:
PATTERNS ACROSS PORTRAYALS AND FAN FORUM POSTS**

A Thesis Presented

by

KIMBERLY R. WALSH

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
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DEDICATION

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to my parents, Mike and Jody, for their unconditional, unquestioning, and unwavering support of all kinds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe my deepest gratitude to Erica Scharrer, my advisor, thesis committee chair, mentor, and friend. Her knowledge, guidance, commitment, and positivity have been essential to both my thesis writing and the development of my academic identity. She has truly inspired me as a student, a scholar, and a person.

I wish to express my appreciation to the members of my committee, Jarice Hanson and Lynn Phillips, for their invaluable insight and advice throughout all stages of this project.

I also want to thank my coders, Jody Walsh and Matt McDermott, for watching more hours of teen television than most adults could tolerate.

Last, I want to extend a special thank you to all of my colleagues in the Communication Department, especially to my office neighbor, Laras Sekarasih, who was always willing to provide feedback, suggestions, and moral support.

ABSTRACT

BULLYING ON TEEN TELEVISION: PATTERNS ACROSS PORTRAYALS AND FAN FORUM POSTS

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The primary goal of this thesis was to provide a snapshot of the portrayal of bullying on teen television. Drawing from contextual factors studied in the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998), a content analysis of 82 episodes (representing 10 series) and 355 acts of bullying was conducted to examine portrayals of physical, verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying in terms of bully and victim social status, motivations, humor, punishments/rewards, character support for bullies, harm shown to victims, interventions by third parties, and anti-bullying episode themes.

The analysis revealed significant differences across bullying types for all variables except third party intervention, with portrayals of physical and verbal bullying identified as most “high-risk” (i.e. depicting bullying in ways that research suggests increase the likelihood of negative effects), and portrayals of cyber bullying identified as least “high-risk” for the majority of contextual elements. More generally, the analysis demonstrated that a substantial amount of bullying on teen television sends some concerning messages to young viewers, including the notion that bullying can be funny, harmless, and go without punishment.

Complementing the content analysis, an exploratory textual analysis of 294 online fan posts related to bullying portrayed on *Glee* was performed to capture a representation of potential audience interpretations and intertexts (consumed alongside the television text). The analysis pointed to four major themes across posts: categories of bullying, messages about bullying promoted by characters, contextual elements of bullying, and feelings about characters involved in bullying.

In terms of audience responses, the themes highlighted how some fans think critically about bullying portrayals and their implications, distinguish between different types of bullying, and identify with characters. In terms of intertexts, the trends suggested that fans might be exposed to a variety of messages that both criticize and support high-risk depictions of bullying, and defend and rebuke bullying behavior (depending on the characters involved).

Combined, the content analysis and textual analysis underlined the importance of media bullying as a topic of scholarly inquiry, revealing that teen bullying is a unique and complex media phenomenon that audiences respond to and interpret in a multitude of ways.

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CHAPTER 1

BULLYING, TEENS, TELEVISION, AND THE INTERNET: AN INTRODUCTION

Background

Drugs, alcohol, smoking, sex, sexuality, gender, body image, and bullying—all topics of relevance to teen life, and all but one the topic of intensive media studies research. Acknowledging the danger of irresponsible and inaccurate media depictions of these issues, academics have made them all foci of empirical study, all except for bullying. Perhaps the topic was considered to be covered by media violence studies, or maybe the perception of bullying as a natural part of growing up has caused its portrayal in dramas and sitcoms to go unnoticed. It could also be true that bullying has commonly been assumed to be an interpersonal issue rather than a media effect. Regardless of the reason, the representation of bullying in entertainment media has been largely ignored for decades. However, a series of tragic events over the past few years has made bullying impossible to ignore and forced people to notice.

When 16-year-old Phoebe Prince committed suicide in January 2010 after suffering from relentless bullying and torment from her peers, "the bullying epidemic" began to populate headlines and has continued to gain media attention ever since (Melnick, 2010). The tragic phenomenon, coined "bullycide," most recently made national news when a string of five teen suicides related to anti-gay bullying occurred within the month of September 2010 (Marikar, 2010). As much of the bullying related to these stories occurred via social networks and other forms of digital technology, the topic of cyber bullying (a form a harassment that gained

widespread attention in the early 2000s) reentered the spotlight as an issue of high concern for parents, teachers, and legislators (National Science Foundation, 2011). In addition to its connection to these recent tragedies, cyber bullying has triggered this level of anxiety due to its pervasiveness, reach, and anonymity: cyber bullies can victimize anyone at anytime, to potentially large audiences, with little risk of being caught.

Of note, prior to the most recent bullycides, the 2006 cyber bullying-related suicide of Megan Meier had already gained the attention of the federal government. In 2008, the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act, which would make cyber bullying a federal offense, was introduced to the House of Representatives. The act defines cyber bullying as the "electronic transmission" of communication intended "to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause substantial emotional distress to a person, using electronic means to support severe, repeated, and hostile behavior" (as cited in Strickland, 2010, para. 3). This act has not been voted on yet, but several similar state laws have already gone into effect.

Reacting to the news media's emphasis on teen bullying (particularly cyber bullying), many television writers have created and promoted special "bullying" episodes. For example, in November 2010, *Glee* aired an episode centered around anti-gay bullying. Additionally, in October 2011, *Harry's Law* aired an episode in which an attorney defended a teen whose cyber bullying caused her classmate to commit suicide. In addition to airing these special episodes, the entertainment industry has responded with multiple public service announcements featuring a diverse group of celebrities encouraging kids to put a stop to school bullying. For

instance, the cast of *Pretty Little Liars* starred in an anti-bullying PSA sponsored by GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), which also aired during October 2011 (National Bullying Awareness Month). Considering all of the recent media "hype," it seems due time to pay some attention to bullying on television.

Research Rationale

While a variety of entertainment outlets may feature bullying, it seems the most logical genre to start analyzing would be television shows targeting the teen population (i.e. "teen TV.") While not as popular as some more generally targeted or adult programs, many teen-targeted shows reach sizable audiences. The network "dramedy" *Glee*, for example, reached an average of 9.77 million viewers and was the fourth most popular show among teen viewers (age 12-17) during its first season (2009-2010) (Andreeva, 2010; FOX, 2010). Even the more narrowly targeted cable teen drama, *Pretty Little Liars*, maintained a substantial audience of 3.25 million viewers and regularly attracted 14% of the teen market during its first summer run in 2010 (ABC Family, 2011; <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com>; "Pretty Little Liars," 2011). Considering these ratings, as well as the fact that teen shows tend to focus on teen characters in a school setting, such programs have the potential to be a primary source of information (particularly about school-related issues) for teen viewers. Even in this digital age, television remains the preferred media choice for teen consumers (Nielsen Company, 2009). Undoubtedly, teen TV shows deserve to be scrutinized and held to a higher standard than other types of programming. It is clear that these programs have the platform for teaching young

viewers valuable lessons about bullying, but the question remains, are they taking advantage of it?

Decades of media effects research have pointed to the potential harmful effects of exposure to media aggression, especially among young viewers. More specifically, studies have revealed that certain types of portrayals (that include specific contextual elements) make depictions of aggression more likely to negatively influence viewers (Smith et al., 1998). While research on media aggression is relevant to the study of media bullying (and instrumental in emphasizing its relevance), bullying requires its own line of study, as it is a distinct form of aggression that includes physical, verbal, indirect/social,¹ and cyber dimensions. As defined by news, legal, and activism web sites (e.g. Megan Meier Foundation, 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010; Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2010), bullying is characterized by intention, repetition, and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim.

In sum, then, it is both relevant and warranted to study how bullying is being portrayed on teen-oriented television shows and answer the crucial question: What messages about bullying are young viewers receiving from their favorite media content? The first portion of this study, a content analysis of depictions of bullying on recent teen-oriented TV shows, will aim to start filling what seems to be a gaping whole in the media effects literature.

¹ Henceforth, this thesis will use the term "indirect" to describe aggression or bullying that targets a person's social status or reputation (e.g. spreading rumors, purposeful exclusion). However, within the literature, these forms of aggressive behavior are sometimes referred to as "social" or "relational" aggression.

However, as Gray (2008) emphasized in his review of contemporary television studies, "If we wish to study a program's effects, its power, its viewers' identification with it, and even its creativity, we must always be prepared to update our understanding of it by examining its various reproductions, interpretations, uses, and forms" (p. 101). Acknowledging that young consumers are growing up in an increasingly multimedia world, researchers must acknowledge that a television text can no longer be understood in isolation. Rather, it is one text within a vast network of texts, intertexts, and intra-texts that are available at the click of a button. While no research project could ever examine all of the messages within this ever-expanding network, the current study will explore one source of these messages—online fan forums.

The combination of digital technology, enthusiastic young fans, and teen TV programs highlighting diverse perspectives on key "teen issues" has created a perfect storm that makes online fandom a popular outlet for teens to express their reactions to and interpretations of television content. In terms of audience research, it has created a rich source of information for media scholars. Through the discourse produced in online fan communities, researchers can gain insight into fans' reception of media content, as well as the types of intertexts these fans create through their online discussions (see Jenkins, 2006a). Tapping into this fruitful resource, the second portion of this study is an exploratory textual analysis of fan responses to depictions of bullying on *Glee* as described in posts to the Glee Forum, a fan community dedicated to the show. It addresses another crucial question: How

are fans receiving, responding to, and reworking messages about bullying as portrayed on teen TV?

Theoretically and methodologically, the two portions of this thesis—a quantitative, effects-driven content analysis and a qualitative, reception-based textual analysis—may seem contradictory. However, for the purpose of the research questions at hand, they are complementary. On the one hand, the content analysis will provide an overview of the messages available to teen viewers, and the media effects perspective will offer insight into the potential implications of these messages. On the other hand, the textual analysis will acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between texts and audiences (particularly in a multimedia environment), and the qualitative approach will highlight the intricacies of fan reception practices and the intertexts they produce. Neither analysis will provide the total picture of bullying as portrayed on teen television, but they will contribute key pieces to the foundation of future research on this topic.

Teens, Television, and the Internet: An Overview

The current study focuses on both teen television content and teens' online reception of teen television. Therefore, it seems worthwhile to review how teens tend to engage with the traditional medium of television, on one hand, and the new medium of the Internet on the other. As subsequent sections will review a wealth of research describing and theorizing about the role of media in the lives of consumers ranging from soap opera fans to *Survivor* "spoilers," it will be helpful to keep in mind the ways in which teen consumption practices both reflect and diverge from those of the general audience. This chapter provides a review of current trend data and

literature on this topic in order to demonstrate the potential uniqueness of teens' experiences with television, the Internet, and their intersection—particularly when that intersection materializes in online fan forums.

Teens and Television

Viewing Habits

Considering the hype surrounding teens' use of digital media, one might be led to assume that Tweeting, Facebooking, and YouTubing have distracted young consumers from traditional media. However, research has suggested otherwise. According to a 2009 Nielsen report on teen media use, "television is still the dominant medium of choice for teenagers" (p. 3). In fact, American teens are watching more television than ever before, increasing their viewing time by 6% over the past five years, with the average teen now watching more than 100 hours of TV per month (Nielsen Company).

In terms of what teens are watching, the 2009 Nielsen report revealed that in 2008, the most popular networks among teens were FOX, Nick-at-Nite, Nickelodeon, Disney, and Adult Swim, the most popular genres were evening animation, participation/variety, and general drama, and the most popular shows included *American Idol* and *Family Guy*. While these viewing trends suggest that teens' favorite shows and genre preferences are not completely divergent from those of older demographics, it is clear (particularly from the popularity of the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon) that teens are also watching programming specifically targeted to them.

What is "Teen TV?"

Considering that adolescents watch a wide range of television content and that shows written primarily for teen audiences may reach a much broader age demographic, it is challenging to define "teen television" as a stable concept. Acknowledging this complexity, in lieu of assigning an objective definition to the term, media scholars have tended to describe the cultural associations and popular perceptions attached to "teen TV." For example, Ross and Stein (2008) explained that teen TV is often disparaged as "low brow" media content (p. 7). According to the authors, this negative perception stems in part from the commercialization associated with both teen culture and television as a medium. Additionally, they suggested that the majority of what people consider to be teen TV is serial in nature, and in turn, widely associated with soap operas (with some shows even referred to as "teen soaps"). Related to this connection, teen television audiences have been stereotyped similarly to soap opera fans— as "bon-bon eating, overly-engaged, overly-emotional female viewers" (Ross & Stein, 2008, p. 7). Providing a contrast to this low brow/pop culture perception of teen television, Ross and Stein described the cult appeal of teen shows (related to their distinguishing features such as self-referentiality and genre mixing), as well as the "discourses on 'quality television,' positioning 'Teen TV' somewhere between 'mainstream' and 'elite'" (p. 8).

In addition to reviewing public perceptions of teen television, scholars have also conceptualized the phenomenon from a historical and industrial viewpoint. Television shows appealing to teen viewers and teen sensibilities have existed since the dawn of television, from *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Gidget* in the

1950s and 1960s to *Head of the Class* and *Fresh Prince of Bel Air* in the 1980s and early 1990s. However, teen TV as we have come to know it today (centering around the teen drama) seems to have begun in the 1990s with ABC's *My So-Called Life* and FOX's *Beverly Hills, 90210* and evolved by the end of the decade into a relatively formulaic genre exemplified by several shows airing on the WB network (e.g. *Felicity* and *Dawson's Creek*). As Ross and Stein (2008) explained, "By the late 1990s...WB programming was teen programming from a pop culture standpoint" (p. 15).

Describing this trend from a branding perspective, Wee (2008) explained that during the 1990s, the WB designed its programming with the goal of competing with and distinguishing itself from its primary competitor in the teen market—the controversial and edgy MTV cable network. Resulting from this strategy was a wave of hour-long dramas featuring ensemble casts of young, attractive, intelligent, and sensitive characters who encountered the issues and struggles most relevant to young viewers (e.g. sex, alcoholism, friendships, relationships, and the search for identity). Echoing Ross and Stein's (2008) discussion about the "quality" aspects of teen TV, Wee emphasized that in addition to fostering the WB's "teen identity," these series also borrowed elements characteristic of what scholars have deemed "quality" television, adopting an "attitude of liberal humanism," as well as cinematic aesthetics and style (p. 49-51). Based on the popularity and success of these WB

series, other broadcast networks followed suit during the 2000s, with shows such as UPN's² *Veronica Mars* and FOX's *The O.C.*

While hour-long dramatic series focused on white, middle-to-upper class, attractive characters continue to dominate the teen market, Ross (2008b) suggested that the teen TV landscape has broadened to include half-hour sitcoms, multicultural characters, and more complex explorations of class, race, and gender issues. Citing the N Network (re-launched as Teen Nick in 2009) and its cornerstone Canadian show, *Degrassi: The Next Generation* as an exemplar, she argued that some recent teen programming has begun to embrace diversity and "effectively [position] a real teen as someone aware of and largely respectful of diverse points of view on socially relevant issues" (Ross, p. 62).

Whether they are hour-long dramas or half-hour-long sitcoms, perceived as popular or "quality" television, watched exclusively by teen viewers or watched by all viewers, the draw of all "teen TV" shows (past and present) seems to be their ability to relate to teens' experiences, evolving identities, and longing to find a voice. According to Ross (2008a), the shows achieve this relatability by incorporating a teen point of view, highlighting multiple perspectives within a narrative, relying on a serial plot, and "expanding" the television experience (p. 134). She explained that when narratives allow for various points of view, they can "prompt an expansive experience of that narrative that includes the perspectives of other viewers" (p. 132). In terms of expanding the TV experience, Ross described how the industry has always provided (and profited from) cross-platform, multimedia opportunities (e.g.

² At the start of the 2006-2007 season, UPN and the WB merged to form the CW network.

songs, fan magazines, films) that encourage teen consumers to "participate" and engage with teen TV characters and narratives. As teen programming has always invited participation and multimedia experiences, Ross (2008a) argued that the integration of the Internet into the teen television viewing experience was "but another step in the 'natural' progression of media aimed at teen and young adults" (p. 134).

Teens and the Internet

Online Activities

In order to understand the Internet's increasing role within teen television culture, it is important to know how and why teens are using the Internet. According to a 2009 survey related to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, 93% of American teens use the Internet. Of these Internet users, 73% go online to use a social networking site, 38% go online to share something they created, and 14% go online to write and share their opinions and thoughts via a journal or blog (Pew Research Center, 2009b). Furthermore, a 2009 Pew report describing the generational differences in online activities revealed that teens and members of Generation Y are more likely than other generations to use the Internet for communication purposes (e.g. staying connected to family and friends) and entertainment purposes (e.g. playing games, and listening to music). The report also indicated that younger Internet users (ages 12-32) are more likely than older Internet users to use and create profiles on social networking sites, and to write and read blogs (Pew Research Center, 2009a). Taken as a whole, the trend data suggest that teens are using the Internet to create content (sharing everything from their

opinions to their artwork), read other user-generated content, and stay connected. In sum, it demonstrates that the online experience of a typical teen is typically centered on communication and entertainment.

Considering these trends, one might assume that communicating about entertainment and creating and consuming content about entertainment would be natural intersections of the most popular online activities for teens. Indeed, a 2011 analysis from NM Incite and the Nielsen Company confirmed this assumption, providing a more detailed picture of how Internet users are utilizing social media to talk about TV. Drawing from site visitor demographics for the top ten groups, blogs, boards, Twitter pages, and image and video sites discussing television, the study showed that while older users are more likely to use the Internet to talk about TV, 12% of the population using these sites is under the age of 18. Interestingly, the results also demonstrated that more males than females (55% vs. 45%) visit these TV-centered social networking sites. Although the data were not broken down by age, the analysis pointed to the most frequently discussed topics on these sites, which included comedy, drama, voting, physical attractiveness, and television writers/creators (NM Incite and Nielsen Company, 2011).

The Big Picture

The aforementioned trends and literature surrounding teens, television, and the Internet support the relevance of studying the portrayal of bullying on teen television, as well as the online reception of these portrayals. The TV trend data demonstrate that even in the digital age, teens remain heavy users of traditional media like television. The literature on teen television suggests that teen-oriented

shows tend to highlight issues of relevance to teens' lives. Considering the general media hype surrounding bullying and the apparent pervasiveness of bullying in today's teen culture, it seems likely that bullying is one of the "issues" featured in recent teen shows. Additionally, as Ross (2008a) pointed out, the serial narratives and multiple perspectives common in these programs encourage discussion and varying interpretations. Consequently, with the dawn of the Internet, the industry has "naturally" promoted a multimedia experience for teen viewers, in which they integrate their television and online experiences. Based on the online trend data pointing to teens' use of the Internet for communication and entertainment purposes, many teens are indulging in these multimedia experiences, whether they occur organically or in response to industry marketing efforts. In sum, then, this background information suggests that a significant number of teens are likely to be watching teen-oriented shows, seeing messages about bullying, and sharing their interpretations online.

CHAPTER 2

MEDIA AGGRESSION AND ITS POTENTIAL EFFECTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction to the Literature

Trend data demonstrate that television continues to be a central activity in the lives of many American teens. Furthermore, as scholars have pointed out, television programs aimed at teens are likely to provide young viewers with messages about the issues and struggles most relevant to them (e.g. sex, alcohol, relationships, and identity). Undoubtedly, the news headlines suggest that bullying is one such issue. Prior media effects research indirectly suggests that portrayals of bullying (as a form of aggression) are particularly worthy of study, as decades of media violence studies have found that media representations of aggression can negatively influence viewers' (particularly young viewers') attitudes and behaviors. This chapter reviews the literature in order to provide an overview of the potential effects of bullying portrayals on teen television and suggests which types of representations of bullying are most likely to promote such effects.

Media Violence Theory

Scholars have been exploring the effects of exposure to media violence for more than 50 years. Many researchers have shown a particular concern about the relationship between children and adolescents' viewing of media violence and their beliefs and actions. Theoretically, there are several valid reasons for such concern. As outlined by Smith et al. (1998) in the *National Television Violence Study (NTVS)*, there is empirical evidence to suggest that the viewing of televised violence can lead to three primary categories of effects: the learning of aggressive attitudes and

behaviors, fear of victimization, and desensitization to violence. This evidence has provided the support behind several established theories and constructs within the media effects paradigm, including social cognitive theory, cultivation theory, and the concept of desensitization.

Social Learning Theory/Social Cognitive Theory

First applied to media violence in the 1960s by Bandura, social learning theory (at the most basic level) postulates that people learn through imitation or the modeling of others' behavior (Bandura, 1973). In terms of media effects, it suggests that characters within media content (whether television shows, movies, or video games) can serve as models for viewers (especially young viewers). When these models use aggressive behavior to solve conflicts, viewers may learn from them and imitate the aggressive behavior in their own lives. In one of the earliest and most famous studies applying this theory to media violence, known as the "Bobo Doll Experiment," Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963a) found that children exposed to film-mediated violence were more likely to perform the aggressive behavior shown in the film than children in a control group. This study, along with subsequent research (see Bandura, 1994), also suggested that imitation is more likely to occur when the viewed behavior is rewarded and when viewers identify with the models (particularly in terms of gender).

Over time, Bandura (2009) revised his theory to incorporate more complex cognitive processing and more indirect effects of observational learning. The resulting framework, social cognitive theory, posits that exposure to aggressive behavior does not directly lead to modeling. Rather, observational learning involves

four sub-processes: attention (selecting what to observe based on factors such as identification and salience), retention (transforming information into rules and codes within one's memory), behavioral production (transforming rules into courses of action) and motivation (being influenced by self-produced, vicarious, or direct motivators.) Additionally, Bandura's more extensive theory proposed that more so than direct imitation, observation of aggressive behavior leads to higher level "abstract modeling," in which viewers incorporate the rules underlying the aggressive behavior into their existing schemas, which they use to make decisions in their own lives (p. 101). Therefore, even when real life situations diverge from the contexts depicted in the media, viewers can apply the same rules (e.g. "aggression is the answer") to those situations.

Cultivation Theory and the "Mean World" Syndrome

Gerbner used the term "cultivation" to describe "the independent contribution that television viewing makes to audience members' conceptions of social reality" (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009, p. 35). His cultivation theory proposes that heavy television viewing cultivates certain worldviews such that the more time people spend watching TV, the more likely they are to see the world as it is typically depicted on television programming. Gerbner argued that this is true no matter which programs a viewer watches, due to the fact that "surprisingly similar and complementary images of society, consistent ideologies, and stable accounts of the 'facts' of life cut across many types of programs" (Morgan et al., p. 36). Cultivation theorists have asserted that this remains true even in today's

fragmented and individualized multimedia environment (Morgan, Shanahan, & Harris, 1990; Morgan et al., 2009).

Contrary to most media effects research that is based on the results of controlled experiments, cultivation analyses are typically based on surveys that measure the correlation between participants' levels of TV viewing and their conceptions of social reality (Morgan & Signorielli, 1990; Shanahan & Morgan, 1999). Additionally, while most media effects studies measure change (e.g. attitude change or behavior change), cultivation analyses seek to measure stability and reinforcement (i.e. how well television, as a chief source of our stories and myths, maintains particular values and beliefs) (Gerbner, 1990; Morgan & Signorielli).

In terms of violence, Gerbner & Gross (1976) made the argument that a far greater concern than the potential for media violence to affect viewers' aggression levels may be its potential to cultivate fear among viewers. They explained:

TV violence...communicates much about social norms and relationships, about goals and means, about winners and losers, about the risks of life and the price for transgressions of society's rules. Violence laden drama shows who gets away with what, when, why, how and against whom. 'Real world' victims as well as violents may have to learn their roles. Fear—that historic instrument of social control—may be an even more critical residue of a show of violence than aggression. (p. 178)

Their related hypothesis that heavy television viewing leads to increased feelings of intimidation, fear, and vulnerability contributed to a concept known as the "mean world" syndrome (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Signorielli, 1990). Supported through follow-up research, the premise of the "mean world" syndrome is that long-term, heavy exposure to television cultivates a view of the world as dangerous and mean. Research has demonstrated that heavy viewers are more

likely than light viewers to believe most people are "just looking out for themselves" and "cannot be trusted."

Disinhibition and Desensitization

Most notably tested and theorized within Berkowitz's (1964, 1965) early work, disinhibition theory posits that viewing high levels of aggression on television may change viewers' perceptions of what kinds of behavior are appropriate and/or lower their inhibitions about behaving aggressively (Severin & Tankard, 1992). A crucial (and somewhat controversial) empirical study supporting this theory was an experiment conducted by Walters and Thomas (1963), in which they found that compared to a control group of participants viewing a non-violent scene, participants who viewed a violent scene (a knife-fight) administered a stronger shock to an unseen subject as punishment for making a mistake. Extending disinhibition theory to the potential effects of verbal aggression on television, Potter (1999) suggested that the disinhibiting effects of verbal forms of violence may actually be *more* likely to influence behavior than the effects related to physical violence, as the sanctions attached to these "less serious acts of violence" are weaker (p. 80).

In addition to causing disinhibition, scholars have postulated that exposure to media violence may also influence viewers through emotional desensitization. As Sparks, Sparks, and Sparks (2009) summarized, "According to this notion, with repeated exposure to media violence, a psychological saturation or emotional adjustment takes place such that initial levels of tension, anxiety, disgust, etc. diminish or weaken" (p. 278-279). Scholars have also applied this concept to

younger viewers, suggesting that high levels of media exposure can cause children to become desensitized to mediated violence (e.g. Cline, Croft & Courrier, 1973). Related to disinhibition theory, some theorists have expanded on the concept of desensitization, proposing that because it causes viewers to have less anxiety toward violent situations, it may also increase their likelihood of responding aggressively during real-world conflict (Anderson & Huesmann, 2003).

A unique aspect of the concept of desensitization is that it accounts not only for effects of media violence on potential real-world aggressors, but also for its effects on potential third parties or witnesses to real-world violence. Drabman and Thomas (1974) tested this effect through an experiment that measured whether children's exposure to media violence increased their toleration of (and slowed their reaction to) real-world aggression. After dividing a group of third and fourth graders into two groups (one group that viewed a violent film and one group that did not), an experimenter asked all participants to keep an eye on two younger children via a video monitor while he left the room for a brief period of time. During this time, the participants viewed a videotape of two children becoming increasingly aggressive to the point of physically fighting and breaking the camera. Drabman and Thomas measured the amount of time it took for each participant to alert the adult experimenter of the situation and noted whether each participant waited until the children engaged in physical violence to alert him. The results demonstrated that participants exposed to the violent stimulus took a greater amount of time to alert the experimenter than those who were not. Also, the participants in the violent stimulus group were more likely to tolerate all forms of aggression but physical

violence before alerting the experimenter. The results of this experiment suggest that exposure to media aggression can lessen the probability that third party witnesses will intervene to stop aggression (particularly non-physical forms of aggression) when they encounter it in real life. More recently, researchers have replicated this study with contemporary film and television content (Molitor & Hirsch, 1994) and video games (Bushman & Anderson, 2009), yielding similar results.

Additional Explanations

In addition to the "big three" effects outlined above, there are several other established explanations of the ways that viewing violent media content influence aggressive behavior. For example, Berkowitz's (1984) neo-associative model of priming suggests that the observation of aggression in the media activates related thoughts, beliefs and scripts within viewers, increasing the probability that they will call upon these schemas when provoked by certain conditions. This theory posits that when aggression-related concepts are activated in a viewer's memory, the viewer is more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors and interpret the behavior of others as hostile. Yet, unless these concepts continue to be activated by additional aggressive stimuli, the effect eventually fades.

Additionally, somewhat antithetical to the aforementioned concept of desensitization, Zillmann's (1991b) theory of excitation transfer has also been applied to media violence. The theory postulates that physiological arousal (which dissipates slowly) can transfer from one situation to another. In terms of aggression, this means that arousal from a prior event can *add* to the aggression sparked by a

second event. Applying this to media violence, if a person is excited by a violent movie scene, that excitement will linger for a short amount of time. If, during this time, the person encounters a situation that angers them, the residual excitement from the movie could transfer to the new situation, intensify the person's anger, and make him or her more likely to perform aggressive behavior (Sparks et al., 2009).

Contextual Variables of Aggression

Considering the range of potential negative effects related to exposure to media aggression, it seems unquestionably important to study the portrayal of bullying on television. According to the aforementioned theories, teens exposed to bullying depictions could learn bullying behavior, become desensitized to the bullying activity of their peers, feel less inhibited to bully others, become more fearful of being bullied by their peers, or become primed to react aggressively when provoked by their peers.

However, as emphasized by the *National Television Violence Study*, "Not all violence poses the same degree of risk of...harmful effects" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 11). In other words, the important question is not *whether* bullying is shown on television, but *how*. A plethora of prior media violence studies point to important contextual factors that increase (or decrease) the likelihood of aggressive media depictions causing negative effects. The following review will focus on those contextual factors most relevant to depictions of bullying.

Nature of Perpetrator and Victim

Several studies have demonstrated that the attractiveness or "likability" of a violent character makes viewers more likely to learn aggression from watching him

or her. As mentioned above, Bandura (1986, 1994) found that both children and adults are more likely to learn from models they perceive as attractive. As attractiveness is difficult to operationalize, researchers have noted that the characters most often perceived as attractive are those who help others and act pro-socially, with the most extreme case being super heroes (Hoffner & Cantor, 1985; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). In addition, research has demonstrated that viewers are drawn to characters with whom they relate or whom they perceive as similar to themselves. Studies have shown that identification with characters can stem from many individual circumstances related to the viewer, including demographic variables, such as gender (Bandura, 1986; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963a) and age (Hicks, 1965).

Related to these findings, research has also demonstrated that when a victim of aggression is attractive, likable, or similar to the viewer, the observation of that victimization is more likely to affect the viewer. Studies have shown that viewers tend to show empathy and concern for characters they perceive as attractive (Zillmann, 1991a) or similar to them (Feshbach & Roe, 1968; Tannenbaum & Gaer, 1965). Consequently, when they share the emotional experiences of these characters, viewers are more likely to feel anxiety or fear after watching the violence.

Translating these observations to a content analysis of television bullying, it seems relevant to account for the attractiveness or likability of both bully and victim characters. Bullying performed by the attractive and likeable "popular" kids might glamorize the aggression for young viewers. On the other hand, if viewers identify

with victim characters, they may become more anxious about their own experiences at school. Moreover, accounting for common attributes of bully and victim characters is also relevant in terms of their influence on viewers' perceptions of social reality, particularly as they relate to stereotypes (i.e. perceptions of the typical bully and the typical victim).

Reason for Aggression

Research also has shown that the motives behind an aggressor's actions influence viewers' likelihood of learning aggression. Studies in which participants were exposed to filmed violence portrayed as either justified or unjustified revealed that viewers of justified violence were more likely to behave aggressively after the film than viewers of unjustified violence (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963; Geen & Stonner, 1973; Hoyt, 1970). Additionally, empirical data have also shown that viewers exposed to unjustified violence were less likely to exhibit subsequent aggression than viewers exposed to violence for which the motive was unknown (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Geen, 1981).

These findings are based on media portrayals of physical violence, which can often be clearly distinguished as justified (e.g. self-defense) or unjustified (e.g. a random act of violence). However, as bullying, by definition, involves repetition (i.e. is not random) and a perpetrator that is more "powerful" than the victim (i.e. who is not motivated by fear or a need to protect him or herself), such distinctions between "justified" and "unjustified" aggression do not seem as relevant to media portrayals of bullying. Moreover, one could certainly argue that bullying is *never* actually "justified," or conversely, that it is *always* considered "justified" by the bully. Despite

these considerations, it is still important to account for the motives behind bullying on teen television (without immediately dividing them in terms of justification), if not for their potential to influence the subsequent aggression of viewers, then for their potential effect on viewers' perceptions of social reality (e.g. the perceptions that bullying is OK if the victim "has it coming" or that bullying is an acceptable means of retaliation).

Consequences of Aggression

Another contextual factor found to influence the effects of aggressive portrayals is the degree to which the harm to victims is overtly shown. Several experimental studies have demonstrated that people who observed violence involving explicit signs of pain from the victim (e.g. verbal cues, blood, or injuries) were less likely to subsequently behave aggressively than those who observed violence without explicit consequences (Baron, 1971a, 1971b; Sanders & Baron, 1975). While most of these studies focused on adult participants, Wotring and Greenberg (1973) found similar effects among young viewers.

These studies suggest the relevance of accounting for the degree of harm shown to victims of bullying on teen television. Bullying shown without consequences may be less likely to cause viewers to sympathize with the victims, and more likely to reinforce any perceptions that bullying is "no big deal" or "just a part of teen life." Such perceptions seem likely to increase viewers' disinhibition about bullying their peers.

Rewards and Punishments

In addition to the consequences of violence for the victim, research has also suggested that the depiction of consequences of violence for the perpetrator is an important contextual factor. Studies have shown that "a critical feature of any violent portrayal concerns whether the aggressive behavior is reinforced or rewarded" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 17). As mentioned in the previous section, Bandura's series of Bobo Doll experiments consistently revealed that children exposed to an aggressive film-mediated model who was rewarded were more likely to learn aggressive behavior than children exposed to a model who was punished (Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b). Moreover, research in this area has found that the observation of violence that is neither rewarded nor punished has similar effects to the observation of violence that is explicitly rewarded (Bandura, 1965; Walters & Parke, 1964). Therefore, media aggression depicted as either rewarded or unpunished can increase the likelihood of viewers learning aggression. In addition to these potential effects related to learned aggression, research has also pointed to a connection between unpunished violence and fear. Specifically, a study by Bryant, Carveth, and Brown (1981) suggested that exposure to depictions of unpunished violence can influence viewers' likelihood of reacting with fear and anxiety.

Humor

Although it is often a contextual variable within violent scenes, few (if any) studies have examined how the presence of humor influences the potential for media portrayals of aggression to negatively affect viewers. However, several

studies point to the fact that the mixing of humor and aggression can have negative implications. For example, related to the excitation transfer effect, research has shown that exposure to intense forms of humor (on audiotape) can increase arousal and lead to more aggressive behavior among angered subjects (Mueller & Donnerstein, 1977). Additionally, a study by Berkowitz (1970) found that exposure to hostile or aggressive humor (on audiotape) increased aggressive behavior in both angered and non-angered subjects.

Furthermore, studies by Gunter (1985) and Sander (1995) demonstrated that viewers perceive media violence that contains humor to be less aggressive and less brutal than non-comedic violent portrayals. As Smith et al. (1998) pointed out, such research suggests that humorous portrayals of violence may "foster desensitization" (p. 18). Related to this notion, content analyses have revealed that humorous portrayals of aggression tend to involve less severe forms of aggression (e.g. a verbal assault) and be shown without consequences to the victim or punishment to the perpetrator, resulting in depictions that trivialize aggressive behavior (Potter & Warren, 1998).

Although the implications of humorous depictions of aggression are not clear, there are strong indications that humor reduces the gravity that viewers attach to aggressive scenes (Potter, 1999). Therefore, it seems relevant to measure whether bullying behavior on teen television is shown in a humorous way that trivializes its severity and potential consequences.

The Importance of Context

Combined, the aforementioned research reinforces the observation made by Trent (2007) that "not all media violence is created equal" (p. 5). As eloquently summarized by the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998), the literature suggests that it might even be possible for depictions of aggression to have absolutely no negative influence:

Scientific evidence has also established that the portrayal of violence on television need not lead to the reinforcement of aggressive attitudes and behaviors. If the consequences of violence are demonstrated, if violence is shown to be regretted or punished, if its perpetrators are not glamorized, if the act of violence is not seen as justifiable, if in general violence is shown in a negative light, then the portrayal of violence may not create undesirable consequences. (p. 2)

Although this assertion provides a more optimistic outlook of media violence, a multitude of content analyses (which will be reviewed in the subsequent section) suggest that such "harmless" depictions are rare within popular media content.

Effects on Adolescents

While the aforementioned media effects theories speak to the potential for certain types of aggressive media depictions to negatively affect viewers, they do not address specifically how such content might affect adolescents and teens—the group of interest in the current analysis. Several recent studies have focused exclusively on young participants, pointing to the ways that adolescent viewers can be negatively influenced by the aggression they see on TV. Important to the study of bullying depictions, this body of research accounts for the effects of several types of aggression (i.e. physical, verbal, and indirect) that are key aspects of bullying behavior.

Physical Aggression

Related to the effects of televised physical aggression on adolescent viewers, Slater, Swaim, and Anderson (2003) conducted a study in order to test the downward spiral model, which offers a potential explanation of the relationship between violent media content and aggression in adolescents. Accounting for both selective exposure of aggressive adolescents and the effects of violent content on adolescents' subsequent levels of aggression, the model proposed that "although aggressive tendencies may lead youth to seek out media content consistent with those tendencies, the resulting exposure reinforces and exacerbates those aggressive tendencies" (Slater et al., p. 714). In order to test this explanation, the researchers surveyed a sample of 2,550 sixth and seventh graders four times over a two-year period³ in order to measure their use of violent media content (i.e. action movies, violent video games, and violent Internet messages) and their level of aggressiveness (factoring in thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors). Control variables included gender, age, general Internet use, and sensation seeking. The findings were consistent with the downward spiral model, pointing to both "concurrent effects of aggressiveness on violent-media use and concurrent and lagged effects of violent-media use on aggressiveness" (Slater et al., p. 713).

Relevant to the current study, Slater et al.'s (2003) research highlights the importance of studying the representation of *physical* forms of bullying on teen television. It demonstrates that while exposure to physical bullying on teen

³ Only 1,778 of the students completed all four surveys.

television might exacerbate aggressive tendencies in teen viewers, it may also be true that bullies are attracted to aggressive media content.

Verbal Aggression

While there apparently have not been any studies focused specifically on the effects of televised verbal aggression on adolescents, Chory-Assad's (2004) study of verbal aggression on sitcoms came close, as her sample included undergraduate students. In response to contradictory findings and theories surrounding the effects of viewing sitcoms containing verbal aggression (and to calls for a closer examination of the effects of exposure to televised verbal aggression), Chory-Assad conducted a study to examine how the viewing of verbally aggressive sitcoms affected viewers' "accessibility of aggressive cognitive responses" (p. 431). Based on self-reports, she measured all of the thoughts experienced by 189 undergraduate students during their viewing of either a sitcom (N=102) or a crime drama (N=87). Coders identified any cognitive responses that were verbally aggressive and then categorized them by form of verbal aggression: dislike, malediction (wishing harm to another), or attack on another's competence, character, background, or physical appearance.

The results showed that during exposure to sitcoms, "participants produced a statistically significant number of aggressive cognitive responses" (Chory-Assad, 2004, p. 443). More specifically, 16% of their reported thoughts were aggressive. In terms of particular forms of verbal aggression, the most common cognitive responses were either character attacks or competence attacks. Notably, these two forms of verbal aggression had also been found to be the most common forms

portrayed in sitcoms (Chory, 2000). Chory-Assad cited the "spreading activation perspective" (introduced in Berkowitz's (1984) neo-associative model and incorporated into Anderson and Bushman's (2002) General Aggression Model) as a potential explanation for why the forms of verbal aggression most frequently shown on sitcoms were the same forms that most commonly appeared in viewers' cognitive responses (p. 438). According to this perspective, "exposure to verbally aggressive television should first activate thoughts that are most closely associated in semantic space with the aggressive behavior observed" (Chory-Assad, p. 438). Interestingly, Chory-Assad also found that sitcom viewers had a "marginally higher number of aggressive cognitive responses" than crime drama viewers (p. 431).

Chory-Assad's (2004) results suggest that the viewing of verbal aggression can lead to aggressive cognitive responses in young viewers. More specifically, the findings point to the possibility that the viewing of particular forms of verbal aggression may activate thoughts associated with those forms of aggression. In terms of studying television portrayals of bullying, this study affirms the importance of including *verbal* bullying as well as looking at particular *forms* of verbal bullying (e.g. character attacks vs. competence attacks) portrayed on such shows.

Indirect Aggression

In addition to physical and verbal aggression, a third type of aggression often involved in bullying behavior is indirect aggression, which has been defined as "noxious behavior in which the target person is attacked not physically or directly through verbal intimidation but in a more circuitous way, through social manipulation" (Kaukiainen et al., 1999). Related to the effects of televised indirect

aggression on teen viewers, Coyne, Archer, and Eslea (2004) examined the short-term effects of viewing indirect aggression and direct aggression on subsequent indirect aggression among British adolescents (age 11-14). They exposed participants (N=199) to one of three stimuli: a video containing indirect aggression, a video containing direct aggression, or a video containing no aggression, and then measured participants' levels of indirect aggression immediately following the stimuli. Measures of aggression were based on participants' evaluations of an experiment confederate who had been instructed to act arrogantly, but not aggressively, in his interactions with the participants. Aggression was also measured by participants' reactions to four hypothetical aggressive vignettes. After reading the open-ended scenarios (some related to indirect aggression and some related to direct aggression), participants were asked how they would react toward the aggressor if the scenarios happened to them. The researchers found that participants who viewed the videos containing either indirect or direct aggression gave a more negative evaluation of the confederate than those who viewed the video containing no aggression. In addition, they found that participants who viewed the video containing indirect aggression gave more indirectly aggressive responses to the hypothetical situation, while participants who viewed the video containing direct aggression gave more directly aggressive responses.

This study suggests that the viewing of indirect aggression on television may have an immediate effect on subsequent indirect aggression among adolescents. In terms of bullying on teen television, these findings point to the value in studying

direct (i.e. physical and verbal) *and* indirect forms of bullying, as teen viewers may be more likely to act aggressively after viewing both types of aggression.

Also related to the effects of indirect aggression within teen media, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) analyzed the connections between college undergraduates' perceptions about social aggression and their exposure to and affinity for teen movies. This study was a follow-up to their content analysis of the portrayal of “social aggression” in popular teen movies (reviewed in more detail in the following section), which revealed that teen characters were more often rewarded than punished for demonstrating social aggression. Based on survey results from 135 undergraduates, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro found that as teens' affinity for the movies included in the content analysis rose, so did their belief that popularity comes as a reward for socially aggressive behavior. Another finding was that among males, as exposure to the teen movies increased, so did “perceptions regarding the positive consequences of social aggression” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, p.141).

Notably, these findings suggest that in addition to leading to aggressive behaviors, exposure to mediated indirect aggression (referred to as social aggression by Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008)) can also influence teen viewers' perceptions of real-world indirect aggression and its consequences. These conclusions reaffirm the importance of studying indirect forms of bullying on teen television shows.

Media Portrayals of Aggression

Expectedly, the wealth of theoretical discourse and experimental data surrounding the effects of media aggression has been paralleled by a wealth of content analyses of the prevalence and portrayal of violence in the media, particularly on television. Such content studies are crucial to media scholars ultimately concerned with media effects, as they provide insight into particular aspects of media content that demand attention and inquiry.

Relevant to the study of bullying on teen television, recent research has focused on depictions of different types of aggression (e.g. physical, verbal, and indirect) within prime-time television, teen movies, and teen-targeted television shows, as well as the difference between portrayals of male and female involvement in media aggression. These studies have particular relevance to the first part of this thesis research, as they share with it the content analysis methodology.

Portrayals of Physical Violence

Based on the key assumption (grounded in findings from several studies cited within the book) that "the context in which [media] violence occurs may vary in many important ways, and those differences can hold crucial implications for their impact on viewers" (p. 7), the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998) examined the nature and amount of violence on television over a three-year period (1994-95, 1995-96, and 1996-97). The analysis included more than 50,000 violent interactions within approximately 10,000 hours of broadcast, public, and cable (both basic and premium) television programming. The researchers defined violence as "any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or the actual

use of such force intended to physically harm an animate being or group of beings"⁴ (Smith et al., p. 20). Coding involved observations of the nature of perpetrators (i.e. type of character, sex, age, apparent ethnicity, hero status, disposition of good/bad/neutral), nature of victims (i.e. type of character, sex, age, apparent ethnicity, hero status, disposition of good/bad/neutral), reasons for violence, justification for violence, means of violence/presence of weapons, extent of violence, graphicness of violence, realism of violence, rewards and punishments associated with violence, consequences of violence, and humor associated with violence. Coders also noted whether the violence involved a sexual assault and whether the violence was presented within an episode that had an anti-violence theme.

The results suggested that violence on television tends to go without punishment, be motivated by selfish reasons, be repeated within an episode, and show few consequences to victims. Additionally, findings demonstrated that violence is seldom explicit or graphic, often portrayed in a humorous context, and rarely shown within programming that emphasizes an anti-violence theme. Although the study revealed that perpetrators of violence are most often "bad" characters, it suggested that 40% of perpetrators "have at least some good qualities that could make them attractive, and therefore potent role models for viewers" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 69). In terms of victims of violence, the analysis demonstrated that victims are shown as "good" slightly more often than they are portrayed as

⁴ According to Smith et al. (1998), violence also included "certain depictions of physically harmful consequences against an animate being/s that result from unseen violent means" (p. 20).

"bad" (36% compared to 29%).⁵ Of relevance to a study of teen dramas, the *NTVS* found that dramas were more likely than other genres to contain violence, portray the use of guns, and depict violence in a realistic setting. Additionally, dramas were more likely than other genres to show the long-term consequences of violence and to show relatively realistic harm to victims.

Focusing specifically on prime-time network "dramatic" television, Signorielli (2003) conducted another large-scale content analysis of television violence. Specifically, she examined the portrayal and context of violence within a 13-week sample consisting of 1,127 programs and 4,885 characters over the 1993-2001 period. Coders observed violence based on the definition provided by the Cultural Indicators project: "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon, against self or other) compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing" (Signorielli, Gross, & Morgan, 1982, p. 163). Coders noted the frequency of violent acts, and the context of the violence, including its significance, seriousness, and intentionality, as well as the "degree of immoral, justified, gratuitous and graphic violence" (Signorielli, 2003, p. 45). Additionally, characters were coded based on demographics (e.g. race and gender), their participation in violence (e.g. degree of victimization or violence committed), and the context of that violence, as it related to their characterization (e.g. justified or immoral).

This content analysis revealed that although fewer characters were involved in violence portrayed on television in the 1990s and early 2000s, the "overall level

⁵ The study found that 9% of characters could be classified as both bad and good, while 19% could be classified as neutral (Smith et al., 1998).

of violence” (i.e. the percentage of prime-time programs containing violence and the average number of violent acts per program) remained consistent with that which was found in the 1970s and 1980s (Signorielli, 2003, p. 54). Significant gender differences observed in earlier studies remained, with more men than women involved in violent acts, both as perpetrators and victims. Signorielli also concluded that much of the violence lacked context: physical consequences were seldom shown, violence was rarely portrayed as immoral or justified, and “few characters were punished for their involvement in violence” (p. 54). She expressed concern that this “context-free” violence might give the message that violence is “sanitary” and without significant consequences, resulting in “viewers being more likely to learn and even accept aggressive behaviors” (Signorielli, p. 55).

Utilizing data from the second year (1995-1996) of the *National Television Violence Study* (Wilson et al., 1998), Wilson, Colvin, and Smith (2002) analyzed 2,757 television shows from 23 broadcast and cable channels in order to compare the amount and nature of violence performed by child, teen, and adult characters. Most pertinent to a discussion of teen bullying, the authors found that both teen (56%) and child (57%) perpetrators of violence were more likely than adult perpetrators (43%) to possess positive qualities that made them likely role models for viewers. They also found that teens (63%) and adults (59%) were more likely than children (47%) to engage in "repeated behavioral aggression toward the same victim" (p. 48). In addition, Wilson et al. concluded that child perpetrators (66%) and teen perpetrators (60%) were more likely than adult perpetrators (50%) to "engage in violence that produced no physical injury to the victim" (p. 49).

The trends demonstrated by the *NTVS* and Signorielli (2003), many of which reveal patterns of high-risk portrayals of violence, emphasize the importance of studying contextual elements of media violence. Of relevance to a content analysis of the portrayal of bullying on teen shows, they point to several elements of context that should likely be included in the coding of acts of bullying, such as nature of perpetrator, nature of victim, rewards/punishments, harm demonstrated to victim, reasons for bullying, and humor associated with bullying. Additionally, this research brings to light the importance of noting whether bullying depictions appear within episodes that present an "anti-bullying" theme.

Portrayals of Verbal Aggression

Although some media scholars (e.g. Hestroni, 2007) have distinguished between different types of violence, most research on media violence has focused solely on physical aggression. Acknowledging this lack of attention to non-physical forms of aggression (and emphasizing that exposure to these "less serious" forms may be even more likely than exposure to physical aggression to influence viewers' behavior (Potter, 1999, p. 80)), Potter, along with various colleagues, conducted research focused on depictions of verbal aggression on television.

Potter and Vaughan (1997), for example, conducted a content analysis of one composite week of network television (resulting in 65.5 hours of prime-time entertainment programming) in order to explore the presence of "antisocial acts," which encompassed physical aggression, verbal aggression, theft, and deceit. Notably, verbal aggression included malicious acts, resentment, verbal threats, and rejection. Based on the analysis, the researchers found that verbal aggression was

significantly more common than physical aggression (a 2.4 to 1 ratio) in prime-time entertainment programming. Similar to other studies (e.g. Signorielli, 2003), they found that rates of physical aggression appeared to be consistent with those found in prior years. However, comparing their findings to a prior analysis by Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, and Atkin (1980) conducted approximately two decades prior to their study, Potter and Vaughan (1997) concluded that the rate of verbal aggression had increased "by more than four acts per hour" (p. 119). Citing earlier research on prime-time television that yielded physical to verbal aggression ratios of 1 to 1.1 (Williams, Zabrack & Joy, 1982), 1.8 to 1 (Greenberg et al. 1980) and 1.4 to 1 (Potter & Ware, 1987), they proposed, "the findings are so robust that they continue to emerge: verbal aggression is at least as prevalent as physical aggression on television" (Potter & Vaughan, 1997, p. 121).

In another study that looked at the context of aggression on comedic vs. non-comedic programming, Potter & Warren (1998) concluded that the rate of aggression (particularly verbal aggression) was high on comedy shows (more so than non-comedic shows), and that most of the aggression on these shows involved "relatively minor" forms (p. 40). The researchers analyzed a one-week (168-hour) sample of network television programming, including 53 hours of comedy and 115 hours of non-comedy, to identify contextual elements such as humor, level of remorse from perpetrator, rewards/punishments, consequences, and type of perpetrator (hero vs. villain.) Potter and Warren found that "verbal hostility" accounted for 45.2% of violence across both types of programming. This verbal aggression was rarely portrayed as punished or regretted, shown as perpetrated by

heroes approximately one third of the time, and depicted as having negative consequences approximately half of the time. Notably, the researchers identified humorous verbal aggression on comedy shows as particularly problematic (high-risk) and trivialized, concluding that in addition to being portrayed as comedic, it was depicted as causing the perpetrator to feel remorse only 2.2% of the time and shown as punished only 8.2% of the time. Also, 62.4% of this humorous verbal hostility was performed by hero characters and 37.4% was shown without any negative consequences.

Combined, the aforementioned studies emphasize the importance of studying verbal forms of televised aggression (and thus, verbal forms of televised bullying) and its context (consequences, rewards/punishments, nature of perpetrators, etc.), not only due to the increasing prevalence of verbal aggression on television programming, but also due to its likelihood of being portrayed in high-risk or trivialized ways.

Focusing on verbal aggression within a specific genre of television popular among male adolescents, Tamborini, Choy, Lachlan, Westerman, and Skalski (2008) conducted a content analysis of the verbal aggression on professional wrestling TV shows. Stemming from a definition provided by Chory (2000), the researchers defined verbal aggression as "an attack on the self-concept of another person instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic of communication" (Tamborini et al., 2008, p. 248). In addition to coding the frequency of verbal aggression, coders examined contextual elements related to character attributes and interaction attributes. In terms of character attributes, they noted the sex, ethnicity,

role (e.g. commentator, wrestler, or crowd member), disposition, and number (e.g. individual or group) for each perpetrator. In terms of interaction attributes, coders noted the type of verbal aggression (character attack, competence attack, rejection, dislike, sarcasm, physical appearance attack, threat, demand, mocking, malediction, or swearing) and the reason/motive behind the aggression (personal gain, amusement, retaliation, protection of life, accident, sport, or anger)⁶ for each act of verbal aggression. Based on the coding of 36 hours of programming, the researchers concluded that verbal aggression was highly prevalent on wrestling programs (more than 23 acts per hour). They also found that swearing, competence attacks, and character attacks were the most frequent type of verbal bullying, and that amusement and anger were the most frequent motives behind the verbal aggression. Additionally, most aggressors were white males, with neutral dispositions, acting alone.

Notably, this analysis suggests several contextual variables, such as whether an aggressor acts alone or in a group, motivation for aggression, and type of verbal aggression, that may be particularly applicable and meaningful to an examination of the *verbal* forms of bullying on teen television.

Portrayals of Indirect Aggression

Also acknowledging the relative lack of scholarly attention to non-physical forms of media aggression, Glascock (2008) conducted a content analysis of a weeklong sample (111 shows) of U.S. prime-time network television aired during 2005 in order to explore the portrayal of three different types of aggression:

⁶ These categories were adapted from the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998).

physical (overt force intended to scare or hurt another person), verbal (oral attacks against another's self-concept) and indirect (aggressive behavior done behind another's back). Glascock defended his inclusion of verbal and indirect aggression, suggesting that their "impact...may be even more long lasting and harmful than those of physical aggression" (p. 268). He found that out of the 6,559 acts of aggression observed within the sample, 52% were verbal, 26% were indirect, and 22% were physical, confirming the prevalence of non-physical aggression on television. Significant genre-related findings indicated that dramas and comedies contained the majority of aggressive acts and the highest average of verbal aggressive acts per hour. Importantly, Glascock's study points to the relevance of studying television depictions of non-physical forms of aggression, particularly on comedies and dramas.

Focusing specifically on teen-oriented television and on indirect forms of aggression, Coyne and Archer (2004) conducted a content analysis of TV shows popular among British adolescents. Across a sample of 228 hours of programming, the authors found that indirect aggression was depicted more frequently than physical aggression and verbal aggression, appearing in 92% of episodes. They also concluded that females were more likely than males to be depicted as perpetrators of indirect aggression, while males were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of physical aggression. In terms of contextual factors, characters who were coded as attractive were more likely to perform indirect aggression than other types of aggression. Additionally, acts of indirect aggression were frequently coded in high-risk ways—as rewarded, realistic, and justified.

Also studying indirect aggression within teen media, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2008) examined the portrayal of “social aggression” (another term for indirect aggression) in the 20 highest grossing U.S. teen movies released from 1995 through 2005. Specifically, they studied intentional enactments of socially cooperative and socially aggressive behavior, as well as any short-term consequences of these behaviors clearly demonstrated during the movies. The researchers defined socially cooperative behavior as “the use of cooperative and inclusive behaviors that fostered a supportive environment and adaptive outcomes” and “involved making peers feel included, emotionally, supported, and secure,” and socially aggressive behavior as “the use of ‘indirect’ aggression to damage another’s status or self-esteem such as bullying tactics, spreading rumors, silent treatment, note-passing, backstabbing, public or private humiliation, and other malicious acts” (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, p. 135). Based on these definitions, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro found that teen characters, particularly female characters, were more often rewarded than punished for demonstrating social aggression (p. 136). Conversely, there were no significant gender differences in the enactment of or rewarding of socially cooperative behavior.

Combined, Coyne and Archer’s (2004) analysis and Behm-Morawitz and Mastro’s (2008) analysis emphasize the relevance of studying the contextual variables (e.g. attractiveness of characters involved and whether behavior is rewarded or punished) surrounding portrayals of indirect forms of bullying.

Portrayals of Gendered Aggression

In addition to their findings related to the portrayal of different types of aggression and their consequences, the aforementioned content analyses demonstrated revealing patterns regarding media depictions of male and female aggression. The studies of prime-time TV and teen television found that male characters were consistently more involved in physical violence than female characters (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Glascock, 2008; Signorielli, 2003), that female characters were more often involved in indirect aggression (Coyne & Archer, 2004; Glascock, 2008), and that both male and female characters engaged in a relatively equal amount of verbal aggression (Glascock, 2008). Consistent with these results, Behm-Morawitz & Mastro's (2008) research on teen movies found that female characters were more likely than male characters to perform socially aggressive behavior.

Portrayals of Bullying

Most relevant to the topic of bullying on teen television, Walsh (2011) conducted a content analysis investigating how the depiction of bullying on teen drama series has changed over time. Specifically, the analysis compared teen dramas aired during the 1990s (*Beverly Hills, 90210* and *Dawson's Creek*) with more recent teen dramas aired between 2005 and 2010 (*One Tree Hill* and *Gossip Girl*). Based on the coding of 40 episodes and 305 characters, a descriptive analysis of the entire sample revealed that emotional forms of bullying (i.e. verbal or indirect forms) were more common on teen dramas than physical bullying. It also demonstrated that females were most often the perpetrators of emotional bullying,

while males were most often the perpetrators of physical bullying. Additionally, perpetrators tended to bully victims of the same sex (with female-female bullying being the most common gender matchup overall).

In terms of changes over time, the data demonstrated that recent teen dramas portrayed more physical and emotional bullying, more female involvement in bullying, and less harm to victims of bullying than older teen dramas. In addition, the findings revealed that third party characters on both older and newer shows were consistently unlikely to intervene in bullying. In terms of a study of the context of bullying on current teen television, these findings reaffirm the relevance of accounting for different types of bullying, the gender associated with different types of bullying, and the roles of third party characters.

What's Next?

Overall, prior research and theorizing have pointed to the potential implications of exposure to different forms of aggression for television viewers, as well as the contextual factors that make such portrayals more or less harmful. While the literature does not explain exactly how television depictions of bullying affect teen viewers, it suggests that specific types of portrayals (e.g. unpunished or humorous) have the potential to teach viewers aggressive behavior (particularly bullying behavior), desensitize them to bullying, lower their inhibitions about bullying others, and reinforce their perceptions of the world as "mean" place.

Recent content analyses have contributed to significant advances in our understanding of the portrayal of aggression on television. Media scholars have studied the prevalence and context of physical aggression, verbal aggression, and

indirect aggression on television (and in some cases specifically in teen-oriented media). Additionally, one prior study provided a snapshot of the increasing prevalence of bullying on television. However, no content analysis to date has examined the context of bullying portrayals on television in order to determine whether or not they are likely to negatively influence teen viewers. The current study aims to fill that gap by carefully analyzing the representation of bullying within 11 teen television shows aired within the past two years (January 2010-January 2012). Additionally, this study makes another important contribution to the literature by studying the portrayal of cyber bullying on television.

Hypotheses and Theoretical Linkages

As the first known study to examine the context of bullying on television, the overarching goal of the current analysis is to provide a clear picture of the most common representations of bullying that today's teen viewers are likely to see on their favorite shows: Is the bullying physical, verbal, indirect, or cyber? Are the bullies female or male? Is bullying rewarded? Is harm to victims shown? Is bullying performed by likeable characters? In addition to providing an overview of all bullying depictions (accounting for variables including character gender and apparent ethnicity and type of harm to victims, this analysis will also account for the fact that bullying can take on several different forms; it will test multiple hypotheses and research questions related to different types of bullying (physical, verbal, indirect, and cyber) and their relative frequency of being portrayed in ways that are likely to negatively influence teen viewers. As explained above, this likelihood of negative effects depends on the absence or presence of certain contextual variables.

Although prior studies have not focused on the context of bullying on television, their results are relevant to some of the hypotheses and research questions presented in this analysis.

Media violence literature suggests that viewers will be more likely to learn aggressive behaviors from bully characters that are likable and attractive (e.g. Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). (The traits of likability and attractiveness were operationalized as “popular” in this study, as a means of capturing their relevance in the teen social world that is typically the context of bullying.) Additionally, viewers are more likely to feel empathy with victims of bullying who are attractive (or in this case, popular), which could lead to a fearful reaction (Zillmann, 1991a). While the fearful reaction has traditionally been considered to be a negative effect, the empathetic response may be beneficial, particularly for bullying portrayals. Prior studies have suggested that most perpetrators of verbal aggression (Potter & Warren, 1998) and physical aggression (Smith et al., 1998) are typically “bad guys.” However, research has also shown that a substantial amount of perpetrators of physical aggression possess some potentially attractive qualities (Smith et al., 1998), particularly if they are teens (Wilson et al., 2002). Specifically in teen shows, research has shown that attractive characters are more likely to engage in indirect aggression than other types of aggression (Coyne & Archer, 2004). In terms of victim characters, studies have found that victims are portrayed as “good” characters or neutral characters with potentially attractive qualities more often than they are portrayed as “bad” characters (Smith et al., 1998).

While past research provides some clues as to how perpetrators and victims of different types of bullying might be portrayed, bullying is a unique type of aggression. By definition, bullying involves an imbalance of power between the aggressor and victim. Related to this, bullying is traditionally thought of as tough, intimidating “outcasts” picking on weak, vulnerable “nerds.” This would suggest that if television reflects these stereotypes, neither bullies nor victims are likely to be portrayed as popular. However, the recent “mean girls phenomenon” in popular media often pits popular females against one another (Walsh, 2011). Moreover, with the dawn of cyber bullying, the image of a typical “bully” has become less clear and the range of potential victims has expanded (National Science Foundation, 2011). Therefore, at least in the real world, and perhaps on television too, distinct images of “bullies” and “victims” are gradually blurring.

Overall, the literature and real-world observations offer somewhat contradictory clues as to how perpetrators and victims of bullying are likely to be portrayed on television (as popular or unpopular). Due to the lack of substantial evidence to hypothesize about comparisons between different types of bullying related to the nature of perpetrators and victims, the current study will address this uncertainty with research questions.

RQ1a: How do portrayals of verbal, physical, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting bullies as popular (i.e. giving the message that bullying is done by attractive/likable teens)?

RQ1b: How do portrayals of verbal, physical, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting victims as unpopular (i.e. giving the message that victims are always “uncool”)?

Related to the motives behind bullying behavior, media effects research suggests that bullying portrayed as justified is more likely to negatively affect viewers than bullying portrayed as unjustified (e.g. Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963). The *National Television Violence Study* demonstrated that physical aggression is most often portrayed as unjustified, and that the most common motives for television violence are personal gain, anger, and protection of life (Smith et al., 1998). Additionally, Coyne and Archer (2004) found that within adolescent-targeted programming, indirect aggression is more likely to be portrayed as justified, while verbal and physical aggression are more likely to be portrayed as unjustified. However, as explained in the previous chapter, it seems that in the case of bullying, the particular motives behind the aggression are equally if not more relevant than their distinction as either justified or unjustified. Therefore, this study will account for the specific reasons for bullying behavior, rather than only grouping reasons based on their justification or lack thereof. As the literature only points to the most common primary motives behind physical aggression on television (some of which are irrelevant to bullying behavior), there is not substantial evidence to hypothesize about comparisons between different types of bullying. Thus, this study will address this topic of motivations behind bullying with a research question.

RQ2: How do portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of the primary motivation they show contributing to bullying behavior?

The media violence literature also suggests that viewers may be more likely to behave aggressively and become desensitized to bullying after viewing humorous bullying depictions (e.g. Berkowitz, 1970; Sander, 1995). As Potter (1999) has

pointed out, verbal forms of aggression are typically seen as "less serious" than physical violence (p. 80). Furthermore, it seems logical that verbal bullying would often involve jokes intended to elicit laughter from third party onlookers. Therefore, it is expected that this type of bullying is particularly likely to be portrayed as humorous.

H1: Bullying involving a verbal element will be portrayed as humorous more than other types of bullying.

While one can certainly imagine situations in which other types of bullying are portrayed as humorous (e.g. a funny rumor or Facebook status, or a victim getting tripped and falling in the hallway), there are no empirical studies or real-world trends on which to base a hypothesis about their relative likelihood of being portrayed in this manner. Therefore, this uncertainty will be explored with a related research question.

RQ3: How do portrayals of physical, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting bullying as humorous?

Media violence research also suggests that viewers are more likely to learn from and imitate bullying behavior when it is portrayed as rewarded or unpunished (e.g. Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b), and more likely to be fearful after viewing unpunished bullying (Bryant et al., 1981). Related to these findings, various content analyses have revealed that on television, physical aggression (Signorielli, 2003) and indirect aggression (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Coyne & Archer, 2004) are more often shown as unpunished than punished. It is expected that these trends will carry over to bullying portrayals.

Furthermore, by its nature, cyber bullying is unlikely to be punished, as it is often performed anonymously. Thus, it is expected that teen television will reflect this real-world trend. Combined, the literature and real-world observations suggest that portrayals of *all* types of bullying are likely to be shown as rewarded or unpunished. Therefore, this study will make that prediction.

H2: Bullying, in general, is more likely to be portrayed as rewarded/unpunished than to be portrayed as punished.

While there is evidence supporting a trend of unpunished aggression across the different types of bullying, prior research does not provide a sufficient basis to hypothesize about comparisons between the different types. This ambiguity will be addressed by a related research question.

RQ4: How do portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting bullying as punished?

The media effects literature does not appear to address the question of whether viewers are more likely to be influenced by media aggression that features a single perpetrator or media aggression that features a group of perpetrators working together (i.e. "ganging up" on the victim). However, it seems reasonable that portrayals of multiple perpetrators could promote the message that aggression is a group activity, or in some cases, a bonding activity (i.e. "the more the merrier"). Such a message could affect viewers' perceptions of social reality (potentially increasing their anxiety about multiple aggressors), and perhaps, decrease their inhibitions about acting aggressively.

Apparently, the only content analysis to look at the number of perpetrators as a contextual element of aggression was the Tamborini et al. (2008) study focused

on wrestling shows. Although this study found that the verbal aggression on these shows most often involved an aggressor acting alone, this finding is likely specific to the genre and may not translate to portrayals of bullying on teen TV. Furthermore, common knowledge of real-world bullying does not point to an obvious trend in terms of whether bullies act alone or in groups. Also, in terms of different types of bullying, it seems reasonable to assume that bullies have the opportunity to "gang up" on a victim no matter which form of bullying they perform. In sum, then, there is not sufficient evidence to hypothesize about comparisons between different types of bullying regarding this topic. The current analysis will explore this uncertainty with a related research question.

RQ5: How do portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood to portray bullying as a group activity?

Media effects research also suggests that viewers are more likely to learn aggressive behavior when bullying is shown without consequences (i.e. harm to victims) (e.g. Sanders & Baron, 1975). Related to these findings, content analyses have revealed that physical aggression is often portrayed with few consequences (Signorielli, 2003; Smith et al., 1998), while verbal hostility is shown with no negative consequences approximately half of the time (Potter & Warren, 1998).

As bullying encompasses both physical and non-physical forms of aggression, its consequences may include physical harm (i.e. injury or pain to one's body), which is typically caused by physical bullying, and emotional harm (i.e. mental harm, such as psychological turmoil, hurt feelings, depression or distress), which can be caused by physical, verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying. As prior studies have

found that acts of verbal and indirect aggression are more common on prime-time television than acts of physical aggression (Glascock, 2008; Potter & Vaughan, 1997), and that teen dramas portray more emotional (non-physical) bullying than physical bullying (Walsh, 2011), it seems likely that combined, non-physical types of bullying (i.e. verbal, indirect, and cyber) will account for the majority of bullying on teen television. If this is true, it is expected that when harm to bullying victims is shown, it will be emotional harm more often than physical harm.

H3: When harm to bullying victims is depicted, it will be more likely to be emotional in nature than physical in nature.

However, it is important to consider that in the real world, harm done to victims of physical bullying is often immediate and visible, while the negative effects of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying (i.e. emotional harm) are often psychological and internal, and thus “less obvious” (Beauchesne, 2006, para. 9). Thus, extensively portraying the latter type of harm would likely require more time and disruption within the plot of an episode, or perhaps even a change of scene or character perspective, making its depiction less likely. Therefore, there is reason to expect that portrayals of physical bullying (even if they are less frequent than portrayals of non-physical bullying) will show more harm to victims than portrayals of other types of bullying.

H4: Bullying involving a physical element will demonstrate more harm to victims than other types of bullying.

In sum then, H3 and H4 predict that overall, emotional harm (combining the harm associated with verbal, indirect, cyber bullying, and perhaps some cases of physical bullying) will be more frequently portrayed on teen television than

physical harm (associated only with physical bullying), but in terms of individual acts of bullying, physical acts of bullying (which could cause both physical and emotional harm) will depict a higher degree of harm to victims than non-physical acts of bullying (which are likely to cause primarily emotional harm).

As neither the literature nor practical knowledge provides substantial evidence to hypothesize about comparisons between non-physical forms of bullying in terms of harm demonstrated to victims, this ambiguity will be addressed with a related research question.

RQ6: How do portrayals of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of the degree of harm demonstrated to victims?

Media violence research has yet to directly examine the difference between the influence of viewing aggression during which bystanders intervene and aggression during which nobody intervenes. However, it seems reasonable that repetitive messages indicating that third parties often stand by and watch others being bullied could affect viewers' perceptions of social reality as well as their learning of how to react when they witness bullying behavior. The aforementioned experiment by Drabman and Thomas (1974) suggested that most young children wait until aggression turns physical before they intervene. If teen television reflects this real-world trend, it is expected that portrayals of physical bullying will be more likely to show third party characters intervening in bullying behavior.

H5: Portrayals of bullying that involve a physical element will be more likely to depict third party characters intervening than portrayals of other types of bullying.

As neither the literature nor practical knowledge provides substantial evidence to hypothesize about comparisons between other types of bullying in

terms of third party involvement, this uncertainty will be explored with a related research question.

RQ7: How do portrayals of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting third party characters as intervening?

A final element of context that seems worthy of inquiry (especially considering the recent trend of special "bullying" episodes and PSAs responding to increased news coverage on the topic) is whether bullying is portrayed within an episode carrying an anti-bullying theme. While research has not specifically addressed how this variable affects viewers, by definition bullying portrayed within anti-bullying episodes is likely to be shown in a responsible, low-risk way (with consequences, punished, etc.). Notably, in terms of physical aggression, the *National Television Violence* study found that only 3% of episodes containing violence had an anti-violence theme (Smith et al., 1998). While this finding is revealing, there is no evidence to suggest whether other types of aggression (or bullying) are more or less likely to be shown in an educational context. Therefore, this subject will be explored through a final research question.

RQ8: How do portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differ in terms of their likelihood of appearing within an anti-bullying themed episode?

In light of the abundance of media effects research pointing to the potential effects of high-risk portrayals of aggression, particularly on adolescents, the recent focus (in both news and politics) on the issue of bullying in U.S. schools, and the relative lack of research on the topic of media portrayals of bullying, it seemed both relevant and warranted to test the aforementioned hypotheses and research questions.

CHAPTER 3

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BULLYING AND ITS CONTEXT: METHODS

Introduction to the Methods

This chapter will review in detail the methodology behind a content analysis of current teen-oriented television shows (airing January 2010 through January 2012) comparing the prevalence of specific contextual variables within portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying. Based on prior research pointing to the value of studying specific elements of context, major variables of interest included apparent popularity of perpetrators and victims, reasons for bullying, whether humor was associated with bullying, whether bullying was rewarded or punished, whether the bully acted alone or in a group, harm demonstrated to victims, reactions of third party characters, and whether bullying was portrayed within episodes carrying an anti-bullying theme.

In contrast to most prior studies on media violence and aggression, this study focused on bullying as a distinct form of aggression, which according to definitions provided by news, legal, and activism web sites (e.g. Megan Meier Foundation, 2011; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010; Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2010), is characterized by intention, repetition and an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim. Applying this definition to media content, throughout this study, bullying was considered as: any intentional aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, or cyber) performed by (at least) one teen, that causes harm or intends to cause harm (physical or emotional) to another teen, is repetitive in nature, and involves an imbalance of power

(physical, social, or any other form of leverage) between the perpetrator and the victim.

Sampling

In order to obtain the most representative sample of the *recent* teen media landscape, the selection of series to include in the sample began with a list of *all* shows (cable, network, and broadcast) airing episodes in 2011. As a means of capturing the content of shows with significant fan followings/ratings, series were excluded that had not begun airing a second season by the time of coding in January 2012. Then, in order to hone in on shows that were most likely to portray teen bullying, the list was further narrowed to include only series that focused solely on teen characters. Fantasy-based shows (e.g. *Vampire Diaries*), sketch-based shows (e.g. *So Random!*), and shows focused on entire families (e.g. *The Secret Life of the American Teenager*) were also excluded, as they were less likely to feature episodes containing relatable depictions of bullying behavior in a realistic setting.

This process narrowed the sample to eleven recent teen-oriented shows: *90210*, *Big Time Rush*, *Degrassi* (called *Degrassi: The Next Generation* until the 2010-2011 season), *Glee*, *Hannah Montana*, *iCarly*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Shake It Up*, *The Suite Life on Deck*, *Victorious*, and *Zeke and Luther* (see Appendix A for series descriptions and ratings). Of note, all of the series in this final sample contained many of the characteristic elements of teen TV (as outlined in chapter 1); they featured ensemble casts (at least three main teen characters), highlighted multiple perspectives, incorporated a teen point of view, focused on issues of relevance to teen audiences, and expanded the television experience via online engagement

opportunities (see Ross, 2008a). Of the eleven series, *90210*, *Degrassi*, *Glee*, and *Pretty Little Liars* were the only ones that relied on serial narratives. Despite their slight divergence from the prototypical "teen TV show," the other seven series were included in order to guarantee an inclusive sample that captured a range of the content to which teens are likely exposed. This range includes classic, teen dramas/soaps (*90210* and *Pretty Little Liars*), multicultural, social realism-oriented series (*Degrassi* and *Glee*), and sitcoms (*Big Time Rush*, *Hannah Montana*, *iCarly*, *Shake It Up*, *The Suite Life on Deck*, *Victorious*, and *Zeke and Luther*).

As the main impetus for the current study was the recent surge in news coverage related to school bullying, the sample included episodes with original U.S. air dates going back to the approximate point in time when bullying coverage in the news began to dramatically increase, January 2010.⁷ (The initiation of this increase in coverage was undeniably related to the widely publicized bullying-related suicide of 15-year-old Phoebe Prince on January 14, 2010.) Restricting the sample to this timeframe was an effort to best capture how television creators responded to the publicized issue of bullying.

All episodes that originally aired between January 2010 and January 2012 (when coding began) were included in an initial pool of episodes from the eleven series. This pool included a total of 387 episodes: 32 episodes of *90210*, 42 episodes of *Big Time Rush*, 49 episodes of *Degrassi*, 40 episodes of *Glee*, 17 episodes of *Hannah Montana*, 25 episodes of *iCarly*, 35 episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*, 31

⁷ A Lexis-Nexis search of U.S. newspaper articles with "bullying" in the headline or lead paragraph showed that coverage dated January 2010 through June 2010 increased 31% compared to the prior 6 months (up from 632 articles to 831 articles), and continued to increase dramatically up to the time of coding.

episodes of *Shake It Up*, 35 episodes of *The Suite Life on Deck*, 33 episodes of *Victorious*, and 50 episodes of *Zeke and Luther*. The content was accessed through iTunes, web sites providing streaming full episodes, DVR recordings of new and repeat episodes, and DVDs containing portions of or entire seasons.

The process of arriving at the final sample for the content analysis involved two units of analysis (episode and act of bullying), and thus, two unitizing steps. Concerning the episode as a unit of analysis, the researcher and a second coder viewed the episodes in the pool to identify those that featured at least one act of bullying. The determination of what actions counted as bullying was based on the definition of bullying used throughout this thesis (refer to the second paragraph of this chapter). If during the viewing process it was revealed that an episode did not contain bullying, it was removed from the final sample. To ensure the consistency of this initial unitizing process, the researcher (the primary coder) trained a second coder (a 25-year-old white male) on how to identify bullying within episodes by reviewing with him several examples not used in the actual sample. Based on the unitizing of 15% of the initial sample (58 episodes), the two coders achieved a Scott's pi of .86 for this unitizing step. Then, in order to complete the unitizing process for the episode unit of analysis, the second coder viewed an additional 10% of the initial sample (39 episodes), and the primary coder viewed the remaining episodes. The resulting sample included 82 episodes (21.2% of the 387 eligible episodes) that contained some form of bullying.

Once the sample of 82 episodes was finalized, the researcher (primary coder) trained a second coder (a 56-year-old white female) on how to identify individual

acts of bullying within episodes (a second unitizing step) and how to code each variable. Training involved a thorough explanation of the coding scheme and the co-viewing of several examples not included in the sample. Based on the identification of bullying acts within 25% of the final sample (21 episodes), the two coders reached a high unitizing reliability of .96 (Guetzkow, 1950). This unitization process yielded a total of 355 acts of bullying, or an average of 4.3 acts of bullying per episode.

In terms of inter-coder reliability for variables related to the acts of bullying (again based on the coding of 25% of the final sample), the two coders reached an average Scott's pi of .93 across nominal-level variables (perfect agreement for bully gender, group bullying, presence of humor, victim gender, victim race, presence of harm, third party intervention, and anti-bullying theme; .95 for third party presence, .91 for rewarded/punished, .90 for type of bullying, .89 for bully race, .86 for bully status, .85 for motivation, .82 for victim status, and .75 for type of harm). Moreover, regarding the inter-coder reliability of the degree of harm variable, the two coders reached an intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) of .81. After establishing these reliabilities (all of which were considered acceptable), the primary coder coded the remaining 75% of the sample.

As alluded to above, the primary unit of analysis was act of bullying, with coding limited to bullying in which a major teen character was involved as either a bully or victim. A teen character was considered "major" if he or she played a primary role in the plot of a given episode (i.e. had a speaking role in person or via

digital means),⁸ appeared in more than one scene, and interacted with recurring main characters.

Defining Concepts

As previously stated, for the purpose of this study, bullying was defined as any intentional aggressive behavior (physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, or cyber) performed by (at least) one teen, that causes harm or intends to cause harm (physical or emotional) to another teen, is repetitive in nature, and involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim.

During coding, aggression was considered repetitive as long as it did not appear to be an isolated incident; it had to either occur more than once during an episode, or be implied as repetitive through context (e.g. verbal references to its occurrence in the past, or a victim's apparent expectation of the aggression). An imbalance of power was considered present if it was apparent through visual cues (e.g. a difference in physical strength or size) or perceived through context (e.g. a stated or implied disparity in social status or popularity.) A victim's apparent intimidation or inability to defend himself or herself could also indicate an imbalance of power. A new or unique act of bullying was signaled by either a change of victim (i.e. a new target) or a change in time (i.e. a new scene). In other words, bullying activity was considered part of the same act as long as it was targeted at the same victim and took place during the same scene.

For each act of bullying, coders recorded the gender (male, female, or indeterminate) and apparent race (White, Latino(a), Black, Native American, Asian,

⁸ Including characters that only "appeared" via digital technology allowed for the inclusion of cyber bullying performed anonymously.

Middle Eastern, other, or indeterminable) of bully and victim characters. Additionally, in lieu of coding for the seemingly subjective variables of "attractiveness" and "likeability," coders noted the perceived social status/popularity of each perpetrator and victim (arguably an indication of both attractiveness and likability in the high school social world, at least as it is portrayed on television). A character was considered popular if he or she was explicitly referred to as "popular" or "cool" by other characters, or if his or her popularity was implied by the amount of attention he or she received or the number of friends with whom he or she was often shown. Conversely, a character was considered unpopular if he or she was explicitly referred to as a "loner" or an "outcast," or if his or her unpopularity was implied by the lack of attention he or she received or his or her tendency to be alone. A character was considered "in between" if he or she appeared to fall in between these two categories, and "indeterminable" if the contextual clues required to infer the character's social status were not provided in the episode.

More specific to the bullying behavior, coders noted whether the bullying was physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, or cyber. Bullying was considered physical if it involved actual or intended physical harm to the victim (e.g. punching, tripping, or throwing something at a victim). Bullying was considered verbal if it involved the use of language (oral or written) to harm (or intend to harm) the victim (e.g. name-calling, insulting, teasing, or sexual harassment) and *was not* conducted through digital means. Bullying was considered both physical and verbal if it involved an element of physical bullying (as described above) and an element of

verbal bullying (as described above). Bullying was considered indirect if it targeted the victim's social status or reputation through social manipulation (e.g. spreading rumors, gossiping, or purposeful exclusion) and *was not* conducted through digital means. Lastly, bullying was considered cyber if the perpetrator utilized digital technology (i.e. cell phones or computers) in order to bully the victim (e.g. intimidating via text or harassing via Facebook). Importantly (for the means of producing descriptive data), in addition to noting the general type of bullying, coders noted (by writing their own words in an open-ended space provided on the coding sheet) the specific form of bullying. For example, if the bullying was physical, they specified whether the bullying involved a punch, trip, shove, etc. Coders also recorded whether the bully acted alone or with a group (i.e. with other bullies or a supportive posse).

In order to account for the motive behind the bullying, coders noted the primary reason why the perpetrator engaged in aggressive behavior. Borrowing from the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998), potential reasons included retaliation (e.g. when the perpetrator was portrayed as "getting back at" the victim), anger (e.g. when the perpetrator was portrayed as taking out his or her anger on the victim), and personal gain (e.g. when the perpetrator was trying to increase his or her social status or self confidence). Other potential motives (not included in *NTVS*, but measured in this analysis) that seemed particularly relevant to bullying included hatred/bias (e.g. when the perpetrator bullied a victim due to a

bias against his or her race, religion, sexual orientation, disability, or ethnicity)⁹ and entertainment (e.g. when the perpetrator bullied a victim "for laughs"). If the reason behind the bullying was not covered by the aforementioned options, it was coded as "other." If the reason was not obvious, it was coded as "indeterminable." Reasons for bullying could be explicitly mentioned in dialogue or implied through previous plot events.

In addition, coders indicated whether bullying behavior was rewarded, punished, both, or neither. Rewards and punishments were defined based on adapted versions of the definitions provided by the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al., 1998). Bullying was considered rewarded if the perpetrator received a reward, such as "verbal or nonverbal reinforcement" for acting aggressively (e.g. self praise or laughter from third parties) (Smith et al., p. 34). Bullying was considered punished if the perpetrator received a punishment, such as a legal or disciplinary repercussion or "verbal or nonverbal sign of disapproval or disappointment" due to his or her aggressive behavior (e.g. condemnation or expulsion from school) (Smith et al., p. 34). If the perpetrator received both reward(s) and punishment(s) for his or her aggressive behavior (e.g. he or she was praised by peers, but punished by the school principal), the bullying was considered "both." If the perpetrator did not encounter any consequences (good or bad) related to the aggressive behavior, the bullying was considered "neither."

As a means of measuring whether bullying was portrayed as humorous (i.e. if a bully's words or actions elicited or intended to elicit laughter), coders also noted

⁹ This operationalization was based on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's (2004) definition of a hate crime.

whether humor was absent or present during the bullying activity. Based on the definition provided by the *National Television Violence Study*, humor was defined as "the use of speech, actions and/or behaviors that a character engage[s] in that [are] intended to amuse either the self, another character or characters, and/or the viewer" (Smith et al., 1998, p. 34). Indicators of humor could include reactions of laughter from the bully, third parties, viewers, or a laugh track.

For each act of bullying, coders indicated (yes or no) whether harm to the victim was clearly demonstrated (i.e. was apparent to the viewer) at any point in the episode, during or after the bullying. Indicators of harm could be visual (e.g. crying, bleeding, facial expressions) or auditory (e.g. a victim screaming in pain or talking about his or her hurt feelings or physical injuries). For each act in which harm was demonstrated, coders recorded whether harm to the victim was physical, emotional, or both. Harm was considered physical if it involved immediate pain/struggle or long-term injury, demonstrated through indicators such as a bruise, bleeding, or a grimace. Harm was considered emotional if it involved psychological reactions such as depression, humiliation, or fear, as indicated in conversation or narrated thoughts, or as implied through cues such as facial expressions or crying. Harm was considered physical and emotional if it involved both physical pain and psychological effects (e.g. a black eye and humiliation).

For each act of bullying in which harm was demonstrated, the degree of harm demonstrated was coded on a scale of 1 (minor) to 5 (severe). A score of "1" or "2" indicated harm portrayed as insignificant or fleeting. For example, a "1" could refer to an "ouch!" exclaimed after being hit on the back of the head with a paper airplane,

or in the case of emotional harm, a slight frown in response to an insult. A “2” could refer to a grimace after being shoved into a locker, or in the case of emotional harm, a concerned facial expression in reaction to a threatening text message. A score of “4” or “5” indicated harm portrayed as substantial or enduring. For example, a “4” could refer to a broken leg caused by a beating, or in the case of emotional harm, social exclusion or a ruined reputation resulting from an act of social sabotage. A “5” indicated only extremely severe harm. In terms of physical harm, this could include very serious, permanent injury such as brain damage or paralysis, or in the most extreme case, death. In terms of emotional harm, this could include severe depression linked to bullying, or in the most extreme case, suicide or attempted suicide (self-inflicted physical harm). Harm falling in between the two extremes was coded as a “3.”

In addition to the aforementioned variables, coders also noted for each act of bullying whether a major teen character was a third party to the bullying (i.e. he or she was present during or witness to the bullying, but was not involved as a bully or victim). For each bullying act in which a third party character was present, coders specified (yes or no) whether the third party character intervened in the bullying. A character was considered to intervene if he or she came to the aid of the victim either at the time of the bullying, in an attempt to disrupt or stop it, or after the bullying, in an attempt to prevent it from occurring in the future (e.g. got a parent or teacher involved).

Lastly, coders assessed whether each act of bullying appeared within an episode carrying an anti-bullying theme (i.e. an episode that intentionally promoted

the message that bullying is morally and/or socially wrong.) Based on an adaptation of the *National Television Violence Study's* (Smith et al., 1998) operationalization of an anti-violence theme, an anti-bullying theme was considered to be present if an episode included at least one of the following four factors: the presentation or discussion of alternatives to bullying throughout the program, repeated discussions about the negative consequences of bullying, an emphasis on the harm caused by bullying, or the message that punishments for bullying outweigh rewards.

CHAPTER 4

PHYSICAL, VERBAL, INDIRECT, AND CYBER BULLYING ON TEEN TV: RESULTS

Sample Overview

Within the 82 episodes that included at least one portrayal of bullying, 355 acts of bullying (an average of 4.3 acts per episode) were coded: 47.3% (168 acts) in *Pretty Little Liars*, 15.5% (55) in *Glee*, 12.4% (44) in *Degrassi*, 5.9% (21) in *iCarly*, 4.5% (16) in *Big Time Rush*, 4.2% (15) in *Zeke and Luther*, 3.7% (13) in *Victorious*, 3.1% (11) in *90210*, 2.0% (7) in *Shake It Up*, 1.4% (5) in *Hannah Montana*, and 0.0% (0) in *The Suite Life on Deck*. The most frequent types of bullying were verbal bullying, which accounted for 45.9% (163) of bullying acts, and cyber bullying, which accounted for 28.5% (101) of the bullying. Additionally, 15.2% (54) of bullying acts involved both physical and verbal elements, 6.5% (23) were physical, and 3.9% (14) were indirect.

Interestingly, the most common verbal elements of bullying included insulting/name-calling (involved in 52.9% (115) of acts of bullying with a verbal element), threats/intimidation (involved in 52.1% (113) of acts of bullying with a verbal element), and teasing/mocking/making fun (involved in 20.3% (44) of acts of bullying with a verbal element). The most frequent forms of cyber bullying were threats/intimidation (involved in 98.0% (91) of cyber bullying acts), insulting/name-calling (involved in 5.9% (6) of cyber bullying acts), and mocking/teasing (involved in 4.0% (4) of cyber bullying acts). The most common physical elements of bullying included pushing/shoving (involved in 27.3% (21) of

acts of bullying with a physical element), “slushie facials”¹⁰ (involved in 22.1% (17) of acts of bullying with a physical element), and grabbing (involved in 11.7% (9) of acts of bullying with a physical element). The most frequent forms of indirect bullying were sabotage (involved in 64.3% (9) of indirect bullying acts), spreading rumors (involved in 28.6% (4) of indirect bullying acts), and exclusion (involved in 7.1% (1) of indirect bullying acts).¹¹

In terms of characteristics of the bully characters, coders recorded the gender, race, and social status of the bully associated with each act of bullying. In terms of gender, 42.0% (149) of bullying acts were performed by characters whose gender was unknown (i.e. the characters bullied anonymously through digital means or were not seen by the viewer), 35.5% (126) were performed by male characters, 20.0% (71) by female characters, and 2.5% (9) by a mix of male and female characters. In terms of the race of bully characters, 42.8% (152) of bullying acts were performed by characters whose race was unknown (i.e. the characters bullied anonymously or their race was unclear to the coder), 42.8% (152) were performed by White characters, 8.5% (30) by a group of characters representing various races, 4.5% (16) by Latino/a characters, 1.1% (4) by Black characters, and 0.3% (1) by Asian characters. In terms of the social status of bully characters, 51.3% (182) of bullying acts were performed by characters whose social status was unknown (i.e. the characters bullied anonymously or their status was not obvious to

¹⁰ “Slushie facial” is a trope popularized on *Glee* that describes what occurs when someone douses an unassuming student in the face with an ice-cold slushie beverage (usually in the hallway at school).

¹¹ Forms of each type of bullying were not always mutually exclusive.

the coder), 39.2% (139) were performed by popular characters, 7.9% (28) by characters who fell somewhere in between popular and unpopular, and 1.1% (4) by unpopular characters. Additionally, 0.6% (2) of bullying acts were performed by a group of characters representing a mix of social groups.

Related more to the bullying behavior itself, coders also recorded the apparent reason for bullying, whether bullying was performed by a group (multiple bullies or a bully with a posse), whether it was portrayed as humorous, whether it was rewarded or punished, and whether it appeared within an anti-bullying episode. In terms of motive, it was most common for bullying to have an unknown motive (46.2%/164 acts). Additionally, 11.8% (42) of bullying acts were motivated by personal gain, 10.7% (38) were motivated by hatred/bias (most often bias against homosexual or transgender characters), 9.6% (34) were performed as a means of entertainment, 8.7% (31) were motivated by anger, 7.3% (26) were motivated by jealousy, and 5.6% (20) were motivated by retaliation. In terms of group bullying, 76.1% (270) of bullying acts were performed by a single character, while 23.9% (85) were performed by multiple bullies or one bully backed up by a posse. Related to humor, only 24.8% (88) of bullying acts were portrayed as humorous (either to a character or to the audience). In terms of rewards vs. punishments, 73.0% (259) of bullying acts were portrayed as neither rewarded nor punished, 18.3% (65) were rewarded, 7.3% (26) were punished, and 1.4% (5) were both punished and rewarded. Additionally, 20.3% (72) of bullying acts appeared within episodes carrying an anti-bullying theme.

Other coded variables related to characteristics of victim characters and the harm (if any) they suffered. In terms of gender, female characters made up the majority of victims, with 55.8% (198) of bullying acts targeted toward a female and 44.2% (157) targeted toward a male. In terms of race, the majority of victims were White, with 78.0% (277) of bullying acts targeted toward a White character. In addition, 13.2% (47) of bullying acts targeted a victim of unknown race (indeterminable by the coder), 3.7% (13) targeted an Asian character, 3.4% (12) targeted a Black character, and 1.7% (6) targeted a Latino/a character. Related to social status, 39.7% (141) of bullying acts targeted a popular character, 32.7% (116) targeted an unpopular character, 19.2% (68) targeted a character that appeared to fall in between the two categories, and 8.5% (30) targeted a character whose social status was unclear to the coder.

Notably, in the case of 90.4% (321) of bullying acts, some form of emotional or physical harm to the victim was demonstrated within the episode. In the case of 87.2% (280) of these acts, emotional harm was shown. Both physical and emotional harm were demonstrated following 10.6% (34) of the acts, while physical harm alone was demonstrated following 2.2% (7) of the acts. When harm to victims was shown, the degree of harm demonstrated tended to fall in the low-to-middle range, coded as either a “2” or “3.” The average degree of harm was 2.56 ($SD = .91$).¹² Specifically, 35.8% (115) of bullying acts were shown to cause harm rated as a “3,” and 34.9% (112) were shown to cause harm rated as a “2.” All other bullying acts

¹² The harm variable was later recoded so that a score of “1” represented both minor harm *and* no harm. An analysis of this variable indicated that across all acts of bullying (even those in which no harm was shown), the average degree of harm was 2.41 ($SD = .98$).

were coded as demonstrating a level-4 (16.5%/53 acts) or level-1 (12.8%/41 acts) degree of harm. No acts of bullying were coded as demonstrating level-5 harm (the most severe degree).

The final variables coded surrounded third party characters who witnessed bullying, but were not involved as bullies or victims. Regarding the presence of third party characters, 29.3% (104) of bullying acts were witnessed by a major teen character. In the case of only 20.2% (21) of these acts, teen characters intervened to stop the bullying or prevent it from happening in the future.

Social Status of Bullies and Victims

Research question 1a asked how portrayals of verbal, physical, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of depicting bully characters as popular. Due to an insufficient distribution across cells, the categories of physical bullying and physical/verbal bullying (both representing bullying containing a physical element) were collapsed into one “physical element” category. Additionally, unpopular and “in between” statuses (representing bullying by characters that were not popular) were collapsed into a “not popular” category and popular and “mixed” status categories (representing bullying by at least one popular character) were collapsed into a “popular” category.

A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories showed that there were significant differences in bully social status (popular, not popular, or indeterminable) across different types of bullying (bullying with a physical element, verbal bullying, indirect bullying, and cyber bullying), $\chi^2(6, N = 355) = 132.44, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .43$ (see Table 1.) Specifically, bullies were portrayed as popular

in 63.6% (49) of bully acts involving a physical element, 52.8% (86) of verbal bullying acts, 42.9% (6) of indirect bullying acts, and 0.0% (0) of cyber bullying acts. Z-tests comparing column proportions (adjusted with the Bonferroni correction)¹³ within the cross tabulation indicated that while they did not significantly differ from one another, bullying with a physical element, verbal bullying, and indirect bullying were all significantly more likely to be performed by popular characters than cyber bullying.

Additionally, bully characters were portrayed as *not popular* in 14.3% (11) of acts of bullying involving a physical element, 11.7% (19) verbal bullying acts, 2.0% (2) of cyber bullying acts, and 0.0% (0) of indirect bullying acts. Z-tests comparing column proportions revealed that bullying with a physical element and verbal bullying were more likely to portray bullies as *not popular* than indirect and cyber bullying. Notably, an overwhelming 98.0% (99) of cyber bullying acts were performed by a character of unclear or unknown social status. This was also the case for 57.1% (8) of indirect acts, 35.6% (58) of verbal acts, and 22.1% (17) of acts involving a physical element. According to Z-tests comparing column proportions, cyber bullying was significantly more likely than all other bullying types to be performed by characters of unclear or unknown status. In addition, indirect bullying was more likely than bullying with a physical element to involve a bully character of indeterminable social status.

¹³ Bonferroni's correction was used to adjust the alpha levels for all Z-tests comparing column proportions within chi-square cross tabulations.

Table 1: Cross Tabulation of Bully Social Status and Bullying Type

Bully Social Status	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Popular	63.6% (49 _a)	52.8% (86 _a)	42.9% (6 _a)	0.0% (0 _b)
Not Popular	14.3% (11 _a)	11.7% (19 _a)	0.0% (0 _{a,b})	2.0% (2 _b)
Indeterminable	22.1% (17 _a)	35.6% (58 _{a,b})	57.1% (8 _b)	98.0% (99 _c)

$\chi^2(6, N = 355) = 132.44, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .43$

Notes. 1 cell (8.3%) has an expected count less than 5. Each shared subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Research question 1b asked how portrayals of physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of portraying victims as *unpopular*. Due to insufficient distribution across cells, physical and physical/verbal bullying (representing bullying containing a physical element) were collapsed into a “physical element” category, and popular and “in between” statuses (representing victims that were *not unpopular*) were collapsed into a “not unpopular” category. A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories showed that there were significant differences in victim social status (unpopular, not unpopular, or indeterminable) across different types of bullying (bullying with a physical element, verbal bullying, indirect bullying, and cyber bullying), $\chi^2(6, N = 355) = 84.24, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .34$ (see Table 2).

The data demonstrated that 64.9% (50) of bullying acts involving a physical element portrayed victim characters as unpopular. This was also the case for 36.8%

(60) of verbal bullying acts, 35.7% (5) of indirect bullying acts, and 1.0% (1) of cyber bullying acts. Z-tests comparing column proportions within the cross tabulation revealed that bullying with a physical element was more likely to involve a victim portrayed as unpopular than verbal bullying and cyber bullying. Additionally, verbal and indirect bullying were significantly more likely than cyber bullying to involve unpopular victim characters.

In terms of victim characters being portrayed as *not* unpopular (either popular or “in between” popular and unpopular), such victims were involved in 85.1% (86) of cyber bullying acts, 57.1% (8) of indirect bullying acts, 55.85% of verbal bullying acts, and 31.2% (24) of bullying acts involving of physical element. According to Z-tests comparing column proportions, cyber bullying was significantly more likely than verbal and physical bullying to portray victims who were *not* unpopular. Also, verbal bullying acts were more likely to portray victims as *not* unpopular than acts of bullying involving a physical element.

Bullying in which victim characters were of an unknown or unclear social status accounted for the remainder of bullying acts in the sample: 13.9% (14) of cyber bullying acts, 7.4% (12) of verbal bullying acts, 7.1% (1) of indirect bullying acts, and 3.9% (3) of acts of bullying involving a physical element. Z-tests comparing column proportions revealed that these differences between types of bullying were not significant.

Table 2: Cross Tabulation of Victim Social Status and Bullying Type

Victim Social Status	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Unpopular	64.9% (50 _a)	36.8% (60 _b)	35.7% (5 _{a,b})	1.0% (1 _c)
Not unpopular	31.2% (24 _a)	55.8% (91 _b)	57.1% (8 _{a,b,c})	85.1% (86 _c)
Indeterminable	3.9% (3 _a)	7.4% (12 _a)	7.1% (1 _a)	13.9% (14 _a)

$\chi^2(6, N = 355) = 84.24, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .34$

Notes. 2 cells (16.7%) have expected counts less than 5. Each shared subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Motivations Behind Bullying

Research question 2 asked how physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of the primary motivation portrayed as contributing to bullying behavior. Again, due to an insufficient distribution across cells, physical and physical/verbal bullying (representing bullying containing a physical element) were collapsed into one “physical element” category. In addition, anger and retaliation motivations (one representing general anger and one representing a specific form of anger) were collapsed into one “anger” category, and personal gain and entertainment (one representing personal gain more generally and the other representing a specific personal gain) were collapsed into one “personal gain” category. A chi-square cross tabulation of the resulting categories indicated that there were significant differences in motivation (anger, personal gain, hatred, jealousy, indeterminable) across different types of bullying (physical

element, verbal, indirect, and cyber), $\chi^2 (12, N = 355) = 178.15, p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .41$ (see Table 3).

The data revealed that anger was the primary motivation behind 22.1% (17) of acts of bullying with a physical element, 19.6% (32) of verbal bullying acts, 2.0% of cyber bullying acts, and 0.0% of indirect bullying acts. Z-tests comparing column proportions revealed that bullying involving a physical element and verbal bullying were significantly more likely to be motivated by anger than cyber bullying. The motive of personal gain was behind 36.4% (28) of acts of bullying with a physical element, 27.6% (45) verbal acts, 14.3% (2) of indirect acts, and 1.0% (1) of cyber acts. According to Z-tests comparing column proportions, physical, verbal, and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be performed as a means of personal gain. Regarding "hate bullying" or bullying targeted at someone on the basis of their race, religion, sexual orientation, etc., 24.7% (19) of bullying with a physical element, 11.0% (18) of verbal bullying, 7.1% (1) of indirect bullying, and 0.0% (0) of cyber bullying was coded as being primarily motivated by hatred or bias. Z-tests comparing column proportions demonstrated that physical, verbal, and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be motivated by hatred. Moreover, bullying with a physical element was more likely to be motivated by hatred than verbal bullying. In terms of jealousy as a reason for bullying, this was the case in 21.4% (3) of indirect bullying acts, 12.3% (20) of verbal acts, 3.9% (3) of acts of bullying with a physical element, and 0.0% (0) of cyber acts. Z-tests comparing column proportions showed that verbal and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be motivated by jealousy.

The remaining acts of bullying, which included 97.0% (98) of cyber bullying acts, 57.1% (8) of indirect bullying acts, 29.4% (48) of verbal bullying acts, and 13.0% (10) of acts of bullying with a physical element, were coded as having an indeterminable motive. According to Z-tests comparing column proportions, cyber bullying was more likely than physical, verbal, and indirect bullying to have an unclear or unknown motive. Additionally, acts of verbal and indirect bullying were more likely than acts of bullying with a physical element to be coded as having an indeterminable motive.

Table 3: Cross Tabulation of Motivation and Bullying Type

Motivation	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Anger	22.1% (17 _a)	19.6% (32 _a)	0.0% (0 _{a,b})	2.0% (2 _b)
Personal Gain	36.4% (28 _a)	27.6% (45 _a)	14.3% (2 _a)	1.0% (1 _b)
Hatred	24.7% (19 _a)	11.0% (18 _b)	7.1% (1 _{a,b})	0.0% (0 _c)
Jealousy	3.9%(3 _{a,b})	12.3% (20 _b)	21.4% (3 _b)	0.0% (0 _a)
Indeterminable	13.0% (10 _a)	29.4% (48 _b)	57.1% (8 _b)	97.0% (98 _c)

χ^2 (12, *N* = 355) = 178.15, *p* < .001, Cramer's *V* = .41

Notes. 4 cells (20.0%) have expected counts less than 5. Each shared subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Humor and Bullying

Hypothesis 1 predicted that bullying involving a verbal element would be more likely than other types of bullying to be portrayed as humorous (either to the

characters or to the audience). Related to this, research question 3 asked how physical, indirect, and cyber bullying would differ in terms of their likelihood of depicting bullying as humorous. In order to test H1 and RQ3, physical/verbal and verbal bullying (representing bullying involving a verbal element) were collapsed into one “verbal element” category. A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories demonstrated that there were significant differences in likelihood of portraying bullying as humorous (yes or no) across types of bullying (verbal element, physical, indirect, and cyber), $\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 39.20, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .33$ (see Table 4). Broken down by type, 35.0% (76) of bullying acts involving a verbal element, 30.4% (7) of physical acts, 14.3% (2) of indirect acts, and 3.0% (3) of cyber acts were shown in a humorous context. H1 was only partially supported, as Z-tests comparing column proportions indicated that bullying with a verbal element was significantly more likely than cyber bullying to depict bullying as humorous.¹⁴ However, there were no significant differences between verbal bullying and any other category. Related to RQ3, the only significant difference between the non-verbal categories was that physical bullying was more likely than cyber bullying to portray bullying in a humorous manner.

¹⁴ As a post-hoc analysis, the same chi-square cross tabulation and Z-tests comparing column proportions were run with acts of bullying coded as physical/verbal excluded. The results indicated that bullying acts involving *only* a verbal element were also significantly more likely than cyber bullying acts to be portrayed as humorous, $\chi^2(3, N = 301) = 28.51, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .31$. (However, these results are to be interpreted with caution, as 2 cells (25.0%) had expected counts less than 5).

Table 4: Cross Tabulation of Humor and Bullying Type

Humorous?	Type of Bullying			
	Verbal Element (<i>n</i> = 217)	Physical (<i>n</i> = 23)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Yes	35.0% (76 _a)	30.4% (7 _a)	14.3% (2 _{a,b})	3.0% (3 _b)
No	65.0% (141 _a)	69.6% (16 _a)	85.7% (12 _{a,b})	97.0% (98 _b)

$\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 39.20, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .33$

Notes. 1 cell (12.5%) has an expected count less than 5. Each shared subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Rewards and Punishments

Hypothesis 2 predicted that all forms of bullying would be more likely to be portrayed as rewarded or unpunished than as punished. This hypothesis was supported, as 91.3% (324) of all bullying acts were portrayed as not punished (either rewarded, or neither punished nor rewarded) and only 8.7% (31) were portrayed as punished (either punished, or both rewarded and punished). A one-sample binomial test confirmed that this distribution was significantly different ($p < .001$) from a chance distribution of 50% punished and 50% unpunished.

Related to this, research question 4 asked how physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of being portrayed as punished. Due to an insufficient distribution across cells, the categories of physical bullying and physical/verbal bullying (both representing bullying containing a physical element) were again collapsed into one “physical element” category. Additionally, in order to directly respond to the research

question, rewarded and “neither punished nor rewarded” categories were collapsed into one “not punished” category, and punished and “both punished and rewarded” categories were collapsed into one “punished” category. A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories revealed that there were significant differences in likelihood of bullying being portrayed as punished (punished or not punished) across different types of bullying (physical element, verbal, indirect, and cyber), $\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 16.49, p = .001$, Cramer’s $V = .22$ (see Table 5). More specifically, 13.5% (22) of acts of verbal bullying, 11.7% (9) of acts of bullying with a physical element, 0.0% (0) of acts of indirect bullying, and 0.0% (0) of acts of cyber bullying were punished. Z-tests comparing column proportions indicated that physical and verbal bullying was more likely than cyber bullying to be portrayed as punished.

Table 5: Cross Tabulation of Punishment and Bullying Type

Punished?	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Yes	11.7% (9 _a)	13.5% (22 _a)	0.0% (0 _{a, b})	0.0% (0 _b)
No	88.3% (68 _a)	86.5% (141 _a)	100.0% (14 _{a, b})	100.0% (101 _b)

$\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 16.49, p = .001$, Cramer’s $V = .22$

Notes. 1 cell (12.5%) has an expected count less than 5. Each shared subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Bullying With a Posse

Research question 5 asked how physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of being portrayed as a group activity (i.e. with multiple bullies or a bully backed up by a posse). For means of consistency with the aforementioned statistical analyses, physical and physical/verbal categories were collapsed into one “physical element” category. A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories indicated that there were significant differences in terms of likelihood of portraying group bullying (yes or no) across types of bullying (physical element, verbal, indirect, and cyber), $\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 63.11, p < .001$, Cramer’s $V = .42$ (see Table 6). Broken down by bullying type, 53.2% (41) of bullying acts involving a physical element, 23.9% (39) of verbal bullying acts, 21.4% (3) of indirect bullying acts, and 2.0% (2) of cyber bullying acts were performed by multiple bullies or bullies supported/egged on by other teens. According to Z-tests comparing column proportions, physical, verbal, and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to depict group bullying. In addition, bullying with a physical element was significantly more likely than verbal bullying to depict group bullying.

Table 6: Cross Tabulation of Group Bullying and Bullying Type

Group Bullying?	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Yes	53.2% (41 _a)	23.9% (39 _b)	21.4% (3 _{a, b})	2.0% (2 _c)
No	46.8% (36 _a)	76.1% (124 _b)	78.6% (11 _{a, b})	98.0% (99 _c)

$\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 63.11, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .42$

Notes. 1 cell (12.5%) has an expected count less than 5. Each subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Emotional vs. Physical Harm

Hypothesis 3 predicted that when harm to victims was shown, it would be more likely to be emotional in nature than physical in nature. This hypothesis was supported; 97.6% (280) of the 287 acts of bullying that portrayed bullying as causing physical or emotional harm (as opposed to no harm or a combination of both physical harm and emotional harm) depicted some type of emotional harm, while only 2.4% (7) demonstrated physical harm. A one-sample binomial test confirmed that this distribution was significantly different ($p < .001$) from a chance distribution of 50% emotional harm and 50% physical harm.

Degree of Harm Demonstrated

Hypothesis 4 predicted that bullying involving a physical element would demonstrate more harm to victims than other types of bullying. Related to this, research question 6 asked how portrayals of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying would differ in terms of the degree of harm demonstrated to victims. In order to

appropriately test H4, physical and physical/verbal bullying categories (representing bullying involving a physical element) were collapsed into one “physical element” category. Additionally, in order to give weight to the 34 acts of bullying within the sample after which no harm to victims was depicted, these acts were recoded as demonstrating a level-1 degree of harm (making level-1 harm come to represent no harm or minor harm). A one-way ANOVA based on the resulting categories revealed that there were significant differences in degree of harm demonstrated (on a 1-5 scale) across different types of bullying (physical element, verbal, indirect, and cyber), $F(3, 351) = 12.58, p < .001$ (see Table 7).

H4 was partially supported; post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated that the mean degree of harm shown after bullying with a physical element ($M = 2.65, SD = .93$) was significantly greater ($p < .001$) than the mean degree of harm shown after verbal bullying ($M = 2.11, SD = .97$). However, the mean harm shown after physical bullying was not significantly different than the mean harm shown after indirect bullying ($M = 3.29, SD = 1.14$) or cyber bullying ($M = 2.41, SD = .86$).

Regarding RQ6, post-hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction revealed that the mean harm demonstrated following verbal acts of bullying was also significantly *less* than the mean harm demonstrated following indirect bullying ($p < .001$) and cyber bullying ($p < .001$). Additionally, the difference between harm demonstrated after indirect bullying and cyber bullying (with indirect showing more harm than cyber) approached significance ($p = .06$).

Table 7: One-Way ANOVA for Bullying Type on Degree of Harm Depicted

Mean and Standard Deviation for Bullying Types						
Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>
2.65 _a (.93)	2.11 _b (.97)	3.29 _c (1.14)	2.59 _a (.86)	12.58	3, 351	< .001

Notes. Harm was measured on a scale of 1 (no harm or minor harm) to 5 (severe harm). Each subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose means did not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Third Party Intervention

Hypothesis 5 predicted that portrayals of bullying involving a physical element would be more likely than portrayals of other types of bullying to depict third party teen characters as intervening to disrupt or prevent bullying activity. Related to this, research question 7 asked how verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of portraying a third party intervention. In order to accurately test H5, the categories of physical bullying and physical/verbal bullying (representing bullying involving a physical element) were collapsed into one “physical element” category. In addition, due to an insufficient distribution across cells, the categories of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying were collapsed into one “non-physical” category. Because of this collapse, RQ7 could not adequately be answered by the data set.

A chi-square cross tabulation based on the collapsed categories found that there were no significant differences in likelihood of portraying third party intervention (yes or no) across types of bullying (physical and non-physical), $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = .30, ns$ (see Table 8). Thus, H5 was not supported. Notably, when taking

into consideration only acts of bullying during which third party teen characters were present, 24.0% (6) of acts of bullying with a physical element and 19.0% (15) of non-physical acts of bullying depicted a third party character intervening to stop bullying or prevent it from happening in the future.

Table 8: Cross Tabulation of Third Party Intervention and Bullying Type

Intervention?	Type of Bullying	
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 25)	Non-Physical (<i>n</i> = 79)
Yes	24.0% (6 _a)	19.0% (15 _a)
No	76.0% (19 _a)	81.0% (64 _a)

$\chi^2 (1, N = 104) = .30, ns$

Note. Each subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

Anti-Bullying Episodes

Research question 8 asked how physical, verbal, physical/verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying differed in terms of their likelihood of being portrayed within an anti-bullying themed episode. To maintain consistency with other reported results, physical and physical/verbal categories (representing bullying involving a physical element) were collapsed into one “physical element” category. A chi-square cross tabulation based on the resulting categories indicated that there were significant differences in likelihood of appearing in an anti-bullying episode (yes or no) across different types of bullying (physical element, verbal, indirect, and cyber), $\chi^2 (3, N = 355) = 81.02, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .48$ (see Table 9).

Broken down by bullying type, 55.8% (43) of acts of bullying with a physical element, 14.3% (2) of indirect bullying acts, 14.1% (23) of verbal bullying acts, and 4.0% (4) of cyber bullying acts appeared within an anti-bullying themed episode. Z-tests comparing column proportions within the cross tabulation indicated that bullying with a physical element was more likely than verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying to appear in anti-bullying episodes. Additionally, verbal bullying was more likely than cyber bullying to appear in such episodes. These results (and all of the aforementioned results), as well as the conclusions drawn from them, are summarized in Appendix B.

Table 9: Cross Tabulation of Anti-Bullying Theme and Bullying Type

In anti-bullying episode?	Type of Bullying			
	Physical Element (<i>n</i> = 77)	Verbal (<i>n</i> = 163)	Indirect (<i>n</i> = 14)	Cyber (<i>n</i> = 101)
Yes	55.8% (43 _a)	14.1% (23 _b)	14.3% (2 _{b,c})	4.0% (4 _c)
No	44.2% (34 _a)	85.9% (140 _b)	85.7% (12 _{b,c})	96.0% (97 _c)

$\chi^2(3, N = 355) = 81.02, p < .001, \text{Cramer's } V = .48$

Notes. 1 cell (12.5%) has an expected count less than 5. Each subscript denotes a subset of bullying type categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

CHAPTER 5

PATTERNS ACROSS BULLYING PORTRAYALS: DISCUSSION

Summary, Interpretations, and Implications

Trends Across the Sample

The first goal of the content analysis was to provide a snapshot of the bullying representations that teen viewers are most likely to see as they watch their favorite television shows. The analysis revealed that the majority of bullying on recent teen television programming was verbal or cyber in nature (most often taking the form of an insult or threat). It was most often performed by an anonymous character or white male, who worked alone (without fellow bullies or a posse) and was portrayed as being popular or having an unknown/unclear social status. Additionally, most acts of bullying had unknown or unclear motivations, were not humorous or punished, and did not appear in an anti-bullying episode. In terms of victim characters, most acts of bullying involved white female victims, clearly portrayed as either popular or unpopular. These victims were most often depicted as suffering moderate emotional harm rated either a “2” or “3” on a degree of harm scale of 1-5 (minor to severe). In addition, most acts of bullying were not witnessed by a major teen character. When third party characters were present, they were unlikely to intervene to stop the bullying or prevent it from happening in the future.

Most of these trends could be attributed to the fact that 47.3% of the acts of bullying in the final sample occurred within episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*—a mystery/drama focused on four white female teens who are being constantly

harassed and threatened (usually via texts or notes) by an anonymous character, “A.” Due to the strong presence of this one show in the data set, the results were interpreted with caution. However, the sample’s emphasis on anonymous cyber bullying was not considered a limitation, as teen dramas centered on anonymous and seemingly omniscient/omnipresent bullies or “mean girls” (e.g. *Gossip Girl* and *Pretty Little Liars*) represent a recently recognized formula for success among the teen girl demographic (Gay, 2011; Stinson, 2011). Additionally, portrayals of anonymous cyber bullying are particularly relevant, considering their real-world prominence and potentially grave consequences (National Science Foundation, 2011).

Also concerning the cyber bullying portrayed in the sample, it is important to acknowledge that cyber bullying differs from other types of bullying studied in this analysis; cyber bullying represents a *mode* of bullying (bullying that occurs via technology rather than in-person), while physical, verbal, and indirect bullying represent approaches to bullying (attacking a person’s body, self-concept, or reputation, respectively). Because cyber bullying on teen television was necessarily conducted via technological means, it was commonly shown from the victim’s perspective (e.g. through a shot of the victim character reading a text message) and performed by a bully who remained anonymous (or at least unseen by the viewer). This key distinction between cyber bullying and other bullying types likely contributed to the fact that for most variables (i.e. bully status, victim status, motivation for bullying, humor associated with bullying, group bullying, and rewards/punishments to bully characters), cyber bullying demonstrated unique

trends compared to verbal, physical, and indirect bullying. In fact, cyber bullying accounted for all significant differences related to RQ1 (How do types of bullying differ in terms of depicting bullies as popular?), H1 (Bullying involving a verbal element will be portrayed as humorous more than other types of bullying), RQ3 (How do types of bullying differ in terms of depicting bullying as humorous?), and RQ4 (How do types of bullying differ in terms of depicting bullying as punished?).

Considering the distinctiveness of cyber bullying that appeared to contribute to many of the significant findings in this study, post-hoc analyses excluding acts of cyber bullying were run in order to clarify apparent differences between the other bullying types. Post-hoc chi-square cross tabulations confirmed findings from the original analyses. There were still no significant differences between verbal, physical, and indirect bullying in terms of humor, punishment to bullies, or bully social status. Additionally, in terms of variables for which significant differences across physical, verbal, and indirect types had been identified in original analyses, these differences remained significant at the $p < .01$ level.¹⁵

Having acknowledged the overarching findings and confirmed that the distinct features of cyber bullying did not obscure the results, the subsequent sections will summarize, interpret, and discuss the implications surrounding the primary goal of the current study: to compare representations of different types of bullying in terms of social status of bullies and victims (RQ1a and RQ1b), motivations behind bullying (RQ2), humor associated with bullying (H1 and RQ3), rewards and punishments associated with bullying (H2 and RQ4), bullying

¹⁵ In the case of victim status and motivation variables, expected cell counts were no longer sufficient when cyber bullying was removed from the analyses.

performed alone or in a group, (RQ5), type of harm demonstrated to victims (H3), degree of harm demonstrated to victims (H4 and RQ6), intervention of third party characters (H5 and RQ7), and presentation within an anti-bullying episode (RQ8).

Popular Bullies and Unpopular Victims

The major finding related to RQ1a was that bullying with a physical element, verbal bullying, and indirect bullying were significantly more likely than cyber bullying to involve bully characters portrayed as popular. This result could be explained by the fact that an overwhelming majority of cyber bullying was performed by anonymous characters whose status was unknown by the coder/viewer. Moreover, considering the anonymity that cyber bullying permits, it would be the logical bullying type of choice for bullies who are *not* popular and want to gain leverage and “level the playing field” against those who have an advantage in terms of social power.

In terms of RQ1b, the primary findings were that bullying involving a physical element was significantly more likely than verbal bullying and cyber bullying to involve a victim portrayed as unpopular, and that verbal and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to involve unpopular victim characters. Again, the tendency for cyber bullying to be performed by an anonymous character (whose status was unknown) likely contributed to these results. Moreover, it is unsurprising that physical bullying was most likely to depict victims stereotypically as unpopular or “nerdy,” as it is the bullying type typically associated with traditional “strong preying on the weak” bullying (e.g. Hepburn, 2010; Rivero-Conil, 2011).

Thus, in terms of character social status, physical, verbal, and indirect bullying appeared to be the most high-risk types of bullying portrayals. These types of portrayals were the most likely to show bully characters as popular (i.e. likable and attractive), which research suggests may make viewers more likely to learn from them (e.g. Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). Physical bullying was also most likely to depict victim characters as unpopular, feeding into the existing stereotype and likely decreasing the chance of viewers feeling empathy toward victims (Zillmann, 1991a). At the most basic level, portrayals that show popular characters bullying unpopular characters emphasize the connection between bullying and social status (i.e. popular kids bully and losers get bullied), sending the message to young viewers that bullying makes you “cool” and functions to maintain the social structure at school. This glamorization and normalization of bullying is concerning, considering its potentially devastating effects.

Such portrayals were common in *Glee* episodes, and often involved both physical and verbal elements. For instance, in the “A Very Glee Christmas” episode, members of the football team (conveying their popularity through the letterman jackets they wear and the confident way they strut down the hall), throw slushies and scream, “Ho, ho, ho, losers!” at glee club members, Tina, Mike, and Mercedes (Brennan, Falchuk, Murphy, & Gomez-Rejon, 2010). By publicly humiliating the glee club members with “slushie facials” and referring to them as “losers,” the football players reinforce their dominance within the social structure of McKinley High.

Angry, Jealous, Self-Serving, Hateful Bullies

In terms of RQ2, the data revealed that bullying with a physical element and verbal bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be motivated by anger. This finding could be related to physical and verbal bullying being more direct, visceral, “in-your-face” aggression that would effectively demonstrate a character’s anger to viewers (and to his or her victim). Another finding was that bullying with a physical element was more likely than verbal bullying to be motivated by hatred/bias. A potential explanation could be that because the “hate bullying” in the sample involved bias against either a transgender (i.e. Adam in *Degrassi*) or gay character (e.g. Kurt in *Glee*), a physical element was often involved as a means of reaffirming traditional masculinity or dominance through physical force.

The analysis also revealed that verbal and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be motivated by jealousy. This finding makes sense in that certain forms of verbal and indirect bullying (e.g. insults, rumors) would likely be the “go-to” methods of a jealous person whose goal was to tear people down by making them worse about themselves (through verbal abuse) or damaging their reputation (indirectly). Additionally, cyber bullying was less likely than all other bullying types to be motivated by hatred/bias or performed as a means of personal gain. This finding could be explained by the fact that cyber bullying was most often anonymous and more likely than all other bullying types to have an unclear or unknown motive.

Once again, physical and verbal bullying were the most likely types to depict bullying in a high-risk way—as motivated by a reason that could potentially be

viewed as justified (i.e. anger/retaliation). In light of research suggesting that exposure to justified aggression decreases the inhibition of subsequent aggression (e.g. Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963), depictions of “justified” bullying could decrease young viewers’ inhibitions about bullying others. More generally, any bullying portrayals that a viewer might interpret as the victim getting “what was coming to them” could promote the troublesome message that some bullying is acceptable.

An example of physical retaliatory bullying (likely to be interpreted by viewers as justified) appeared within the “iPity the Nevel” episode of *iCarly*. In this episode, major characters Carly, Freddie, and Sam tie up recurring character, Nevel with a rope and force him to drink punch out of an old, smelly shoe. In other parts of the episode, it is emphasized that Nevel has always been horrible and mean toward Carly, Freddie, and Sam (and many other kids), and thus, deserves some payback. In fact, one scene shows the major characters throwing a “karma party” celebrating Nevel’s downfall. At the party, Sam proposes a toast, “To Nevel’s Misery!” and the crowd cheers (Fleckenstein & Reinsel, 2011).

Bullying for Laughs

Hypothesis 1, which predicted that bullying involving a verbal element would be more likely than other types of bullying to be portrayed as humorous, was partially supported; bullying involving a verbal element was significantly more likely than cyber bullying to depict bullying as humorous, but did not differ significantly from other types of bullying. The non-significant difference between verbal and indirect bullying is likely due to the generally low number of indirect bullying acts in the sample, which contributed to an insufficient distribution across

cells. The surprising result, though, is that physical and verbal bullying were very similar in their tendencies to be portrayed in a humorous manner. This result contradicting H1 likely stems from the fact that the prediction that verbal bullying was more likely to be humorous than physical bullying was largely based on an assertion from Potter (1999) that referred to media violence *in general* and may not transfer to media bullying. Potter suggested that verbal forms of media aggression are more often viewed as “less serious” than physical forms (p. 80). However, physical forms of general media violence (portrayed across a variety of genres) may be shown in a serious manner more often than physical forms of bullying (often portrayed on teen sitcoms). Supporting this possibility, the physical bullying in the sample was depicted as being performed for “entertainment” or “for a laugh” more frequently than any other type of bullying.¹⁶ In sum, the findings related to H1 may be demonstrative of a key difference between media bullying and other types of media aggression.

Related to RQ3, the only significant difference between the non-verbal categories was that physical bullying was more likely than cyber bullying to portray bullying in a humorous manner. Again, this could be explained by the apparent difference between physical bullying in the media (frequently depicted as being performed for entertainment) and media violence in general. Moreover, the fact that both physical and verbal bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be depicted as humorous makes sense in that the majority of cyber bullying in the sample was conducted via text message, by an anonymous bully, without witnesses.

¹⁶ This trend was observed based on descriptive analysis.

In other words, there was no “audience” for the bully to entertain, and the viewer could not see the bully to know if he or she was entertained by his or her own bullying behavior.

Thus, in terms of the contextual element of humor, physical bullying and bullying with a verbal element were the types most likely to portray bullying in a high-risk way. According to the literature, these portrayals of humorous bullying could lead to increased arousal and aggressive behaviors (Berkowitz, 1970; Mueller & Donnerstein, 1977), promote desensitization (Gunter, 1985; Sander, 1995), and trivialize bullying behavior (Potter & Warren, 1998). Furthermore, such depictions are irresponsible in that they promote the message that bullying is funny and entertaining, potentially minimizing its severity in the eyes of viewers.

An example of verbal bullying portrayed in a humorous way occurred in the “Got to Get Her Out of My House” episode of *Hannah Montana*. In this episode, Rico (a teen who runs a snack bar at the beach) explicitly makes it his goal to make Oliver (another major teen character on the show) miserable. In an effort to recruit Oliver to work for him at the snack bar (where he can torment him on a daily basis), Rico says to him, “If you don’t [work for me], I’ll have to face my girlfriend, tell her I can’t afford my half of the car, I’m a complete loser and...oh wait, that’s not me, that’s you!” (Poryes, O’Brien, Lieblein, & Correll, 2010). The smirk on Rico’s face as he talks, as well as the audience laugh track played following his comment, frame the insult as both humorous and entertaining, and may even encourage young viewers to laugh along.

Getting Away With Bullying

H2, which predicted that all types of bullying would be more likely to be portrayed as rewarded or unpunished than to be portrayed as punished, was supported. In terms of RQ4, bullying involving a physical element and verbal bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be portrayed as punished. This result is unsurprising because (as predicted) most cyber bullying was performed by a character who could not be identified in order to be punished. Additionally, it seems logical that physical and verbal forms of bullying, being more overt than cyber bullying, were more often noticed by a third party teen character or authority figure who subsequently punished the bully (via disapproval or disciplinary action).

Thus, in terms of punishments associated with bullying, the anonymous aspect of cyber bullying appeared to make it the most high-risk type; cyber bullying portrayals were the least likely to depict bullies being punished. According to prior effects research, depicting bullying without punishment could increase the chance of viewers learning bullying behavior (e.g. Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963b) and becoming fearful (Bryant et al., 1981). Most generally, through, such portrayals put forth the message that teens often get away with bullying. Although this message may reflect reality, it could have a disinhibiting effect on young viewers who find themselves in positions where they are tempted to bully others.

The cyber bullying on *Pretty Little Liars* exemplifies portrayals that depict bullying as unpunished. In almost every episode of the first two seasons, the anonymous character, "A" sends threatening text messages to the main characters, Hannah, Spencer, Aria, and Emily. The first of these messages, sent to all four girls in

the pilot episode, reads, “I’m still here bitches, and I know everything. – A” (King, Shepard, & Glatter, 2010). These messages only intensify and become more threatening as the series progresses, and “A” remains unidentified and unpunished.

Bullying as a Team Sport

In terms of RQ5, the results indicated that bullying with a physical element, verbal bullying, and indirect bullying were more likely than cyber bullying to be depicted as a group activity. This likely stems from the fact that most acts of cyber bullying were conducted via text messages assumed to be coming from one source (in most cases, the anonymous “A” character in *Pretty Little Liars*). Additionally, bullying with a physical element was significantly more likely than verbal bullying to depict group bullying. On the one hand, this trend could be related to the fact that physical bullying was often portrayed as motivated by a desire to entertain (i.e. make a group of friends laugh). On the other hand, it might be explained by the logic that bullies wishing to intimidate or physically overpower a victim might bully with others (or at least with a posse to stand behind them) in order to increase their impact or guarantee that a victim is unable to defend himself or herself.

Considering the aforementioned differences, bullying with a physical element was the most high-risk type of bullying in terms of portraying bullying as performed by a group. The literature does not provide evidence of specific effects related to this variable. However, it seems likely that depictions of group bullying could promote the idea that bullying can be a bonding activity or a way of making (or keeping) friends, providing young viewers with yet another incentive to bully others.

Although it did not involve a physical element, one act of bullying portrayed on *Shake it Up* epitomizes how bullying portrayals can depict bullying as a way to make friends or become part of the “in” crowd. During the show’s “Show it Up” episode, some of the popular cheerleaders ask Tinka and Gunther (foreign exchange students who are outsiders in the school) to join their talent show team so they can beat Rocky and Cece (the show’s protagonists whom the cheerleaders have been harassing for the duration of the episode). In a subsequent scene, Tinka and Gunther join the cheerleaders in taunting and mocking Rocky with a cheer about how her “bad dream” is going to come true when they win first prize at the competition (Thompson, Conn & Zwick, 2011). After joining the popular crowd to gang up on Rocky, Tinka and Gunther are shown jumping up and down and grinning, relishing in the feeling of acceptance.

The Effects of Bullying: Minor to Moderate Emotional Damage

Hypothesis 3, which predicted that when harm to bullying was shown, it would be more likely to be emotional than physical, was supported. However, H4, which predicted that bullying with a physical element would demonstrate more harm to victims than other bullying types, was only partially supported. The degree of harm shown after bullying with a physical element was significantly greater than the degree of harm shown after verbal bullying, but not significantly different than the harm shown after indirect bullying or cyber bullying. The unexpected finding that bullying involving a physical element *did not* demonstrate more harm to victims than indirect bullying or cyber bullying may point to yet another key distinction between general media violence and media bullying. H4 was based on the

assumption that physical bullying would often cause *physical* (apparent, visible) harm. However, media bullying seems to be unique in that it reflects the idea that in the real world, physical forms of bullying are not necessarily intended to cause serious physical harm to a victim (that leaves visible damage). Supporting this notion, physical bullying within the sample was often conducted as a means of entertainment or to intimidate/intensify the effect of a threat, rather than as a means of causing serious physical harm. Moreover, the fact that physical bullying was frequently portrayed in a humorous way likely made any physical damage seem less severe to the viewer/coder, reducing the perceived degree of harm associated with the act. For example, the numerous acts of bullying on *Glee* that involved “slushie facials” were not portrayed as intending to cause serious physical harm. Rather, throwing slushies at the glee club members was depicted as a relatively harmless tradition that football players did to entertain themselves and each other.

Regarding RQ6, the major finding was that the mean degree of harm demonstrated after verbal bullying was significantly less than the mean degree of harm demonstrated after indirect bullying and cyber bullying. These results (and those related to H3) suggest that verbal bullying is the bullying type portrayed as having the least consequences. This trend could be explained in relation to the possible reasons why other types of bullying (physical, cyber, and indirect) tend to depict a significant amount of harm.

Regarding bullying with a physical element, despite appearing to demonstrate less *physical* harm than other forms of TV violence, it often (47.1% of the time) portrays both physical and emotional harm, potentially increasing the

overall degree of harm perceived by the viewer. For instance, in the “Jade Dumps Beck” episode of *Victorious*, Trina (an upperclassman at the performing arts school who stars in a one-woman show) bullies Robbie (a younger “nerdy” student) into posting a positive review of her performance on his blog. Grabbing him by his hair, she repeatedly shoves his head into a hot bowl of soup and says, “I’ve worked my butt off on that performance, and you are gonna write a good review. You feel me?” (Fleckenstein & Hoefler, 2010). As a result of this act of bullying, Robbie is portrayed as physically hurt by the hot soup on his face (and a mushroom up his nose) and emotionally harmed by the threat of what Trina will do to him if he does not write a good review. This combination contributed to a level-3 degree of harm.

In terms of cyber bullying, there is not much of a story/very little action if a viewer only sees the content of a mean text message or Facebook rumor. In most cases, the drama is provided through the depiction of a victim’s reaction to the message, which is often a representation of the harm they suffer. For example, in the “Little Bro, Big Trouble” episode of *Zeke and Luther*, the Plunk brothers (the neighborhood bullies) send a video message to Luther telling him that they have recruited his little brother and “lots of activities have been planned” (Burkhard, Dearborn, & Shelton, 2010). The importance of this message in the show’s storyline is only made clear when the viewer sees Luther’s reaction; he looks up from his phone, says, “Oh no, he’s gone to the Plunks side,” then runs away screaming (Burkhard, Dearborn, & Shelton).

Similarly, with indirect bullying, the relatively high degree of harm demonstrated could be related to the specific *forms* of indirect bullying in the

sample episodes, the most recurring form being sabotage. With episode plots involving sabotage (and perhaps rumors too), the storyline is likely to become dependent on a clear demonstration of harm (likely somewhat enduring harm), in that it is the only way to show whether the bullying was “successful.” For example, in the “Save the Date” episode of *Pretty Little Liars*, the viewer does not immediately know the significance of an act of bullying that involves “A” injecting a substance into Emily’s (a main character who is on the swim team) pain relief cream. The significance of this act is only made apparent when the harm to Emily is shown; she is sent to the hospital with an ulcer, and the doctor tells her that there are steroids in her system. As this medical information could ruin her swimming career, the scene reveals that “A” tampered with Emily’s ointment in order to sabotage her. (King, Shepard, Witten, & Grismer, 2011). This example supports the notion that storylines involving indirect forms of bullying (e.g. sabotage) often do not make sense without an overt depiction of harm. This tendency could explain why a descriptive analysis, supported by a significant difference between indirect and verbal bullying and a difference between indirect and cyber bullying that approached significance (with indirect demonstrating more harm on average than both types), suggested that indirect bullying was the bullying type portrayed as having the most severe consequences.

Considering the aforementioned trends, in terms of consequences, verbal bullying was the most high-risk bullying type; on average, verbal bullying portrayed the least amount of harm to victims. Based on prior media aggression research, this lack of consequences could increase the likelihood of viewers learning

aggressive/bullying behavior (e.g. Sanders & Baron, 1975). Moreover, bullying portrayals showing little to no harm to victims promote the inaccurate message that bullying is “harmless,” when recent tragedies have proven that bullying can not only be harmful, but also deadly.

The “Girl Fight” episode of *90210* provides an example of verbal bullying shown to cause only minor harm. In the episode, Naomi (an attractive, popular student) appears to be jealous of Ivy (a tom boy who is best friends with Naomi’s boyfriend, Liam). Throughout the episode, Naomi repeatedly harasses Ivy. In one scene, she says to Ivy (who is wearing a wet suit), “Well aren’t you cute. You look like a little wet seal. I hope no one clubs you” (Thomas et al., 2010). However, Ivy does not seem particularly bothered by this remark or others, demonstrating only minor, level-1 harm.

To Intervene or Not to Intervene: Unhelpful Third Party Characters

H5, which predicted that portrayals of bullying involving a physical element would be more likely than portrayals of other types of bullying to depict third party teen characters as intervening to disrupt or prevent bullying activity, was not supported. In contrast, third party witnesses to both physical and non-physical bullying tended not to take action to disrupt bullying, intervening in less than 25% of bullying acts in both categories. RQ7 could not be answered, as the categories of verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying were collapsed into one “non-physical” category due to an insufficient distribution across cells. Perhaps the lack of character intervention in bullying is related to television producers and writers wanting to let the bullying behavior “play out” rather than interrupt the drama (or comedy) with a

third party intervention. Such portrayals of non-intervening characters send a potentially harmful message to young viewers who might identify with or aspire to be like their favorite television characters. Characters who stand by, watch, and sometimes even laugh at fellow classmates being bullied (instead of stepping in or telling an authority figure) make poor role models for young viewers.

The tendency for third party characters to not intervene in bullying behavior was exemplified by the pilot episode of *Victorious*. In this episode, the title character, Tori attends her first day at performing arts school. During improvisation class, the teacher has Tori perform a skit with Jade (a current student who appears threatened by Tori's looks and talent). During the skit, Jade "improvises" that Tori is her pet dog that has fleas. Subsequently, she pours an iced coffee on Tori's head. Sensing Tori's embarrassment, Jade smirks and asks her, "What's the prob, dog?" (Schneider & Hoefler, 2010). This physical and verbal harassment was witnessed by a classroom full of students and by a teacher, none of whom stood up for Tori.

Moral Lessons about Bullying

Regarding RQ8, the analysis suggested that physical bullying was more likely than verbal, indirect, and cyber bullying to appear in episodes carrying an anti-bullying theme. In addition, verbal bullying was more likely than cyber bullying to appear in such episodes. Perhaps producers and writers are more likely to include physical bullying in anti-bullying episodes because they are trying to get a point across in these episodes, and in turn, include what might be considered the most dramatic, noticeable, and traditional type of bullying. For instance, physical bullying was taken to an extreme level in the "All Falls Down" episode of *Degrassi*, which had

an anti-bullying theme. In this episode, the ongoing storyline of Fitz (a tough, physically intimidating school bully) harassing and pushing around Eli (a small-statured social outcast) culminates when Fitz is arrested after a cop sees him swinging a knife at Eli during a school dance (Glinski, Moore, Schuyler, & Williams, 2010).

Considering the aforementioned trends, cyber bullying was the most high-risk type of bullying in terms of likelihood of appearing in anti-bullying episodes. In other words, cyber bullying portrayals were least likely to appear in episodes that provided young viewers with clear, direct, and repeated messages (aimed to inhibit them from bullying) about alternatives to bullying, the harm caused by bullying, and the potential punishments associated with bullying.

Types of Bullying: The Relative Risks

As summarized in Appendix B, the results related to the hypotheses and research questions posed in the current study suggest which types of bullying tend to be portrayed in high-risk ways according to the effects literature. Overall, bullying involving a physical element and verbal bullying proved to be the most high-risk types according to several factors (bully social status, motivation for bullying, and humor associated with bullying). Additionally, physical bullying was the most high-risk in terms of victim social status and group bullying, while verbal bullying was the most high-risk in terms of harm shown to victims.

Regarding most contextual factors (victim and bully status, motivation, humor, and group bullying), cyber bullying was the least high-risk type of portrayal. In some cases, this pattern was related to the fact that the majority of cyber bullying

was performed by anonymous characters. However, in terms of punishments associated with bullying, the anonymous aspect of cyber bullying appeared to make it the most high-risk type. Cyber bullying was also the most high-risk type in terms of likelihood of appearing in anti-bullying themed episodes.

Notably, indirect bullying was found to be particularly high-risk in that it was more likely than cyber bullying to depict bullies as popular, but proved to be the least high-risk type of bullying (at least according to descriptive analysis) in terms of harm demonstrated to victims. Overall, due to its relatively low occurrence within the sample episodes (perhaps because indirect forms of bullying involve more complex storylines than other types), there were few significant findings related to indirect bullying. However, the mere fact that it was not often portrayed on teen television shows suggests that it may not be as concerning (in terms of long-term or repetitive negative effects) as the other types of bullying.

While these conclusions suggest that certain types of bullying are depicted more responsibly than others, we should be concerned about any type of bullying portrayal promoting messages that potentially encourage bullying behavior (e.g. bullying makes you “cool,” bullying helps you to fit in, or bullying is acceptable if the victim deserves it) or fail to discourage it (e.g. bullying is funny, bullying is harmless, and you can get away with bullying). Considering the potentially severe consequences of bullying, these messages could have extremely dangerous implications if internalized by potential bullies.

Connections to Media Violence Literature

Comparisons between the aforementioned findings and conclusions drawn from past television aggression content analyses suggest that patterns across bullying portrayals on teen television align with some TV aggression trends but are inconsistent with others. Representative of such comparisons, the current findings regarding the social status of bully and victim characters are only somewhat consistent with the existing media aggression literature. The trend of bullies across categories being popular or of indeterminable status contradicts media violence research indicating that perpetrators of verbal aggression (Potter & Warren, 1998) and physical aggression (Smith et al., 1998) are more often "bad guys" than "good guys." The results (particularly those related to physical bullying) are more consistent with studies suggesting that a substantial amount of perpetrators of physical aggression (particularly teens) possess some potentially attractive qualities (Smith et al., 1998; Wilson et al., 2002). Except for the case of physical bullying, the results of the present study (showing that acts of verbal, cyber, and indirect bullying portray victims as *not* unpopular or indeterminable more often than they portray them as unpopular) align with prior findings that victims of TV violence are portrayed as "good" characters or neutral characters with potentially attractive qualities more often than they are portrayed as "bad" characters (Smith et al., 1998). In sum, it seems that TV bullying is similar to general TV violence in its portrayal of relatable and likable victims, but somewhat divergent in terms of its depiction of likable/attractive aggressors. This difference in perpetrator depictions could mean

that viewers are more likely to learn from bully characters than from perpetrators of other violence.

In terms of motivations, the only motivation for bullying observed in the sample that could possibly be considered as justified was anger/retaliation, which accounted for only 22.1% (17) of physical acts, 19.6% (32) of verbal acts, 2.0% (2) of cyber acts, and 0.0% (0) of indirect acts. Therefore, the results of this study are consistent with prior findings that physical aggression on television is most often portrayed as unjustified (Smith et al., 1998), and verbal and physical aggression on teen-targeted programming are more likely to be depicted as unjustified than justified (Coyne & Archer, 2004). However, the present analysis contradicts findings that indirect aggression on teen programming is more likely to be portrayed as justified than unjustified (Coyne & Archer, 2004). The finding that bullying is most often motivated by anger/retaliation or personal gain/entertainment (when the motive is known) is also consistent with research suggesting that the most common motives for television violence are personal gain, anger, and protection of life (Smith et al., 1998). In sum, TV bullying seems to be similar to general TV aggression in terms of some of its most common motivations, but different in that across types of bullying, acts are generally more often unjustified than justified. In this sense, bullying depictions may be less high-risk than other violent depictions in that they are less likely to promote the message that aggression is acceptable.

The present analysis also found that bullying with a verbal element is more likely than cyber bullying, but not more likely than physical or indirect bullying, to be depicted as humorous. As mentioned in the previous section, this finding

somewhat differs from conclusions offered in the media violence literature, particularly Potter's (1999) contention that verbal aggression is perceived as "less serious" than physical violence (p. 80). As mentioned, this difference could be related to the fact that physical forms of bullying on TV seem to be less serious than other forms of media violence (i.e. rarely performed as a means of causing serious physical harm.) More generally, the finding that all types of bullying are more often portrayed as *not* humorous than humorous is consistent with prior research suggesting that humor is more likely to be absent than present in violent scenes (Smith et al., 1998). Therefore, it is possible that media bullying and media violence are somewhat similar in terms of their likelihood of portraying aggression as humorous and minimizing the severity of aggression.

Additionally, the finding that all types of portrayals of bullying are more likely to show bullying as unpunished rather than punished, is consistent with several media aggression studies indicating that physical aggression (Signorielli, 2003; Smith et al., 1998) and indirect aggression (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2008; Coyne & Archer, 2004) are more often shown as unpunished than punished. Thus, in terms of punishment to perpetrators, it appears that both general media violence and media bullying frequently promote the message that perpetrators get away with aggression.

Also in support of prior research, the finding that verbal bullying acts are typically performed by bullies acting alone is consistent with Tamborini et al.'s (2008) similar finding regarding wrestling shows targeting teen boys. This suggests that the trend might apply across multiple genres targeted toward teen audiences.

Furthermore, the current study found that non-physical bullying is more prevalent on teen television than physical bullying, which is consistent with prior findings that verbal and indirect aggression are more common on prime-time television than physical aggression (Glascock, 2008; Potter & Vaughan, 1997), and that teen dramas portray more non-physical bullying than physical bullying (Walsh, 2011). Related to this pattern (and to the fact that 90% (63) of acts of bullying with a physical element resulted in emotional harm), the present analysis confirmed the prediction that harm resulting from bullying is more likely to be emotional than physical.

Although there apparently are no studies comparing degree of harm across different types of aggression, prior content analyses have suggested that physical aggression is often portrayed with few or no consequences (Signorielli, 2003; Smith et al., 1998), while verbal aggression is shown without consequences approximately half of the time (Potter & Warren, 1998). The current study does not necessarily contradict these studies, but suggests that overall, bullying as a specific type of aggression may be more likely than general television aggression to depict harm to victims (although that harm might only be minor to moderate). After all, 90.4% (321) of all bullying acts (specifically 90.9% (70) of acts of bullying with a physical element, 85.9% (140) of verbal bullying acts, 85.7% (12) of indirect bullying acts, and 98.0% (99) of cyber bullying acts) depicted at least some type of physical or emotional harm. In contrast, a study of general television violence revealed that 33.0% (5,821) of violent interactions depicted no physical harm (Smith et al., 1998). (Notably, this study did not measure emotional harm, so it could have been involved

in some of these interactions.) This difference suggests that television bullying may be less high-risk than other forms of TV aggression in terms of promoting the message that aggression is harmless.

Perhaps related to this possible distinction between television bullying and general TV violence, the present finding that physical bullying appeared more often in anti-bullying episodes than in episodes without the theme differs from Smith et al.'s (1998) conclusion that only 3.0% of television episodes containing violence had an anti-violence theme. This difference could be related to the younger target audience of most teen television programs and a related sense of paternalistic responsibility felt by the programs' creators.

Also of note, the trend identified in the current study that third party characters are unlikely to intervene in any type of bullying is consistent with prior research on bullying as portrayed by teen dramas (Walsh, 2011). This pattern suggests that television may not reflect the real-world tendency proposed by Drabman and Thomas (1974) that children are more likely to intervene in aggression when it is physical in nature.

Physical Bullying vs. Physical Violence: Comparisons With the *NTVS*

As the high-risk factors of focus in the current study were based primarily on those studied in the *National Television Violence Study* (Smith et al, 1998), it seems relevant to specifically compare the current results (at least those related to physical bullying) with those identified in the *NTVS*. However, it is important to note that these studies were based on very different samples. The current study was based on two years of teen television programming (2010-2011), 387 episodes (82

of which contained bullying), and 77 acts of physical bullying. The *NTVS* focused on 20 composite weeks of programming (including all regularly programmed shows), 2,750 episodes (1,678 of which contained violence) and 17,638 violent interactions.¹⁷

As summarized in Table 10 (below), a descriptive analysis suggests that physical bullying is portrayed as more high-risk than general television violence in terms of depicting good/popular perpetrators and unpunished aggression, but less high-risk than TV violence in terms of showing justified violence, humorous violence, and appearing in an anti-bullying/anti-violence episode. The two studies revealed similar results in terms of portraying victims as bad/unpopular.

While these differences may reflect differences between television bullying and general television violence, they could also reflect changes in media aggression portrayals over time (as the two studies were completed more than a decade apart).

¹⁷ Religious programs, game shows, infomercials, instructional programs, sports shows, and news programs were excluded from the *NTVS* sample (Smith et al., 1998).

Table 10: High-Risk Factors of Physical Bullying vs. Physical Aggression

High-Risk Factor	Current Study (Teen TV, 2010-2010)	<i>National Television Violence Study</i> (Entertainment TV, 1996-1997)
Popular/Good Character	64.6%	28.0%
Unpopular/Bad Victim	31.2%	29.0%
Justification	22.1%	28.0%
Presence of Humor	30.4%	42.0%
Unpunished Aggression (rewarded or neither punished nor rewarded)	88.3%	71.0%
Anti-bullying/Anti- violence theme	55.8%	3.0%

Note: Degree of harm was not included in this comparison because it was measured significantly differently in each study. *NTVS* accounted for physical injury only and used a 4-point scale, while the current study factored in both physical and emotional harm and used a 5-point scale.

Implications for Future Research

In addition to pointing to the relative risk of harm associated with depictions of different types of bullying, the present content analysis also revealed several ways in which TV bullying portrayals might diverge from media depictions of other forms of aggression (as observed in prior research). In some ways, media bullying may be more likely than other forms of media aggression to negatively affect viewers. For example, the unexpected presence of humor within physical bullying portrayals (often those performed in order to entertain the self or others) suggests that media bullying (at least its physical forms) may be portrayed in a less serious manner than depictions of other forms of aggression. Related to the “entertaining” characteristic of physical bullying on teen television, the results suggest that physical bullying might differ from other forms of media aggression in that it is less

likely to result in (or intend to result in) enduring and visible *physical* harm.

Additionally, the findings suggest that TV bullying depicts more likable aggressors than television violence in general (which typically has “bad guys” performing violence).

In contrast, the current analysis revealed several ways in which television bullying may pose less of a risk of negative effects than other forms of TV violence. For example, the majority of bullying depictions were portrayed as unjustified and having consequences (whereas general media aggression seems to be more varied concerning these contextual factors). Additionally, bullying was more likely to appear in anti-bullying episodes than violence has been reported to appear in anti-violence episodes.

These potential distinctions between television bullying and other forms of television aggression underline the need for additional media research focused specifically on bullying as a distinct form of aggression. As mentioned, it is possible that some of the aforementioned distinctions are related not to differences between bullying depictions and portrayals of other types of aggression, but to changes in TV aggression over time. This possibility highlights the need for updated content analyses of violence and aggression on television (and in other media).

Study Limitations

This content analysis has several limitations. First, due to the relatively low number (14) of indirect acts of bullying across the sample, there were many instances when categories had to be collapsed prior to statistical analysis. Though necessary, this step in the analyses could have prevented them from revealing some

more nuanced (and perhaps more revealing) results. Additionally, this study focused only on a specific subset of the television content to which teen viewers are exposed. It excluded several types of content viewed by the teen population, such as cartoons and reality television, that may also depict bullying (Nielsen Company, 2009). In the future, an analysis of such programming should be conducted in order to get a more complete picture of what television teaches viewers about bullying. As mentioned, another important consideration is the fact that a substantial amount of the acts of bullying in the sample appeared in episodes of *Pretty Little Liars*. Future research might prevent this issue by randomly selecting an equal amount of bullying episodes from different series or different types of teen shows (e.g. comedies, dramas) to create a more varied sample. (However, the initial pool of episodes would likely need to span a longer time period in order to produce an adequate number of bullying acts).

While limiting coding to a very specific definition of bullying was helpful in distinguishing television bullying from other types of TV violence, this narrow operationalization excluded other common types of teen aggression, particularly those associated with the “frenemy” phenomenon (supposed “friends” that act aggressively or competitively toward one another). Future research investigating portrayals of aggression between “frenemies” would make an important contribution to the literature surrounding aggression on teen television.

The specific goal of this study was to explore contextual elements of bullying depictions that may make them more or less likely to negatively influence teen viewers. Related to this goal, it is important to note that the researcher can only

make inferences about the potential effects of bullying portrayals. While the analysis draws on widely respected and tested media effects theories, such concepts are largely based on experiments related to media portrayals of physical violence. Thus, it cannot be assumed that they can accurately predict how viewers will be affected by mediated forms of cyber, verbal, and indirect aggression, or more generally, by portrayals of bullying as a unique form of aggression. This thesis does not take the next step to test the effects of these portrayals experimentally, but lays the groundwork for imperative future studies that should do so.

Regardless of differences found across bullying types, the present study suggests that young viewers who watch current teen-oriented television shows are frequently exposed to some concerning messages about bullying: that it is what popular kids do to “losers,” that it is often done “for fun,” that it is sometimes deserved by the victim, that it is rarely punished, that it is sometimes funny, that it is fairly harmless, and that it is not something in which a third party should intervene. In light of the potentially appalling outcomes of bullying, it is crucial that we gain an understanding of how these messages influence teens’ attitudes toward bullying and likelihood of performing bullying behavior.

CHAPTER 6

ONLINE FANDOM: PARTICIPATION AND PRACTICES

Background

The content analysis of the portrayal of bullying on teen television provided a snapshot of the messages teens are likely to receive while watching their favorite shows. However, while the media violence literature demonstrates the potential effects of these messages, it does not explain how teen viewers are actively interpreting them. Therefore, an analysis of viewers' reactions to these portrayals seems worthwhile.

As reviewed in chapter 2, research suggests that media content is more likely to affect viewers with high levels of exposure and a strong identification with characters. Therefore, dedicated fans of a given media text comprise an audience subset that is particularly relevant to researchers studying the reception of that text. With that said, this study aimed to complement the content analysis with an analysis of fan responses to bullying portrayals as posted within an online fan forum (see chapter 7 for a review of the rationale behind this methodology).

Complicating the process of reception studies, numerous scholars have emphasized how the evolving media landscape has altered practices of media consumption and more specifically, practices of fandom (e.g. Jenkins, 2006a; Hills, 2002). Consequently, they have called for new approaches in the media studies field that account for these changes (e.g. Booth, 2010; Gray, 2008). Additionally, an abundance of scholarship has highlighted the fact that TV texts are not consumed in isolation, but within a network of multiple intertexts, some of which include fan

discourse (e.g. Brooker, 2004; Ross, 2008b). This research emphasizes that in addition to providing a glimpse of how fans are interpreting portrayals of bullying on TV, an analysis of fan forum discussions will also provide a sample of the fan-produced messages that contribute to the larger intertextual network surrounding a TV show text.

This chapter will review the literature on these topics, particularly as it pertains to online fan practices, the convergence of traditional media content (e.g. television texts) and online fandom, and the analysis of online fan communities and the texts they produce/circulate.

What is "Fandom?"

Many theoretical discussions surrounding online texts (or intertexts) related to television programming have emphasized how these texts are consumed and produced by a specific subset of viewers—fans. Originating well before the widespread adoption of the Internet and online communities, academic interest in media fandom had its roots in the 1980s, with reception studies such as Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*, and then exploded in the early 1990s when Jenkins (1992) published *Textual Poachers*. Jenkins' ethnographic account of fan cultures consisting of "an amorphous but still identifiable grouping of enthusiasts of film and television" examined fandom as a mode of reception, a vehicle for viewer activism, an interpretive and social community, and a form of cultural production (p.1). Jenkins' seminal works surrounding fandom and fan culture inspired a response from the next generation of fandom scholarship, represented by theorists like Hills. Within his comprehensive work, *Fan Cultures*, Hills (2002) reviewed and critiqued

various conceptualizations of fans within cultural theory and opened up the discussion of how "new media" technologies provide opportunities for "new fandom" that require the consideration of "new theoretical approaches" (p. 135).

As Hills (2002) emphasized, "Everybody knows what a 'fan' is" (p. ix). Within U.S. culture, "fans" are generally considered to be those audience members who are particularly and routinely involved with, committed to, and exceptionally knowledgeable about a given media object or celebrity, and who, together with other fans, comprise the phenomenon known as "fandom." However, according to Hills, within academia, "defining fandom has been no easy task, despite (or perhaps because of) the 'everydayness' of the term" (p. ix). He described how several scholars have attempted to conceptualize fans by distinguishing them from other groups of media consumers. For example, Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) distinguished between "followers" and "fans" (with fans more involved than followers), while Brooker and Brooker (1996) distinguished between "fans" and "cult fans" (with cult fans more committed, knowledgeable, and community-oriented than other fans).

Acknowledging the diversity of definitions related to the concepts of "fan" and "fandom," particularly in the realm of academia, Rebaza (2009) conducted an online survey (posted to several online sites related to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*) to explore how self-proclaimed "fans" described their own practices.¹⁸ As opposed to providing a "'one-size-fits-all' definition of a 'fan,'" the results from more than 1600 respondents illustrated "a continuum of fannish involvement" (Rebaza, p.

¹⁸ Rebaza (2009) discussed the methodological limitations of posting the survey to online fan sites, acknowledging that this approach necessarily excluded "fans" who were not social (at least in the online universe) about their fan practices.

169). While the study did not reveal a clear definition of "fan," it pointed to something potentially more important and relevant to researchers— the acknowledgment of the *diversity* of fans, both across and within a particular group/fandom. Based on her findings, Rebaza called for a more specific definition of fandom that instead of including *all* fans of a given object, "encompasses only those who are at least aware of and interested in the behavior and exchanges of other fans" (p. 169). She asserted that such a definition would "more closely reflect a fannish continuum, where a given person might be a 'fan' of some things in isolation or to a less involved degree, and would be a member of a 'fandom' when involved in a deeper or more communal manner to a fannish object" (Rebaza, p. 169).

Based on this continuum-oriented definition of fandom, the term "online fandom" would describe those fans who (compelled by various reasons that scholars continue to explore) take that extra step, or in the words of Kirby-Diaz (2009b), "cross the border" by participating in online fan groups or communities (p. 65). The online opportunities for fan participation take several forms, ranging from chat rooms, to message boards or forums, to the exchange of fan fiction videos or artwork. These forms of communication each have their own distinguishing features. For example, chat rooms enable live, real-time exchanges, while forums or message boards allow for asynchronous correspondence. In threaded boards, conversations are regulated and organized by topic, while in linear forums, conversations are grouped "according to people who want to talk to each other"

(Ali, 2009b, p. 102).¹⁹ Furthermore, within each type of fan group or community, fans engage in different levels of participation. Welsler, Gleave, Fischer and Smith (2007) categorized these participation levels or "social roles" into three main groups. Based on a study of approximately 6,000 messages posted to three different newsgroups, the authors suggested that "answer people" were those who responded frequently to but never initiated conversations, "discussion people" were those who responded to and initiated conversation, and "lurkers" (who made up the majority of participants) were those who read conversations but never posted.

Important to a textual analysis of online fan discourse, these definitions and categories demonstrate the importance of considering the representativeness of postings in an online fan forum. Such a sample is not only limited to fans falling on the fandom end of the "fannish continuum," but may also fail to reflect the opinions of the silent majority within that forum—the lurkers. In other words, a textual analysis of message board postings likely emphasizes the opinions of the most involved and vocal fan participants.

Fandom: Then and Now

Online communities provide some clear demonstrations of different levels of fan activity, as they exist today. However, it is important to consider that fandom, along with the discourse and relationships it promotes, has existed for decades, in forms ranging from fan magazines to national conventions. While offline and online fandom are rooted in the same concept or continuum, research has shown that the Internet has complicated, and in some ways, intensified the practices of television

¹⁹ Ali (2009b) argued that linear forums promote more flexible interactions, and in turn, more "genuine" online communities (p. 102).

fans and the texts they produce. Several new media scholars have reflected on the changing face of fandom (and teen fandom) in the digital age.

Facilitating Communal Viewing Experiences

At the most basic level, the Internet has made it easier for fans all along the "fannish continuum" to do what they have always done—talk with others about their favorite media. As opposed to consuming television in complete isolation, viewers have always tended to discuss what they watch with friends, family or colleagues. Now, new media technologies give viewers even more channels through which they can communicate with one another. In his study of a *Survivor* spoiler community, Jenkins (2006a) described more specifically how media convergence has facilitated "communal, rather than individualistic, modes of reception" (p. 26). As Jenkins explained, "For most of us, television provides fodder for so-called water cooler conversations. And, for a growing number of people, the water cooler has gone digital" (p. 26).

In her discussion of teen television fans, Ross (2008a) pointed to a similar trend among young viewers, explaining that "social networking has long been a part of teen and youth media culture —be it in the malt shop, the basement, the dorm room, the bedroom, or via discussion at school or on the phone" (p. 134). She argued that because the current generation of teens (i.e. the "Millennials") grew up in a "multimedia *and* multi-medium culture" in which the boundaries between television, film, and the Internet were relatively "non-existent," they naturally incorporated digital technology into their social networking and fandom routines (Ross, p. 135).

From Marginal to Mainstream

In addition to pointing to the role of technology in facilitating communal viewing practices, theorists have also drawn attention to the idea that new technology has made fandom a more mainstream phenomenon. For example, reflecting on the differences between his early work on fan culture and his more current observations, Jenkins (2006b) explained how the level of fan engagement once reserved to "fringe," "underground," or "rogue" viewers has recently become mainstream. He said, "The concept of the active audience, so controversial two decades ago, is now taken for granted by everyone involved in and around the media industry. New technologies are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" (Jenkins, p. 1). Echoing this notion, Brooker (2004) asserted:

The structures are there to enable an immersive, participatory engagement with the programme that crosses multiple media platforms and invites active contribution; not only from fans, who after all have been engaged in participatory culture around their favoured texts for decades, but also as part of the regular, 'mainstream' viewing experience. (p. 579)

In addition to claiming that new technologies allow and encourage the "average" viewer to participate in fan culture (leading to a larger percentage of fans populating the social and participatory end of the "fannish continuum"), researchers have also argued that the new media environment has led to a wider range of shows attracting online fandom. Along these lines, Ross (2008a) shared her observation that following the online fan phenomena related to cult shows such as *The X-Files*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, "more 'mainstream' TV series...were emerging with equally impressive online fan bases" (p. 3). She argued

that "visiting online sites linked to TV series, among other activities typically associated with 'the fan,' is becoming an increasingly common activity for 'regular viewers'" (Ross, p. 4).

Hills (2004a), who has conducted extensive research surrounding fan culture and cult culture, explained that "by making it easier for fans to contact other like-minded devotees, the web increases the possibility of small-scale organised fandoms emerging around a wider variety of TV shows" (p. 519). Cautious of assigning cult status to mainstream shows, Hills adopted the term "mainstream cult" to describe shows, such as *Dawson's Creek*, which promoted an "active, online fan culture and [carried] textual and intertextual markers of quality TV *without* necessarily being inserted into the 'intertextual network' of texts that are described by fans - and in secondary texts (fanzines, publicity) - as 'cult'" (p. 55).

In the face of these evolving and expanding practices of fandom, the definition of what currently constitutes "cult TV" continues to be contested, and the idea that more TV shows are gaining cult status remains controversial (see Hills, 2004b). However, a notion upon which scholars seem to agree is that, whether successful or not, TV producers and writers of today have increased their attempts to achieve cult status and the economic potential that accompanies it. As Kirby-Diaz (2009a) summarized, "Today, television shows actively seek out genre/cult status. They *want* those fans...who are engaged, committed, and ready to invest time and money in their series-related merchandise" (p. 23). This is particularly true in the realm of teen television in which many shows purposefully straddle the line between the commercial, popular, "low-brow" culture associated with soap operas,

and the marginal, quality, "high brow" culture associated with cult television (Ross & Stein, 2008, p. 7-8). (Some of the studies discussed in the next section explore how successful this strategy seems to be with teen consumers.)

Overall, the transition of fandom from marginalized toward mainstream suggests that analyzing the discourse within online fan communities (particularly teen communities) may in fact provide a glimpse of how "average" fans are responding to television content. However, it is important to remember that the mainstreaming of fandom does not necessarily translate to the mainstreaming of reception or interpretation. As Pullen (2000) has cautioned, "Though the internet may have begun to mainstream fandom, it has not necessarily created a single, unified fan position or practice" (p. 60).

Expanding and Accelerating Fandom

In addition to commenting on the transition of fandom from an exclusive to mainstream concept, scholars have also discussed how the Internet has changed fan practices in terms of both time and space. Hills (2002), for example, emphasized how digital technology has increased the speed of communication among fans. He described how the fans of today have the ability to respond immediately to live television content (whether it's at the end of the show or during commercial breaks), resulting in what he called "just in time fandom" (Hills, p. 78-79). As Jenkins (2006b) pointed out, in addition to increasing the rate of fan communication, the Internet has also increased the frequency of fan communication. Prior to the Internet, large groups of fans could only get together a few times a year at

conventions or meetings. In the digital age, fans can interact as frequently as they choose.

In relation to space, the Internet has created opportunities for fans from across the globe to interact with one another. Moreover, it has allowed fans to interact with other fans who live in a relatively close proximity, but with whom they would not normally interact. As Jenkins (2006b) explained, this has led to online discussions in which the participants have divergent "taken-for-granted interpretive and evaluative norms," and thus, extremely different responses to content (p. 142). While these discussions can result in fans' exploring the reasoning behind various interpretations, it can also result in "flame wars" and/or the formation of smaller groups and more private discussions.²⁰ Alternatively, in communities that encourage respect and friendliness, these situations can result in the stifling of unpopular interpretations. As Baym (1999) suggested in her analysis of an online soap opera community, even when there appears to be a consensus in opinion among a group, it may actually be the interpretation of a few funny, well-known, or well-liked posters. In line with Noelle-Nuemann's (1974) spiral of silence theory, Baym explained that whether intended or not, this perceived "majority" interpretation can lead to the silencing of opposing or differing opinions held by non-dominant community members.

Jenkins (2006b) discussed some of the other potential implications of these temporal and spatial shifts in fandom. He suggested that the ability to connect with

²⁰ A flame war is an argument (related to differing opinions on a topic) of escalating intensity or hostility that takes place in an online discussion group or forum.

other devotees around the world (especially for those in remote places), as well as the possibility of more frequent interactions, might lead to fans feeling accepted and more strongly connected. However, he also pointed out that as the number of members within a community increases, the more likely existing members are to feel lost and alienated and lose their sense of a personal connection to the group. Thus, in the case of online communities, bigger is not always better.

Combined, the literature surrounding the temporal and spatial dimensions of online fandom suggests that the analysis of fan forum posts has the potential to reveal immediate, natural responses to television content from fans who represent a variety of locations and perspectives. However, it also highlights the possibility that posts from a single discussion group may not capture all the different interpretations among forum members.

The Intertextuality and Reciprocity of Fandom

Two important and richly theorized elements of fandom are the intertextuality it produces or circulates and the relationships it fosters between audiences and creators. Recently, theorists have discussed how the new media landscape has changed these aspects of fan culture.

In his book, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins (2006a) reviewed the cultural, economic and technological forces at play in what he called "an era of media convergence, collective intelligence, and participatory culture" (p. 170). Highlighting the changing roles of and relationships between audiences and the media industry, Jenkins emphasized how convergence has

changed the processes behind the production and consumption of media content.²¹ In terms of production, he suggested that media companies have learned to "accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden markets, and reinforce viewer commitments" (Jenkins, p. 18). Referring to the impact of convergence on consumption practices, he explained, "...fans of a popular television series may sample dialogue, summarize episodes, debate subtexts, create original fan fiction, record their own soundtracks, make their own movies—and distribute all of this worldwide via the Internet" (Jenkins, p. 16).

Jenkins (2006a) described how these changing practices have complicated the relationship between creators and audiences. While some fan activities (especially top-down participation directly promoted by a show) align with the interests of television creators, other fan activities (such as bottom-up, grassroots communities) pose a threat to corporate control. Jenkins' analysis of an online *Survivor* spoiler community provided an example of the latter type of fan activity and a situation in which the interests of producers and fans conflict.

Related to Jenkins' (2006a) assertion that convergence has led to changing media consumption practices, several scholars have focused on how the products of these new practices, appearing within websites, blogs, message boards, fan forums, and fan communities, function as supplementary texts (or intertexts) that extend the television viewing experience. Brooker (2004), for example, used the term

²¹ Notably, Jenkins differentiated between the concepts of media convergence (i.e. the cross-platform promotions organized by producers) and cultural convergence (i.e. the creative ways that consumers use or "poach" multiple media forms) (see Jenkins, 1992).

"overflow" to describe how "the text of the TV show is no longer limited to the television medium" (p. 569). Describing his own extended experience with the BBC2 series, *Attachments* via related websites, forums, and quizzes, Brooker said that he had become more than just a "bewildered observer"—he had become "part of the broader text" (p. 569). As it seemed that an increasing number of viewers were encountering similar "overflow" experiences, he suggested that it is due time for scholars to "reconsider what it means to engage with a television programme" (Brooker, p. 569).

Applying Brooker's (2004) concept of "overflow" to the television show, *Lost*, Gray (2008) illustrated the many challenges that overflow, synergy, and expansion pose to media analysts and critics. He noted how it has become increasingly difficult to "pin down exactly what and where the program we are studying is," and how "we are likely to find it only reflected off the audiences who consume it, and off its various instances of overflow" (Gray, p. 100-101). Gray explained that contemporary media studies must not begin and end with the primary text. Rather, he argued that as "overflow" elements (e.g. online sites) open up opportunities for identification, play, engagement, and reinterpretation, "a closer analysis of overflow, and its subtle or overt acts of reconfiguring a program, will be a particularly helpful tool for the future study of television" (Gray, p. 101).

Reaffirming this call for new directions within the media studies field, Booth (2010) discussed examples of digital fandom in order to "demonstrate the necessity for a change in scholarship of New Media" (p. 28). He called on broader theories, such as Barthes' (1986) distinctions between "work" (as tangible and complete) and

"text" (as ongoing relationships and activities) and Bakhtin's (1968) notion of the carnivalesque (activity in which social hierarchies are overturned and collectivity and anonymity are emphasized) to demonstrate how online fan discourses surrounding television shows function as both intertexts and intra-texts. Booth challenged the idea of a TV show as a single, isolated text, explaining "...it's not just individual texts that hold meaning, but also vast intertextual networks of connected texts—some of which can be fan created in themselves" (p. 34). Although he focused specifically on works of fan fiction, Booth's conceptualization of the complex web of meanings and texts that make up the new media landscape points to the relevance of examining all types of fan discourse, including message boards and fan forums.

Further complicating this theory of the network of meanings and interactions surrounding TV texts, Ross (2008b) incorporated the reciprocal relationships between audiences and industry, and referred to the resulting web of connections as "aesthetics of multiplicity" (p. 22). She described how the relationships between viewers and TV creators are constantly shifting; viewers may consume, discuss, critique, or remix texts (and intertexts), and creators may respond directly or indirectly within episodes, or through "overt," "organic," or "obscured" invitations²² for viewers to continue their participation, engagement and extension of the text (Ross, p. 8-9). According to Ross, as these interactions and texts continue to multiply (e.g. one Internet site links to another site where one board post leads to three

²² "Overt" invitations involve obvious promotion of audience participation (e.g. asking for *American Idol* votes), "organic" invitations are based on assumptions that "tele-participation" is already a part of the viewing experience (e.g. *Degrassi* interstitials that mimic text messaging), and "obscured" invitations involve "messy" narratives that demand viewer collaboration to unravel (e.g. clues provided in *Lost* about connections between character back stories) (Ross, 2008a, p. 8-9).

different threads, etc.), "the 'text' proper of the TV series becomes inextricable from the text of the Internet site" and "the text and the creators and the viewers become inseparable from each other" (p. 22).

In sum, concepts such as convergence, overflow, and aesthetics of multiplicity demonstrate why television should not be studied as an isolated text, but rather as one text within an extensive intertextual network. These theoretical frameworks also highlight the increasing relevance and pervasiveness of online fandom, particularly as it relates to television content. Taken as a whole, they point to the value of analyzing online fan discourse alongside television texts.

Studies of Online Fandom

Complementing the ongoing theorization of online fandom, researchers have conducted in-depth research focused on online fan groups and activities (e.g. message boards, chat rooms, and blogs) related to specific television series in order to gain a more detailed understanding of their function, structure, content, and members. Through a variety of methods, including ethnography, interviews, surveys, and textual and discourse analysis of postings and messages, these studies have revealed key insights on the uniqueness of individual fan communities as well as the similarities across them.

A great deal of this research has explored the motivations behind online fandom. Particularly, scholars have studied the reasons why fans join groups and continue to participate in them. Jenkins (2006b), for example, conducted an ethnography of the *Twin Peaks* Usenet discussion group, alt.tv.twinpeaks in order to explore participants' reasons for joining the group as well as their reading and

interpretative practices. Notably, Jenkins defended the appropriateness of his method by emphasizing its similarity with traditional forms of ethnography, which engage with pre-existing cultural groups in their natural everyday lives. He asserted, "Here the computer net groups allow us to observe a self-defined and ongoing interpretive community as it conducts its normal practices...These discussions occur without direct control or intervention by the researcher" (Jenkins, p. 118).

Through his observation of the discussion group during the second season of *Twin Peaks* (Fall, 1990), Jenkins (2006b) discovered that some of the group's common practices included the sharing of series-related updates and media (e.g. summaries of narrative events, sound bites and quotes), the posting of information about the series' stars and directors (e.g. biographies and appearances), and the arranging of videotape exchanges (in the case that members missed a live episode). He found that the majority of the activity centered on the mission of "cracking the code" or identifying suspects related to a murder mystery within the show's narrative. In other words, the members' main motivation for participating was to take advantage of their collective intelligence. Although Jenkins acknowledged that this motivation was tied to the genre of the television series (as a mystery), he insisted that the program was "open to alternative readings" (p. 126). More specifically, he explained that many female fans of the show were mainly interested in discussing the evolving relationships between the characters. In sum, his research suggests that the functions and interpretative practices within a fan community relate not only to the show's generic content, but also to the needs of the specific audience subgroups (e.g. male viewers vs. female viewers) within that community.

Similar to Jenkins, Ali (2009a, 2009b) sought to identify the link between a television series, its online community, and its members. With that goal in mind, he conducted an extensive ethnography (including participant observation and interviews) of the Bronze, the official online community dedicated to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In terms of the link between the series and the community, he found that similar to the *Buffy* series, the Bronze community promoted a "postmodern view of society" (Ali, 2009a, p. 119). Ali argued that because the show "challenges the audience to question accepted norms, it encourages thoughtful, critical, and lengthy discussion" within a unique type of community that "resists stagnation" (p. 121). Additionally, he concluded that the appeal of the community was that it brought together people who identified with marginalization, and made them feel included. According to Ali (2009a), many members shared the idea, "...if we're all outcasts, it behooves us to be inclusive" (p. 124). The inclusive and close-knit nature of the Bronze community fostered long-lasting friendships that eventually evolved into offline relationships. This study demonstrated another example of an online fan community that functioned in a distinctive way based on both the content of the show/genre on which it focused and on the needs and motivations of its members.

Baym (1999) also discovered how genre and member motivations influence the practices and interpersonal dynamics of online fan forums through her ethnography of the soap opera Usenet newsgroup, rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s), which consisted of participant observation, textual analysis of posts, and online surveys. Baym's observations challenged the soap opera fan stereotype of the "fat, pathetic [housewife] eating bon-bons" (p. 42) who is "thinking impaired" (p. 64) and

watching to live out her romantic "rescue fantasies" (p. 65). She found that the members of the community included many hardworking professionals and students, some of whom were male, who watched their soaps with a very critical and evaluative eye.

Baym (1999) observed that the main purpose of the online fan group was to "maximize interpretations" (p. 210). Her textual analysis revealed that the most common practices within the online community were both interpretive (personalization, character interpretation, and speculation/prediction) and informative (updates, spoilers, trivia, and sightings). Baym asserted that as practices such as personalization inevitably led to members "sharing their worldviews and, more or less explicitly, sharing themselves" (p. 71), they necessitated the building of a particular type of community that was "open, supportive, and trusting" (p. 210). This environment fostered the formation of strong and genuine friendships among the members. Overall, Baym concluded that a great deal of what happens within the r.a.t.s. community "stems from the distinctive features of soap operas, in particular their reflection of socioemotional life, focus on female protagonists, and multiplicity of characters and interpretations," as well as the motivations of members who are interested in "relationships, talk, and emotion" (p. 210).

Related to Baym's (1999) conclusions about the interpersonal dynamics within the r.a.t.s. community and Ali's (2009a) findings about the uniqueness of the Bronze community, researchers have questioned the assumption that all online fan groups are necessarily communities. In turn, they have studied particular online fan

groups in order to explore the presence or absence of elements that would classify them as true "communities."

Focusing on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as well as its spin-off series, *Angel*, Kirby-Diaz (2009a) studied 17 virtual communities (fan boards or fan forums) within the "Buffyverse" to determine if they were "true communities" (p. 18). Borrowing from definitions of community provided by sociology theorists, such as Durkheim and Simmel, she defined a virtual community as "a non-geographic, non-territorial place where strangers meet and talk and become friends" (Kirby-Diaz, p. 23). In order to determine how closely each community came to this definition, she operationalized a true "virtcom" as a forum in which members discussed personal topics of importance to them (in addition to topics related to *Buffy*) and in which the average posts per member (or "citizen") exceeded 100.

In terms of post frequency, only 5 of the 17 forums met Kirby-Diaz's (2009a) definition of a true virtcom. In terms of topics, she found that across the communities, the most popular topics included storylines, anticipated changes in the *Angel* series, and the addition or deletion of major characters. However, she observed that only within one of the communities, the Soulful Spike Society, did members go "off-topic" (Kirby-Diaz, p. 37). Within this community, in addition to conversations about characters and plots, fans discussed their work, fears, dreams, families, and friends; they "supported, nurtured, and encouraged" one another (Kirby-Diaz, p. 37). Based on these observations, Kirby-Diaz concluded that "despite its rarity, the true virtual community does exist online" (p. 38).

The aforementioned studies highlight the notion that online fan communities focused on television shows can perform several different functions for their members. These functions depend largely on the genre and content of the television series of focus, as well as the particular needs of the community members. Depending on the interpersonal dynamics within a group, the community can promote the sharing of personal experiences and their relationship to the text. Considering these findings, it is likely that communities dedicated to teen television programs share distinct practices related to both the genre of "teen TV" and the members of the group (who, depending on the community, may be teens or fans of other ages). These practices may facilitate and promote discussion about how the show's content relates to viewers' personal lives. Such discussions surrounding bullying portrayals could reveal important insights about the way viewers are responding to and interpreting these TV messages. Offering some clarity on these matters, several researchers have studied online communities dedicated to teen television in order to explore the functions of these communities for teen viewers.

Studies of Teen Online Fandom

Complementing the wealth of research focused on online fan communities, several scholars have explored the online fandom surrounding the teen drama genre that emerged in the 1990s. Some of the earliest studies focused on fan reception of the web-based strategies surrounding *Dawson's Creek*.

Brooker (2004), for example, surveyed 27 American teen viewers and 40 British teen viewers about their experiences on the official *Dawson's Creek* home page. He described how through the main site (and microsites such as capeside.net),

the show's creators had constructed *Dawson's Creek* as "an ongoing experience" (Brooker, p. 573). According to Brooker, after watching an episode on television, viewers were invited to "watch the show...on video, join the bulletin board discussion...go shopping for a blouse like Jen's, buy the song that was playing when Joey kissed Pacey, even write [their] own alternative ending and share it on a fan site" (p. 573). Through the survey, Brooker found that only 5 out of 40 British viewers and roughly a third of the American viewers used the *Dawson's Creek* site. While the majority of these respondents said they went to the site to find pictures, lyrics, and updates, only one mentioned using the site to discuss the show on message boards. Overall, Brooker concluded that most viewers were not fully engaged in the *Dawson's Creek* experience set up by the site, which in his opinion suggested that such websites were "very much of secondary importance to the show itself, rather than on an equal level" (p. 577). While he emphasized that the fans' experiences represented a "significant change in the ways viewers experience television," he cautioned researchers to "be careful not to take 'fans' as equivalent to the less active but far larger group of 'viewers'" (Brooker p. 578).

While the pervasiveness of online teen fandom was questionable at the start, even early studies suggested that when teens *were* engaging with other fans online, their conversations were personal, meaningful, and interpretive. Murray (2000), for example, studied the online discussions of a small group of female, teen *My So-Called Life* fans "who consistently and emotionally voiced the importance of the text's proximity to their own lives in their on-line writing" (p. 222). She concluded that because of these communal fan practices, "*MSCL* and its narrative trajectories

became not simply entertainment, an education on social issues, or fantasy fulfillment for this group of teen girls, but rather an investment in an individual and communal understanding of teenage girl identity" (Murray, p. 222). Murray proposed that the meanings created through the "intermingling" of the show's text and the fans' personal lives were particularly "poignant" for these teen girls, as they were grappling with their identities as both females and teenagers (p. 230-231).

More recently, Gillan (2008) drew similar conclusions in her study of online fan responses to *Veronica Mars*. Within a broader analysis focused on fan discourse surrounding the show's focus on fashion, Gillan observed that beyond the industry-driven chatter surrounding purses and shoes, the female fans were "poaching" (in the words of Jenkins [1992]) the text in their own unique ways and using their discussions to make emotional connections with one another. She concluded that in addition to creating a space for fans to discuss themes of social differences and class, *Veronica Mars* forums "also functioned as springboards for discussions among fans about their negotiation of a host of identity issues, often in relation to adolescence, peer pressure, cultural norms, and gender expectations or stereotypes" (p. 191).

In revealing how teen girls utilize fan communities as a forum to discuss issues related to their identity formation, the studies by Murray (2000) and Gillan (2008) underline the potential for portrayals of bullying to elicit fan discourse about their personal experiences, identities, and opinions about gender stereotypes as they connect to bullying.

In contrast to Brooker's (2004) conclusions about the limited success of early attempts by teen television creators to promote online fan participation, several

recent studies have highlighted the increasing pervasiveness of online fandom among teen television viewers.

Ross (2008a), for example, explored the complex relationship between TV producers and fans resulting from the increasing overlap between television viewing and the Internet. In order to understand both the industry and consumer perspectives, she conducted interviews with industry professionals and administered a consumer survey about television viewing and Internet activities (both online and among undergraduate students). Within her larger research project, she focused on the multimedia experiences surrounding a teen drama, *The O.C.*

Ross (2008a) found that *The O.C.* developed an online fan following quickly after its debut in 2002. Her data from both audiences and the show's producers pointed to the cross-platform viewing experience common among the show's young fans. Ross highlighted a survey response from a 16-year-old viewer who described what Ross referred to as a "Millennial way of watching" the show:

I watch *The O.C.* by myself and sometimes, the next day, I will discuss the show with my friends. Sometimes I will write about *The O.C.* in my online journal and sometimes I will go to *The O.C.* forums and chat about the show there. I like to discuss what is going to happen next and who is the hottest on the show. (as quoted in Ross, p. 140)

In Ross' (2008a) interviews with Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz, the *O.C.* producers acknowledged this trend. As Savage explained, "We understand now the culture of writing on boards – the degree to which the Internet has been integrated into life. Now you don't just watch the show – you watch the show, you read the boards, you post" (as quoted in Ross, p. 140). However, the producers also

stressed that they believed young viewers still watched the shows in traditional ways encouraged by serial narratives, such as identifying with characters and their experiences with common "teen issues." As Schwartz said, "With this [show] [viewers] become engaged in longer ongoing storylines, and the characters and their decisions become more real" (as quoted in Ross, p. 142).

In a related study, Ross (2008b) explored how The N network (now TeenNick) acknowledges the growing connection between teens, TV, and the Internet through its branding strategy that "immerses [the network and its shows], and thus their target viewers, in a digital communication environment that assumes teens and young adults are conversant in Internet and texting protocols" (p. 61-62). She found that the strategy was particularly successful in stimulating the multimedia involvement of fans. Concerning the network's landmark series, *Degrassi: The Next Generation (DTNG)*, Ross concluded that the multimedia strategy of the network and show's focus on diverse, multicultural perspectives resulted in the frequent and deeply involved online participation of young viewers. She explained that *DTNG* fans "can be found online discussing the diverse community events of the show [and] mirroring the exchange of perspectives that occurs within the series as they offer their own opinions" (Ross, p. 68). Notably, Ross described how online discussions about events within the show's plot often triggered more general conversations and questions about sensitive topics such as pregnancy, drug use, gay sexuality, and STDs. Anticipating these questions, the N network provided informational links and quizzes on these topics on their website. In sum, then, Ross' (2008a, 2008b) research points to the increasing likelihood of teen viewers using

online fan forums to discuss TV characters' experiences with "teen issues" such as bullying.

Overall, the aforementioned studies on teen online fandom support the worthiness of studying the online reception of bullying depictions on teen television. They highlight how teen television has become an increasingly multimedia experience, to the point where industry professionals are assuming that their viewers are consuming shows within a larger digital environment. These studies also suggest that online fan forums focused on teen TV encourage debate and conversation about subjects of important in teens' lives, and often result in teen viewers sharing their personal experiences surrounding those topics. These conversations are arguably as important as the text of the shows themselves, as they become part of the intertextual networks described by theorists.

CHAPTER 7

FAN RESPONSES TO BULLYING ON *GLEE*: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Textual Analysis as a Complement to Content Analysis

As reviewed in chapter 6, an abundance of research points to the relevance of studying online fan discourse as an important intertext within the network of connected texts surrounding television content. The literature also describes how teen fans often use fan forums as a place to share and discuss their interpretations of characters' experiences with "teen issues," and in the process of doing so, negotiate their sense of identity. With that said, the current study complements the previously discussed content analysis of bullying on teen television with a textual analysis of online fan responses to these portrayals of bullying. Although it is primarily a reception study, this analysis focuses on both messages and audiences, as the sample of fan responses serves as both an example of intertexts (read by other fans, alongside the TV text) and a representation of potential audience interpretations of bullying portrayals.

As emphasized throughout the preceding chapters, while unconventional, the combination of a quantitative content analysis of bullying portrayals on teen television and a qualitative textual analysis of online fan responses provides a useful entry point into the largely untouched topic of bullying and teen media. In analyzing trends across portrayals of physical, verbal, indirect, and cyber forms of bullying on recent teen TV shows, the content analysis provides a snapshot of the messages about bullying that teen viewers are most likely to consume, particularly those that media effects literature suggests are likely to negatively influence them. Pointing to

the prevalence of several high-risk factors, such as popular (attractive/likable) bully characters, unpunished bullying, and non-intervening third party characters, the content analysis underlines the importance of the discourse, intertexts, and reinterpretations associated with practices of fandom, as potential sources of alternative or critical messages.

Acknowledging that media portrayals of bullying are not always absorbed by teen viewers, accepted and unchallenged, the second portion of this thesis accounts for potential alternative readings and reinterpretations by a sample of viewers, who as committed and involved fans, are arguably representative of "active" viewers who pay close attention to and sometimes question the media messages they consume. By accounting for one of the many sources of intertexts in the greater media environment, a textual analysis of online responses to portrayals of bullying on teen dramas (as opposed to interviews or focus groups with fans) has several advantages. First, the textual analysis provides insight on how the convergence of traditional media (television) and new media (online forums), an experience that is becoming increasingly prevalent within teen culture, creates unique meaning for teen audiences. Second, considering the substantial memberships and consistent activity of online forums (including the Glee Forum), at least some of the analyzed fan posts are likely to have been viewed by many teen viewers. Therefore, in addition to representing fan interpretations and responses, these online comments comprise a set of additional, widely distributed messages about bullying. In sum, the second portion of this thesis conceptualizes online fandom according to three of the five dimensions of fan culture identified by Jenkins (1992): "its relationship to a

particular mode of reception," "its function as an interpretive community," and "its particular traditions of cultural production" (p. 1-2).

Before continuing, it is important to acknowledge an idea that is central to online fandom research. As Brooker (2004) phrased it, "Fans, we have to remember, are an active minority" (p. 579). In other words, their words and actions do not necessarily reflect those of the "average" viewer. Although this means that the sample is unlikely to be "representative" of the larger audience, it does not diminish or eliminate the value of gaining a better understanding of how some viewers are responding to and interpreting messages about bullying, and how their comments serve as intertexts that, support, challenge, or complicate the messages promoted by teen programs.

Sampling

This textual analysis focused on fan responses posted within the Glee Forum, a fan forum dedicated to *Glee*, one of the eleven shows included in the content analysis portion of this study. The analysis was limited to one fan community due to the fact that this research, as a reception study, broke new ground in the field of online fandom. (Prior ethnographic research in the area of teen online fandom has tended to focus on fan practices rather than fan discourse.) Thus, in addition to identifying trends among responses to bullying portrayals, the more general goal of the analysis was to get a sense of how fans respond to specific television texts within online forums. In the words of Kirby-Diaz (2009a) in her study of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* fan communities, such a goal can "be kept on track with a smaller, more intense observation as opposed to a larger, more diffuse observation" (p. 33). As a

source of exploratory data, the current analysis sets the groundwork for future research that identifies trends across fan communities dedicated to different teen television shows.

Glee was chosen as the series of focus due to its popularity, critical acclaim, and accolades (winning People's Choice and Teen Choice awards for "Best Comedy" in both 2010 and 2011), as well as its well-known fan following made up of "gleeks." As reflected by the a portmanteau of "glee" and "geek" used to describe fans of the series, as well as the "loser" hand gesture that forms the "L" in the series' logo, *Glee* is at its core, a show "about high school social outcasts finding redemption in a glee club" (Braxton, 2010, para. 1). Therefore, the series provided a unique platform for frequent portrayals of bullying that involve victims (the show's main characters) with whom "gleeks" likely identify and sympathize. The Glee Forum was chosen due to its substantial membership of approximately 39,000 fans, as well as the fact that its threads are organized by episode (which facilitated the identification of fan posts about bullying). Additionally, judging by the language (including emoticons) and culture within the community, the Glee Forum seems to attract younger *Glee* fans. Based on a discussion with *The O.C.* executive producer, Josh Schwartz, Ross (2008a) distinguished between teen message board cultures and adult message board cultures. According to Schwartz, "younger people are more enthusiastic" while older viewers "are more like wanna-be TV critics, wanna-be bloggers, wanna-be 'if this was me, I would do so much better'" (as quoted in Ross, p. 145). The Glee Forum appears to be the former type of culture, as fan comments tended to be much more enthusiastic than critical (e.g. "I LOVE Kurt." or "Santana is so mean!"). Of

course, this trend in no way guarantees that all posts are written by teens. However, the anonymity of participants is a necessary limitation of online research, unless subjects offer the information or researchers have the ability to request it. (Even then, of course, there is no way of knowing if the information provided is true/accurate).

Analysis

This textual analysis focuses on a total of 294 Glee Forum posts, randomly selected from a pool of posts that satisfied two requirements; mentioning the word(s) “bully,” “bullies,” “bullying,” or “bullied,” and appearing within discussions specifically focused on the bullying episodes examined in the content analysis portion of this thesis. (See Appendix C for descriptions of the bullying-related storylines within these episodes). These parameters (set by the “advanced search” function of the forum website) were chosen in order to hone in on relevant bullying-related discourse and guarantee that the researcher, having watched the episodes, understood the context of the fans' conversations. (Admittedly, this prior exposure to the television text created yet another layer of interpretation [i.e. the researcher's own responses to the television text] that inevitably influenced the analysis of fan posts. However, this was not considered a significant limitation, as it is impossible (and never expected) to eliminate research bias in qualitative textual analysis.)

Because the website’s “advanced search” function limited results to 200 posts, a unique search was performed within each of the 16 discussions dedicated to episodes studied in the content analysis. When the discussion of a given episode contained more than 200 posts about bullying, the results were sorted by “most

viewed” in order to include the posts read by most forum members. In order to increase the range of discussion topics, 20 posts about each episode were randomly selected for inclusion in the final sample. In the case that there were less than 20 bullying-related posts for a given episode (which was true for 4 episodes), all bullying-related posts from that episode were included in the sample. This process resulted in 20 posts from 12 different episodes, 16 posts from 2 episodes, 15 posts from 1 episode, and 7 posts from 1 episode, bringing the total to 294 posts.

Once the sample was finalized, the researcher utilized a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to capture trends that appeared across fan posts. Each post was open coded (by sentence) as a means of formulating tentative themes and sub-themes across the posts. Once these tentative themes were formed, the researcher used the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss) to compare the emerging themes with those identified in additional entries.²³ Once themes were established, a 25-year-old white male coder read and categorized 15% (44) of the posts and discussed any discrepancies with the primary researcher.²⁴ This process functioned as a means of checking the consistency of the coding process and minimizing the degree to which the coding process was affected by researcher bias. After themes were finalized, exemplars were chosen to represent trends within each theme. These exemplars (identified by pseudonyms in place of actual member

²³ While she did not call her method of textual analysis a "grounded theory" approach, this coding process is similar to that used by Baym (1999) in her analysis of the discourse within a soap opera fan community.

²⁴ Notably, Baym (1999) had another coder code the entire sample, rather than only 15% of it. However, considering the qualitative and exploratory nature of this part of the thesis, 15% was considered sufficiently rigorous.

nicknames) are reported in the following chapter. Notably, themes and sub-themes were not mutually exclusive; a sentence or post could fall into multiple themes and sub-themes.

Tentative research questions for this analysis centered on fan responses to the bullying depictions in *Glee*: Do they compare portrayals to their personal experiences? Do they challenge their realism? Do they express sympathy for the victims? While these questions were kept in mind during the coding process, the analysis was not limited to such a priori questions. Rather, in line with the grounded theory approach, the focus of the analysis was allowed to shift toward whatever trends emerged from the data. As Charmaz (2004) suggested, “guiding interests and disciplinary perspectives should provide grounded theorists with points of departure for developing, rather than limiting their ideas” (p. 501).

The goal of the aforementioned analytical approach was to point to trends among fan responses to *Glee*'s depictions of teen bullying, that when combined with results of the content analysis of bullying portrayals on teen television, could suggest the potential implications of teens' exposure to and reception of the messages about bullying provided by teen programs and related fan discussions.

CHAPTER 8

INTERPRETING FAN RESPONSES: GLEE FORUM TRENDS AND FINAL THOUGHTS

The Glee Forum Culture

General Observations from the Sample

The broad goal of this pilot study was to get a sense of the fan discourse being produced within online forums dedicated to teen television shows.

The categorization and interpretation of 294 posts within the Glee Forum pointed to several features that characterized the forum as a unique online fan culture.

The sample posts revealed that the discourse in the Glee Forum (at least in the forum discussions focused on particular episodes) primarily focused on the storylines and the characters. Fans tended to use the forum as a place to discuss (and often debate about) the words and actions of *Glee* characters toward whom they demonstrated strong feelings and attachment (e.g. how consistent their actions were with previous episodes, why their actions made the fan like them more or less, or how their actions might predict future plot events). It was common for fans to either attack or defend a specific character's behavior; forum members frequently took the position of their favorite characters, providing explanation or justification for their words and actions. These character- and plot-centered conversations often expanded to more general discussions of real-world issues (e.g. bullying, homophobia, friendships, and relationships) and the sharing of personal experiences with these issues. Typically, such posts involved comparisons between the *Glee* world and the real world. Notably, the sharing of personal experiences was most frequently used as a means of proving a point, rather than as a means of

bonding with/seeking support from other forum members. In fact, there was only one exchange in which a fan expressed emotional support for a fellow forum member. In this exchange, *magicrose* posted, "Maybe I'm just a weak person in general, because I couldn't take half the crap that Kurt takes on the show." In response, *kiyan* provided the reassuring statement, "You are not a weak person! Kurt deals with it so well because he's a fictional character." Of note, there were no discussions in which fans exhibited friendship toward one another.

Additionally, the majority of posts within the Glee Forum referred directly to characters and plot events, as opposed to the way the creators of *Glee* chose to write characters and storyline. In other words, forum members were more likely to post "I hate how Kurt gives in to Dave's bullying," than "I hate how Ryan Murphy (the show's co-creator) represents Kurt as a wimp who gives in to his bully."

Interestingly, one fan expressed his frustration about becoming caught up in this trend. After asking members to comment about Will's (the glee club director) neglect of Kurt (a glee club member), *Slowjam* wrote, "...also, I cannot believe (sic) I find myself discussing shows as if these are real people. So, let me re-phrase that - how should Ryan Murphy write the role?"

Within discussions in which forum members compared and contrasted *Glee* storylines to their personal experiences or to the "real world," 11 posts provided clues about their general age group (kids or teens vs. adults). Within these posts, some fans referred to high school in the past tense, suggesting that they were adults. For example, *AnnieB* posted, "I was bullied in high school for being a fat nerd..." Other fans referred to their personal experiences with high school bullying in the

present tense, suggesting that they were teens (or younger). *Martie*, for instance, wrote, “i (sic) get shoved, pushed, and tripped in school every day...” Therefore, the sample appeared to represent responses and interpretations from fans representing a variety of age groups.

Connections with Online Fandom Literature

Comparing the aforementioned observations to those made in prior online fandom studies, it appears that the Glee Forum shares characteristics with online communities representing teen drama fandom (Gillan, 2008; Murray, 2000; Ross, 2008b), soap opera fandom (Baym, 1999), and cult fandom (Ali 2009a). This conclusion is somewhat unsurprising, considering that *Glee* is representative of “teen TV” programs, which are traditionally associated with serial soap operas, but also acknowledged as having a cult appeal and exhibiting elements of “quality television” (Ross & Stein, 2008, p. 7-8).

The tendency of Glee Forum fans to connect *Glee* storylines to their personal experiences demonstrates a major similarity between the Glee Forum and discussion groups dedicated to other teen TV shows and soap operas. Prior research surrounding the online fandom of *My So-Called Life* (Murray, 2000), *Veronica Mars* (Gillan, 2008), and soap operas (Baym, 1999) found that fans often utilized online fan groups as a forum for sharing stories about their own lives.

Similarly, the finding that Glee Forum members focused on the interpretation and evaluation of storylines and characters, but also expanded discussions to touch on broader social issues, is consistent with past studies of teen TV-oriented (Murray, 2000; Ross, 2008b) and soap opera-oriented (Baym, 1999) online fan groups. For

instance, Baym (1999) observed that the most common practices within a soap opera Usenet group included personalization, character interpretation, and speculation about upcoming plot events. She also concluded that the practice of personalization often led to fans “sharing their worldviews and, more or less explicitly, sharing themselves” (Baym, p. 71). Relating even more closely to the Glee Forum trend of discussing issues such as bullying and homophobia, Murray (2000) and Ross’s (2008b) research on teen TV-oriented online forums revealed that fan discussions often focused on issues of particular relevance to teens’ lives (e.g. peer pressure, sexuality, gender expectations).

The trend of Glee Forum members taking the positions of their favorite characters and defending the behavior of those characters seems consistent with Ross’s (2008b) observations of online discussions surrounding *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. Specifically, Ross described how within online discussions of *DTNG* plot events, fans “mirrored” the various perspectives and opinions of the diverse characters and personalities represented on the show (p. 68).

Additionally, *Glee* fans’ frequent references to the divide between the “outcasts” and the “popular kids” at McKinley High and to *Glee* characters’ struggles with their sexual identities, as well as fans’ tendency to relate these topics to personal experiences with bullying (both of which will be discussed in detail within subsequent sections), pointed to a potential similarity between the Glee Forum and the Bronze, the official online community dedicated to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Within his study of the Bronze community, Ali (2009a) concluded that members of the Bronze community were united by a shared identification with

marginalization—an identification that likely drew them to a television series known to “challenge the audience to question accepted norms” (p. 121). Just as *Buffy the Vampire’s* theme of marginalization appeared to shape the interactions in the Bronze, it appears that *Glee’s* “outcast” theme and focus on homophobia and sexual identity development influenced at least some discussions within the Glee Forum.

While several discursive practices observed within the Glee Forum demonstrate consistencies with the objects of prior online fandom research, the Forum appears to be unique from these other forums in two major ways. First, divergent from the teen TV-oriented fan groups studied by Gillan (2008) and Murray (2000), the Glee Forum did not appear to be as focused on the formation of identity (particularly “teen” identity). This difference could be related to the fact that the Glee Forum appeared to attract a more diverse range of fans, whereas the *My So-Called Life* and *Veronica Mars* groups were populated by a more specific demographic (teen girls/young women), who presumably had a more shared sense of identity. Second, unlike the teen TV, soap opera, and “cult” TV fan groups studied by Baym (1990), Gillan (2008), Murray (2000), and Ali (2009a), the Glee Forum did not appear to foster friendships or strong emotional connections between fans; fans seemed to be more connected to the characters than to one another. (However, strong relationships between fans might have been revealed in discussions not included in the sample). As mentioned, only one fan exchange in the sample reflected an emotionally supportive relationship. This lack of close personal connections between members could be due to the large membership size of the Glee Forum (39,000 fans). As Jenkins (2006b) suggested, as the number of members

within a community increases, the more likely existing members are to feel lost and alienated and lose their sense of a personal connection to the group. At least according to the definition of online community established by Kirby-Diaz (2009a), this lack of personal connections among forum members would likely disqualify it from consideration as a “true” virtual community.

Just as the discourse within the forum was not excessively supportive, neither was it overly hostile. Debates and arguments were common, but they remained focused on the discussion topics (e.g. characters and storylines) and did not escalate to personal attacks or “flame wars.” This trend of fans having differing reactions to the same media content follows Jenkins’ (2006b) notion that online communities bring together fans with divergent “taken-for-granted interpretive and evaluative norms,” who would not normally interact with one another (p. 142). Additionally, in contrast to Baym’s (1999) findings related to a soap opera Usenet group, it did not appear that the Glee Forum community encouraged friendliness and respect to the point where unpopular interpretations were stifled.

Important to note, these observed similarities to and differences from other researched online fan groups are based solely on trends within the sample posts. A more comprehensive, ethnographic study of the Glee Forum would be necessary in order to capture the complete range of its discursive and relational practices.

What Fans Had to Say about Bullying

The primary goal of the textual analysis was to identify trends across Glee Forum posts as examples of fans responses to bullying portrayals and as intertexts read by other forum members. The grounded theory/constant comparison

approach revealed four major themes across the sample posts: references to contextual elements of bullying portrayals (e.g. punishment, harm, character social status), lessons taught by *Glee* characters (i.e. messages promoted through the actions of victim and third party characters on the show), categorizations of bullying (i.e. the distinction between different acts of bullying portrayed on *Glee*), and feelings about *Glee* characters involved in bullying (e.g. love, dislike, empathy).

The Context of Bullying

The most prevalent theme across the Glee Forum sample, represented within 84 posts, was the mention of the context of bullying as portrayed on *Glee*. Posts falling into this theme contained at least one reference to a contextual element of bullying, such as whether bullying was done for good reason, whether it was comical, whether it was punished or rewarded, whether it resulted in significant harm, and whether the characters involved (bullies and victims) were popular or unpopular.

Is Bullying Ever Justified?

The most prominent sub-theme across the sample, appearing in 29 Glee Forum posts, was that forum members tended to discuss the reasons why characters on *Glee* bullied others. Within these posts, fans mentioned a variety of reasons for or motivations behind bullying, ranging from inner torment and homophobia, to peer pressure and entertainment (i.e. “bullying for fun”). Beyond simply referencing the apparent or possible reasons for bullies’ actions, several fans also argued that these reasons made the bullying somewhat acceptable or justified.

Notably, several fans pointed out that *Glee* tends to emphasize the reasons behind bullying and add more depth to bully characters. *SummerSun*, for instance, wrote:

Glee is fond of [linking bullying to a character's inner torment]. Santana's a bitch because of her repressed sexuality...Puck's a jerk because he doesn't have a father and feels like no one cares about him...Sue's a bully because her sister was bullied, etc. Wouldn't be shocked if that's where they'll go with Karofsky, wouldn't be the first time.

Echoing this observation, *TipsyGiraffe* posted, "It's obvious the writers are really trying to go at the bullying arc from all sides, not just the side of the victim but also the reasoning behind why people are driven to bully." Conversely, one forum member appeared to think that most bullying on *Glee* had no clear motivation. *LadyGaga* wrote, "...during the first season Puck slushied Rachel just because she was around...MKH bullies need no reason: Santana was just talking with Brittany and splaassh!"

When the *Glee* writers provided sufficient context for viewers to understand the reasoning behind bullies' actions, forum members sometimes sympathized with the bully characters. *AnnieB*, describing Finn's bullying of fellow glee club member, Kurt, posted, "[Finn] was terrified of not being popular, to the point he was bullied into slushing (sic) Kurt (and I think he hated every moment of it)." Similarly, explaining the logic behind glee club members picking on Rachel, *MadHatter* posted, "They tend to 'ostracize and bully' [Rachel] because she does the same to them. She degrades them, a lot."

In contrast, other forum members asserted that even when the reason or motivation for bullying is clear, there is no excuse for bullying behavior; no victim

deserves to be bullied and no bully has a good reason for bullying others. For instance, *Blackwing* disagreed with fans who defended bullying behavior on *Glee*, saying, "Two wrongs do not make a right...Being mean to someone just because they are mean to you does not make it right." Also, in response to the suggestion that Santana's cheerleading coach, Sue forced her to bully other members of the glee club, *faithnhope* wrote:

As much as I really hate to point this out, no one can force you to do anything at all in life. You always have a choice and it all depends on your strength to decide the right path to choose. Pressure can be applied by trying to blackmail or bully, but it's based upon your decision to act. Just because the choice is difficult or not one you like, doesn't mean the decision is taken out of your hands. It's still a choice you have to make.

Agreeing with this argument, *GleekAlert* posted, "Sue did not force Santana to do anything. She did it because she made the decision to." Additionally, *Clowny*, commented on the explanation that Karofsky bullies because of his inner struggle with his sexuality (an explanation representative of the meta-theme of sexual identity prevalent within the forum), " I think most criminals are probably tortured on the inside. It doesn't give anyone a free pass to commit crimes." Similarly, *Sir Spamalot* asserted, "Karofsky is a violent, abusive bully. No excuse makes that alright."

Several forum members seemed to excuse bullying depending on the situation. Often times, the distinction between justified and unjustified bullying was based on whether it was provoked by victim characters (i.e. whether they "deserved it"). For example, *All4kurt* explained that Puck (a popular jock in the glee club) brought the bullying on himself, while Kurt (a gay member of the glee club) did not deserve to be bullied. This fan posted, "The big difference here is that Puck was the

one who instigated the events that ended up with him shoved in the portable toilet whereas Kurt was specifically targeted by Karofsky for reasons he couldn't control..." Similarly, *Liliwitz* argued, "I think there's a difference between Rachel and Kurt's bullying in terms of the reasons they are bullied." This fan explained that most times, Rachel is picked on for "being a pompous diva," while Kurt is bullied for being too flamboyant. According to this fan, Rachel can prevent her bullying, but Kurt cannot: "When Rachel reduces her pomposity...she usually gets a warm friendly reaction. The only advice Kurt is being given (usually by Finn) to reduce his own bullying is that Kurt should be less flaming."

In sum, it appears that while Glee Forum members do not always agree on whether acts of bullying are justified or deserved by victims, they often pay attention to the likely motivations behind bullies' actions. Importantly, it seems common for fans to make the argument that bullying is *never* justified, regardless of the reason behind it.

Bullying is No Joke

Representing another sub-theme across the sample, 27 posts mentioned the presence or absence of humor in bullying portrayals on *Glee*. More specifically, fans tended to criticize *Glee* for showing bullying in a humorous way. For instance, *LovinGlee* wrote:

David Karofsky's actions toward Puck this week were actually worse than anything Kurt faced, and they played it for laughs. That has really got to stop. The show has taken the stand that high school bullying is wrong and that Karofsky is a really bad kid whose malice must be taken seriously. They can't joke about it anymore.

Generalizing this disapproval of bullying “played for laughs” to other television shows, *All4kurt* commented, “...I myself have always had a problem with how bullying in general is shown in many shows for comedic purposes. *Glee* is not the first and definitely won't be the last...”

In line with this dislike of humorous bullying depictions, several fans expressed contentment when *Glee* showed bullying in a more serious light. *Nova's* post about the “Born This Way” episode was representative of this trend:

...I don't think [bullying] was exactly treated comical (sic) this time around. Not in the way bullying sometimes is on the show. And I think it's the start of what (I hope) will turn out to be a rather nice, sort-of serious storyline.

Providing a contrast to the forum members who encouraged serious bullying portrayals, a few fans conveyed their approval of funny bullying depictions and stated how amused they were by certain bully characters. For instance, referring to Rachel's bullying of a new student named Sunshine (which involved Rachel sending her to a former crack house instead of to the correct audition location), *thekid* wrote, “Rachel's hilarious and poor Sunshine looked so adorably clueless. hahaha.” Additionally, referring to the character Noah Puckerman, *quinnxoxo* posted, “Back to Puck: His character is the bully. He has some hilarious lines.”

Also supporting the notion that it is acceptable for some bullying to be depicted in a comedic manner, several posts stressed that *Glee* is a television show (particularly a comedy) that is not intended to be taken too seriously. Such comments were often posed in response to complaints about humorous bullying depictions. For example, reacting to a post expressing concern that Rachel sending Sunshine to a crack house was supposed to be funny (when she really could have

been killed), *StephieL* retorted, "It's a satire, a comedy, so no she could not have died in a billion years."

Overall, whether they approve or disapprove of it, it appears that Glee Forum members notice when bullying is portrayed as humorous. Importantly, it seems common for fans to focus on the potential implications of humorous portrayals.

Where is the Comeuppance?

Also falling under the theme of contextual elements of bullying portrayals, 17 posts within the sample referenced punishments or rewards received by bully characters on *Glee*. More specifically, several forum members expressed aggravation about bullies being rewarded for their behavior. For instance, *Gleefanatic* wrote that he was offended by the way Dave Karofsky (the primary bully of Kurt) was essentially rewarded; this fan called out Ryan Murphy for sending the wrong message to teens:

Basically Karosfky (sic) is to be rewarded for all he did to Kurt? Just like that? Will praising him and saying he could change for the better...Finn acting buddy buddy with him even if he threatened to kill his brother. He molested Kurt in the locker room and terrorized him for 2 years and now he gets to take part in the Thriller number while Kurt is stuck at Dalton's academy...Where is your serious message for bullied gay teens Ryan Murphy? That the people bullying you will get away pretty easily and that your friends will support him. That is the most offensive thing I've seen on TV recently.

Related to complaints about rewarded bullying, another trend was that several forum members discussed how upset they were that bullying was shown as going unpunished. Also referring to Karofsky, *Clowny* posted:

My biggest problem with K is he hasn't received any kind of comeuppance for the things he's done, which has been the most vicious bullying on the show. I believe that a person should have consequences for the bad things they've done...Puck had his. He went to juvie. And Santana has had herself a fair

amount of bad karma lately too. In fact, everyone else in the show has had to deal with serious consequences for their bad behavior...When does K get his consequences?

Similarly, *Azuri* posted, "Karofsky cannot go unpunished for everything he's done, and I hope the writers recognize that giving him a free pass will completely erase and overlook the pain he did to his victim(s)."

In some cases, fans debated about to what extent bully characters had been punished. For example, in response to a post arguing that Santana had been held accountable for her bullying (as evidenced by her lack of friends and people fighting back), *GLEEKfreak* commented:

...I'm talking about how she never has consequences for her actions... She has never even gotten a freakin' detention for all the fights she has been in, victimizing other people, and were (sic) the hell are these teachers not doing anything to punish her. She might be held accountable for her actions but she always gets a slap on the wrist.

Additionally, multiple posts mentioned how if bullying portrayed on *Glee* had taken place in the real world, it would have been punished. In other words, the authors of these posts claimed that the lack of punishments made some bullying portrayals unrealistic. A post from *martie* exemplified this, stating, "I know bullying exists, but I have a hard time believing that in the real world bullies can constantly shove kids into lockers and otherwise injure them, and nothing happens to them." Similarly, comparing *Glee's* McKinley High to a "real world" school, *Kurtmaniac* posted, "I remember at my school there were serious punishments for bullying...yet here the staff doesn't even care about their students, only their budget." This post is representative of another meta-theme present across all major themes: the comparison between *Glee* bullying and personal experiences with bullying.

In sum, then, fans posting in the Glee Forum appear to have strong feelings about whether (and to what extent) bully behavior is portrayed as rewarded or punished. It seems common for fans to go beyond describing the punishment (or lack thereof) received by bullies on the show and criticize unrealistic bullying portrayals, especially those that send the message to viewers that bullies can get away with their behavior.

The Toll Bullying Takes

Fifteen posts within the sample discussed the consequences of bullying portrayed on *Glee*. The harm to bullying victims mentioned within the forum ranged from short-term changes in emotion (e.g. characters becoming “angry” or “hyper-sensitive”) to more long-term implications (e.g. depression or bulimia). In several cases, forum members mentioned the harm to victims in order to compare or contrast the severity of different acts of bullying. This was the case within the discussion of the “Mash-Off” episode, in which Santana insulted Finn about his weight and singing abilities (bullying *not* related to his sexual orientation), and Finn “outed” Santana by commenting on her homosexuality in the hallway (bullying related to her sexual orientation). For example, *gonyisles* pointed out that both characters’ actions caused significant harm, so one character’s bullying should not overshadow the other’s:

Now we have Santana bullying the entire episode, but how do they end it? With Finn accidentally outing her so people overlook her bullying and make it out that Finn is worse because of the one thing he said. They totally ignore the fact that Santana's bullying can effect (sic) someone in the long term too. And for those saying it won't effect (sic) Finn, have we not seen that it has? Did we not see last episode him saying he's not good enough? Where do you think that comes from? Besides the fact that he got denied the football

schlorship (sic), but that people (including Santana) constantly tell him he isn't good enough.

Disagreeing with this position, *shawn96* commented:

Now, let me ask you a question. Did any of the remarks Santana made to Finn during her "apology" affect Finn in any way? Is Finn going to have to go to his parents and say that everyone knows that Finn is "worthless" and "is fat" like Santana called him in the hallway in front of everyone? Is Finn going to get bullied by everyone in the school for the rest of the year for being "fat" and being "worthless"? Is Finn going to be emotionally scarred from all the bullying for the rest of his life? No. Obviously, the same cannot be said for Santana.

Beyond simply describing and debating about the consequences of bullying shown on *Glee*, forum members also compared the harm done to characters to harm suffered by victims of real-world bullying. In some cases, fans applauded *Glee* writers for emphasizing the "real" effects of bullying. For instance, *Asylum* posted, "This is the first time that I know of on TV that addresses this problem [of bullying] in actual reality...People should sit thier (sic) kids down to watch it. They need to see that thier (sic) actions have real consequences." Conversely, other forum members asserted that while *Glee* highlighted the harm to certain characters who were bullied, the writers should have given more attention to the negative effects of all acts of bullying. For instance, *monkey89* wrote:

I really do wish they'd spend a little bit of time addressing the bullying [characters other than Kurt] get too though...I mean I get why they played it for laughs in the beginning, but if they're going to be trying to send a message about the effects of bullying (which they obviously have started to), that should definitely be applied across the board. Doesn't have to be a big PSA type deal, but just acknowledging that the bullying the others get (even just the slushies) is not okay and that it can indeed take a toll, would be nice.

Making a similar point, *NancePants12* discussed the bullying targeted at Kurt and Rachel, saying, "...both [characters] have had drastic consequences to the bullying.

Kurt was harassed to the extreme and became depressed, Rachel tried to be bulimic- and that is very serious, it should have been looked at more...”

Combined, these trends suggest that active members of the Glee Forum notice the harm to victims portrayed on *Glee*. Beyond this, it appears that some fans think critically about depictions of the consequences of bullying, how they compare to real life, and the messages they send to viewers.

Who Gets Bullied and Who Does the Bullying?

Also relating to the contextual factors studied in the content analysis portion of this thesis, 14 posts across the sample mentioned the social status of a *Glee* character portrayed as either the bully or victim. Notably, these posts were representative of another meta-theme weaved into many forum posts: the struggle of the “outcast.” Several forum members referenced social status (e.g. “unpopular” or “loser”) to explain why a particular character was targeted by bullies. Responding to the question of why Mike, Tina, and Mercedes (all members of the glee club) were slushied in the hallway, *KHummel* posted, “As for why- who knows? Maybe it's still that ‘You're so unpopular because you're in Glee club’ type thing.” Moreover, one fan went further to explain how bullying is a means of maintaining the line between popular and unpopular students. *CoyoteGrey* posted, “Kurt just happens to be the nearest available loser to receive [the popular bullies’] attentions and there's no particular malice in it (for Puck and Finn at least) - it's just what is done to maintain the social order.” (Of note, as the “reasons for bullying” sub-theme also included posts that framed bullying as a means of maintaining social status, it demonstrated some overlap with the “character social status” sub-theme.)

Reflecting this idea of maintaining social order, a recurring message across posts was that if a student at McKinley High wanted to be popular, he or she needed to be a bully and avoid being a victim. In yet another post touching on the meta-theme of struggles with sexual identity, a fan explained that because Sam wanted to be popular, he couldn't come out as being gay, because being gay was an invitation to be bullied. *FXGravity* wrote, "Considering that Sam is focused on being popular, and if he does turn out to have feelings for Kurt, I think there will defiantly (sic) be a struggle since being gay/bi is kind of a (sic) invite to be bullied in McKinley." Also exemplifying this trend, the aforementioned post from *AnnieB* explained that Finn partook in bullying in order to maintain his popular status: "He was terrified of not being popular, to the point he was bullied into slushing (sic) Kurt." Notably, *Liliwitz* expressed her approval of the fact that Mercedes refused to participate in bullying in order to gain popularity: "I love that Mercedes doesn't care to be popular if it entails bullying the school dweebs."

It was also common for fans posting in the Glee Forum to reference how popularity was a form of protection against bullying. Putting this simply, *Icing* posted, "Non (sic) of the popular kids get bullied." Similarly, *All4kurt* commented, "...Puck has never been shown to be quite as bullied as the rest of the gang, mostly due to he himself originally being a bully and his toughness and mild popularity giving him some protection." Additionally, *Divagirl* wrote, "I just don't see how Sam, Quinn and Santana of all people are supposed to (sic) underdogs. Like, really? They're popular. They don't get thrown into dumpsters or slushed on a regular basis. They don't get insults hurled their way all the time."

Combined, these trends reveal that members of the Glee Forum understand social status to be a deciding factor in who gets bullied and who does the bullying at McKinley High. However, unlike with other contextual factors, fans do not seem to criticize this element of bullying portrayals.

Fan References to Contextual Elements: The Implications

Intriguingly, the aforementioned sub-themes related to the context of bullying on *Glee* correspond with the contextual elements of bullying portrayals studied in the content analysis portion of this thesis (i.e. the elements that make portrayals more or less high-risk or likely to negatively affect viewers). The prevalence of references to these elements of context suggest that fans often pay attention to whether bullying is portrayed as justified, humorous, rewarded or unpunished, harmless, performed by popular characters, or targeted at unpopular characters. The fact that viewers are noticing and talking about these elements highlights the significance of accounting for such high-risk factors within content analyses of bullying.

Notably, it was common for fans to criticize high-risk bullying portrayals on *Glee* and appreciate more responsible depictions of bullying. With only a few exceptions, Glee Forum members who mentioned the contextual elements of punishments, humor, and consequences appeared to think critically about the implications of these factors; they stressed the importance of showing harm, argued that bullies should be punished (and that it was unrealistic if they were not), and problematized humorous bullying depictions.

In contrast, fan responses were more divided regarding the idea of “justified bullying.” Although fans frequently asserted that there is *never* an excuse to bully others, several forum members expressed sympathy for bullies or argued that some victims brought bullying on themselves (i.e. “deserved it”). Moreover, in terms of the social status of bully and victim characters, it was common for *Glee* fans to mention the interplay between popularity and bullying at McKinley High: bullies are popular, victims are “dweebs” or “losers,” bullying others increases popularity, and popularity protects people from being bullied.²⁵ Interestingly, though, none of the forum members took issue with the way the social order was portrayed on *Glee*. The relative lack of criticism regarding the contextual elements of justification and bully/victim social status underlines the importance of focusing on the effects of these factors in future research.

In addition to providing insight into how some fans respond to various contextual elements of bullying portrayals, the posts related to this theme also represent potential intertexts that complement television messages about bullying. As demonstrated by the aforementioned quotes, these posts promoted both potentially harmful and potentially helpful messages about bullying. With the exception of posts surrounding the element of bully/victim social status, the sample contained a significant amount of commentary criticizing high-risk bullying portrayals, which responded to or offset the few comments that demonstrated support for high-risk portrayals. Particularly concerning the contextual factor of rewards/punishments associated with bullying, posts written by *Glee* fans who had

²⁵ Although this connection between popularity and bullying was present in other shows within the sample, it was most pronounced in *Glee* episodes.

personal experience with bullying, in which they questioned how realistic it was to show teachers and administrators ignoring bullying, added an important critical element to the Glee Forum discourse.

Learning How to Respond to Bullying

A second major theme across the Glee Forum posts, represented within 54 posts, was the idea that the *Glee* characters, as potential role models, provide viewers with messages about how to respond to bullying. Many of these posts demonstrated that fans were thinking critically about bullying portrayals and their potential to influence young viewers who are likely to encounter bullying in their daily lives (whether they are bullied themselves or witness peers being bullied).

Learning from Third Parties: When to Step in

The most prevalent sub-theme falling under the “learning from characters” theme was the topic of third party characters’ responses to bullying. Forty-one posts focused on the reactions of third party characters and/or mentioned the messages these characters were sending to young viewers. Nineteen of these posts specifically referred to the actions of teen characters (as potential role models), applauding when they intervened and complaining when they did not. The other posts focused on the fact that teachers or administrators at McKinley High consistently “turned a blind eye” to bullying.

Some forum members argued that it was not realistic for the writers to have characters’ best friends ignore (or be unaware of) the bullying they experienced. For example, *Angel84* asserted that the writers of *Glee* should not have made Kurt’s best

friend Mercedes and his fellow glee members seem inattentive and inconsistent just to make a point about the severity of gay bullying:

These writers are so focused on addressing the hot button topic of gay bullying that their (sic) willing to throw their characters under the bus to do so...The writers make the whole glee club, especially Mercedes, look so bad cuz (sic) the bullying has been going on for weeks and its (sic) taken that long for them to notice something is wrong with him or care enough to take action. Mercedes should have been the first one to notice something was bothering him...You expect me to believe that she was absent ever (sic) time he got bullied and when she did find out, even if Karosfy might hurt her, she wouldn't defend him. I know people aren't supposed to be perfect but they don't have the write the characters doing things that are contradictory to their personalities for the sake of what storyline your (sic) trying to do that week, and they don't have to make everyone look ignorant...to convey a messege (sic).

Other forum members contended that it was realistic for high school students not to stand up for their classmates. For instance, in another post touching on the meta-theme of personal experiences with bullying, *BritGurl* commented, "I'm just saying I think it's realistic for HS kids to not really stand up for others...I guess *especially* if the one doing the bullying is a close friend. I saw it in cliques all over the school. But maybe that was just my experience..."

Similar trends occurred within posts highlighting how teachers and administrators did nothing to stop the bullying on *Glee*. The majority of these posts criticized the fact that Will, the glee club director (the so-called wonderful teacher who cares about the "underdog" students), failed to help his students who were being bullied. For instance, *Pacific*, described:

Its not even what [the other glee club members] do to Rachel (though that's also bullying [Will] has ignored from day 1)...the kids have all confessed their bullying to him on several occasions and he has literally done nothing to stop it...they all say that hes (sic) a good teacher but they've yet to show that to us...Hes (sic) been an absolutely (sic) atrocious teacher to these kids...

Making a similar point, *nina08* posted, "...the slushies seem to be considered 'normal' at McKinley and are usually passed off as a joke to the audience but they're still a form of bullying and its (sic) sad that Will does nothing to stop it."

Other fans participating in the forum defended *Glee's* portrayal of unhelpful teachers and administrators. Some, such as *Slowjam*, argued that the lack of adult intervention was realistic:

To a large extent all the teachers...are turning their heads to the bullying. I wasn't seeing this as a reflection on Will but more as a vehicle for us to see what these kids go thru (sic). Do teachers ever intercede? It would be nice.

Additionally, some forum members suggested that the *Glee* writers did not depict teachers getting involved in the bullying in order to maintain the dramatic appeal of the show. A post from *Slimkidder* exemplified this position:

Remember when Puck and Finn came to blows? No detention. Also considering the number of slushy attacks even the most hardcore, prison-like schools would ban the slushy machine and all beverages from the school halls. But that just doesn't happen in TV Land. No, the bullies are needed to provide something for Kurt to fight against. Granted, bullying of this nature is awful, but for the sake of drama, it is probably necessary. The longer [the writers] can keep us talking at the water cooler, the better.

Learning from Victims: What Can You Do?

Another common forum topic, mentioned in 14 posts in the sample, was the way victim characters responded to bullying and/or the messages these characters were sending to viewers. For instance, *Liliwitz*, referring to how Kurt transferred to Dalton Academy to get away from bullying but did not like it there, posted, "I think it's showing that Dalton is not the answer. Which is a good thing actually because I don't think *Glee* would like to send out a message that the only solution to bullying is going to private school." Additionally, responding to a post suggesting that Kurt

should date his former bully, *the traveler* asserted, “Bullying is serious. That’s the point of this arc. Dating the bully undermines that and gives a horrible message.”

Other forum members debated about whether Kurt should have backed down or stood up to Dave (the bully). *Glee4life* posted, “Kurt gave into the bully, not a good message for those who are be (sic) bullied.” Responding to this post, *GleeFanatic* suggested, “The message is sometimes there isn't much you can do. Is the message of facing a guy three times you (sic) size and getting psychologically destroyed each (sic) by doing nothing is a better one?” These debates tended to spark broader discussions about what real-world victims should do when they are bullied. In one such discussion, *martie* drew from his personal experience to argue that sometimes victims have no effective means of responding to bullying:

I get shoved, pushed and tripped in school every day...but teachers won't do anything but talk unless you actually get hurt...plus they usually say they can't do anything bout (sic) something there is (sic) no witnesses for...and there are no witnesses cuz (sic) nobody wants to be next...so if you are the only gay kid in school...then you are alone. I am glad Kurt is gonna (sic) stand up for himself...but we are not all that brave and still got (sic) some years to survive in hell school.

Of note, *martie's* post exemplifies multiple meta-themes that appeared across the sample, including the struggles of sexual minorities in high school and the interpretation of bullying shown on *Glee* through the lens of personal experience.

Combined, the aforementioned trends suggest that members of the Glee Forum think critically about the examples set by victim and third party characters on *Glee*, and in some cases, reflect on the potential messages these characters send to the audience—especially young viewers who find themselves in similar positions to these characters.

Fan Discourse About Characters as Role Models: The Implications

While posts falling into the “contextual elements” theme touched on the way the actions of bully characters were portrayed on *Glee*, posts representing the second theme focused on portrayals of victim and third party characters. The tendency for forum members to comment on the potential for young viewers to learn lessons from victim and third party characters indicates that many fans understand the potential for *Glee* characters to be role models and for *Glee* storylines to be a teaching platform. In contrast to fans who appeared to get upset at the *characters* for participating in or reacting to bullying in certain ways (highlighted in a fourth theme that will be described in a subsequent section), fans representing the second theme appeared to criticize the *creators* of *Glee* for sending unrealistic or harmful messages (or applaud them for sending realistic and helpful messages) through their writing of particular characters. Notably, these fans seemed to be demanding more responsible bullying portrayals on presumably, one of their favorite shows. Considering the literature highlighting the increasingly reciprocal web of relationships between audiences and creators contributing to “aesthetics of multiplicity” (Ross, 2008b), future research should investigate to what extent teen television producers are responsive to the demands of their fan base.

In terms of understanding posts related to the second theme as intertexts complementing the television content, these posts consistently contained analytical and potentially helpful messages for young *Glee* fans. In the majority of the posts, *Glee* Forum members not only provided commentary and criticism about the responsibility of *Glee* writers to promote positive messages through their bullying

storylines (and in some cases, provided alternatives to these messages), but also pointed out the ways that bullying depictions represented or misrepresented bullying in the real world. Perhaps, by sharing their critical thinking process with other forum members, the authors of these posts inspired or taught their own lessons to other fans.

Categorizing Bullying

A third major theme across the Glee Forum posts, appearing in 50 responses, was the categorization of bullying behavior. Forum members tended to classify the bullying on *Glee*, whether it was in terms of type or form of bullying (e.g. physical vs. verbal or slushie vs. insult) or the motivations contributing to bullying (general bullying of unpopular kids vs. anti-gay bullying). Glee Forum members referred to categories of bullying for a variety of reasons. Some fans discussed different bullying categories in order to emphasize that all bullying behavior is wrong, or conversely, to argue that some acts of bullying are in fact worse than others. Fans also categorized bullying in order to suggest that various types of bullying (physical, relational, cyber, etc.) should be portrayed more on *Glee*. Bullying categories were also referenced within the context of debates about whether writers and/or fans should take some acts of bullying seriously (e.g. anti-gay bullying acts) and treat other acts of bullying as a joke (e.g. slushie facials targeted at “the nearest loser”).

Different Types and Forms of Bullying

Falling under the more general theme of categorizing bullying, a sub-theme appearing within 33 posts was the categorization of bullying according to type or form. In some cases, these posts emphasized how all types of bullying are serious

and have negative effects. (Of note, this sub-theme overlapped with the aforementioned “harm to victims” sub-theme within the “contextual elements” theme, as they both included posts focused on the negative effects of bullying). A post from *NancePants12* exemplified this trend:

Also, just because Rachel (and some of the others) haven't been physically assaulted (unless you include slushy facials), it doesn't mean that it isn't serious. Bullying between girls is usually much more silent and less detectable. Take Quinn last season in *Bad Reputation*. She was depressed because of the quiet murmurs and the invisibility she had suffered. That is bullying too. Might not be as violent, but it is still serious. Girls have killed themselves over much less. But I blame the writers more for that. They have seemed to have forgotten that other forms of bullying can be just as serious.

Along the same line, *MishyMish* asserted, “Most girls who are bullied in high school are bullied psychologically, not physically like guys are, but that's no reason to trivialize it. People have killed themselves from being bullied psychologically.” Notably, the tragic “bullycide” trend was commonly used as evidence of why non-physical bullying should be taken just as seriously (if not more seriously) than physical bullying.

Other posts argued that a broader variety of bullying types should be represented on *Glee*. For instance, *Honeybee* commented about the lack of cyberbullying:

Glee isn't capable of doing this topic justice unless they're willing to invest a good amount of time on it, and talk about different kinds of bullying. Cyberbullying...is particularly prevalent, but I doubt [the writers] will say anything about it.

Similarly, *thegleekiestofall* discussed the prevalence of physical bullying on *Glee*, posting, “...i (sic) hate how bullying is just always a very physical and visual thing on

Glee, save for Prom Queen. like (sic) that's the only form of social isolation..." (Of note, this post also touched on the "outcast" meta-theme present across all themes.)

While some fans stressed that all types of bullying are important and harmful, some Glee Forum members referred to different forms of bullying in order to emphasize the notion that not all forms of bullying are equally severe or harmful. For example, *Scribbles*, responding to a previous post, asked, "You do know that a slushie to the face isn't as bad as a death threat and harassment, right?" Along the same line, some forum members explained that they were more upset after watching certain forms of bullying. For instance, *BigAmit* wrote, "...I was seriously disturbed at the bullying...in this episode. We have come to accept the insults... the slushie facials and the dumping in the dumpster...but to come to physical aggression? And doing so to boys and girls?"

Other posts referenced repetition or longevity as contributing to how severe or harmful different forms of bullying should be considered. For instance, *ArtieA* wrote, "...I wouldn't compare one slushie in the face to months of increasingly threatening bullying." Similarly, *Blackwing* posted, "Finn's little comment regarding Karofsky's pubic hair, which we didn't get to hear, by the way, pales in comparison to what Karofsky put Kurt through for at least *nearly a whole year*."

In addition to distinguishing between different forms of bullying in terms of severity and longevity, it was also common for Glee Forum members to discuss how some forms of bullying were portrayed as humorous while others were not. (Of note, many of these posts were also coded as contributing to the "humor" sub-theme within the "contextual elements" theme). For instance, *nina08* wrote, "...slushies

seem to be considered 'normal' at McKinley and are usually passed off as a joke to the audience but they're still a form of bullying." Related to this, a post by *Liliwitz* expressed appreciation for a "chilling" (and non-comedic) bullying depiction in the "Furt" episode in which Karofsky creepily stares at Kurt and pokes him in the chest. Her post read, "Whereas the slushy facials, dumpster tossings (sic), locker slammings (sic), and egg peltings (sic) often seem like cartoonish bullying, this moment captured how helpless bullying can make you feel in a very understated way."

While the majority of forum members referring to comedic vs. non-comedic forms of bullying expressed annoyance at this distinction, some members appeared to support it. *Pinky*, for instance, argued that it is sensible for some forms of bullying to be treated in a comedic way, posting, "I think it'd be kind of stupid to turn the whole slushie thing into a serious bullying storyline. It's always been one of the humorous parts of glee."

Another trend related to the difference between "serious" forms of bullying and "funny" forms of bullying was that several forum members noticed a shift toward serious bullying portrayals over time. These fans tended to attribute this shift to the tragic bullycides appearing in the news. A post from *London* exemplified this trend:

Anyone else thing (sic) the bullying is getting darker? At first the slushies and throwing kids in the dumpster was being played as funny but now it feels darker and that those two guys could really hurt someone. I wonder if the high profile bullying cases in the USA is causing Glee to address this more seriously than they have in the past.

In sum, then, these trends indicate that *Glee* fans pay attention to the differences between different types and forms of bullying. Importantly, many forum members seem to believe that all types of bullying are serious and worthy of portraying on *Glee* and express dissatisfaction with their absence. Additionally, while they may disagree on whether it is a positive thing for writers to treat some acts of bullying as more severe or serious than others, *Glee* fans actively participating in the forum notice when the effects of certain forms of bullying are consistently minimized.

Anti-Gay Bullying vs. “Regular” Bullying

Pointing to another sub-theme within the sample, 25 posts categorized bullying according to the motivation behind the bullying. Typically, a distinction was made between bullying motivated by hatred or discrimination toward gay or lesbian characters (i.e. anti-gay bullying) and other bullying portrayed on the show (i.e. “regular bullying”). (Many of the posts falling into this sub-theme represented the meta-theme of sexual identity struggles prevalent across the sample.) In some cases, forum members took issue with how *Glee* writers treated anti-gay bullying as more serious and less acceptable than other bullying. For instance, *marvels* commented, “There must be some unwritten law in glee that bullying is ok unless you are gay or Brittany.” Similarly, *ceedee* wrote, “In glee world, bullying is only serious if you're gay.” Several forum members also expressed frustration regarding how fans within the forum were reacting more strongly to anti-gay bullying than other bullying and getting angrier at characters performing anti-gay bullying than those performing other kinds of bullying. This was a recurring topic within the discussion of the

“Mash-off” episode. (As mentioned above, this episode included Santana insulting Finn and Finn “outing” Santana as a lesbian.) Emphasizing the severity of both of the characters’ bullying behavior, *gonyisles* wrote, “...I’m just shocked that some people on here are saying Finn is horrible because he outed Santana, but her silly little ‘insults’ are nothing but words, when in reality, BOTH of those things effect (sic) peoples (sic) lives.” Related to this comment, *PuckWins* posted, “Verbal bullying, especially to the extent Santana uses it, is just as destructive as outing someone.”

While the majority of posts surrounding the distinction between anti-gay bullying and other kinds of bullying argued that *all* bullying is wrong and has negative effects, one post actually defended *Glee*’s emphasis on and unique portrayal of anti-gay bullying. *SklyLark62* affirmed, “In our culture, no matter how bad bullying is for anyone-those individuals who are questioning their sexual identity are bullied the hardest.”

Overall, these trends suggest that whether or not they believe that there are major differences between anti-gay bullying and “regular” bullying, *Glee* Forum members pay attention to how writers portray bullying differently and to how fans react to bullying differently depending on the motivation behind the bullying.

Fans’ Categorization of Bullying: The Implications

The theme of fans categorizing bullying based on form, type, or motivation suggests that viewers notice different bullying categories, as opposed to understanding bullying as one, coherent phenomenon. Even fans who argued that different types of bullying should be equally represented on *Glee* or emphasized that all types of bullying are harmful still seemed to consider the specific nature of

bullying as they interpreted or criticized its portrayal (or lack thereof). This tendency to distinguish between bullying categories underlines the importance of the content analysis portion of this thesis, which focused not only on patterns across bullying portrayals, but also on patterns across portrayals of different types of bullying. Considering the prevalence of references to the distinction between anti-gay bullying and other bullying, future studies should examine bullying portrayals divided according to the apparent motivation behind bullying behavior (e.g. discrimination vs. other).

Notably, trends within this theme indicate that not all fans accept *Glee's* portrayals of bullying. Conversely, many Glee Forum members expressed critical attitudes toward the portrayal of different bullying categories. Several fans even referred to the recent bullycides in the news in order to argue for the importance of portraying all bullying as serious and harmful. Therefore, although the content analysis revealed the presence of several high-risk factors within bullying portrayals, this theme supports the notion that viewers (and apparently even the most fervent fans) may reject the messages put forth through these portrayals.

Furthermore, as intertexts, the posts related to the categorization theme contained both potentially harmful and potentially helpful messages about different categories of bullying. An example of potentially harmful posts were those that approved of “funny” bullying portrayals and emphasized that some acts of bullying or reasons for bullying should be taken less seriously than others. Such posts have the potential to reinforce a message promoted by a substantial amount of portrayals in the content analysis: bullying is “harmless” (or causes only minor harm),

entertaining, and a necessary norm that maintains social order. On the other hand, the posts that criticized humorous bullying portrayals, demanded that all bullying be portrayed as harmful and serious (whether it's anti-gay bullying or "regular" bullying, a slushie facial or a nasty rumor), and emphasized the dangers of real-world bullying have the potential to counteract and disrupt the more harmful messages promoted by the show or other fans in the forum.

Feelings Toward Bully and Victim Characters

A final theme across the posts included in the sample, appearing in 39 posts, was that forum members tended to express their feelings and attitudes about *Glee* characters who were bullies, victims, or third parties to bullying.

The Influence of Character Likability on Fans' Reactions to Bullying

Falling under the general theme of expressing opinions about *Glee* characters, a sub-theme represented by 23 posts was that many fans expressed sympathy for characters that were victims or perpetrators of bullying. More specifically, fans' affinity for particular characters appeared to influence their reaction to the bullying in which that character was involved (i.e. increase their sympathy for that character as either a victim or bully).

In terms of sympathy for bullies, *MrT33's* strong opinions about Santana supported his or her argument that although Santana is mean, she deserves respect and sympathy:

Santana's not nice, she's not supposed to be. She's also not the girl you admire, look up to, or try to copy; it's not who she is...What she does get though is respect. In her own sadistic way she fixes things and tackles other people's hypocrisy; if she doesn't make things right, she makes them less wrong. How she goes about it, yeah, not the best way to do things but they get results one way or the other, and they usually result in some sort of

lesson for the target...What makes her sympathetic is her internal struggles, which are very much a real issue...Respect her, don't admire her.

In a similar manner, *slushiefacial* came to the defense of bully, Dave Karofsky:

As I said, I'm not pro bullying at all, but Karofsky is going through stuff he can't cope with. Sure, he could get help. But to get help first one has to admit one has a problem, and that's really hard to do. So, in short, I disapprove of Karofsky, but at the same time I feel sorry for him, and I can understand why he's being so mean. And I think he is really cute... he's got gorgeous eyes.

In terms of victim characters, *KatieK's* "love" for the Rory character (a student from Ireland who is bullied for being different in the "Pot O' Gold" episode) seemed to contribute to her sympathy for him. She posted, "I loved...Rory! He's so cute, and sweet. I loved when he sang 'It's Not Easy Being Green.' I felt bad when everyone was bullying him/rejecting him." Similarly, *SantanaLo* conveyed her sympathy for Kurt, writing, "Aw, poor Kurt he really doesn't deserve to be bullied like this. It hurts me to think that Kurt is going to leave McKinley cause (sic) of this."

Interestingly, several posts directly referred to the trend in television fandom when fans unfairly favor the behavior of their favorite characters or familiar characters. *Azn99*, for instance, commented:

This is the problem in this fandom, no one knows how to tell the difference between right and wrong behavior unless it's something happening to their favorite character, they don't even know how to tell right from wrong when it's their own favorite character's actions. Bullying is never OK, no matter who it is or how much you know about them.

Making a similar point in response to a post that expressed sympathy for Kurt, but not Rachel, as victims of bullying, *Honeybee* asserted: "This response is why they sohuldn't (sic) be dealing with bullying on *Glee*. Basically, this is Rchel (sic) deserves it because of who she is, but Kurt doesn't. All the Gleeks have been bullied...One is not 'worse' than the other." (Of note, due to this post and other posts referencing the

distinction between the bullying of two different victims, this sub-theme frequently overlapped with the “anti-gay bullying vs. other bullying” sub-theme within the “categorizing bullying” theme.)

This trend, observed by both the researcher and Glee Forum members themselves suggests that some fans tend to sympathize with familiar and likable characters (or in some cases, their “favorite” character), regardless of their role in bullying activity.

The Role of Behavior in Fans’ Opinions of Characters

Another recurring sub-theme (appearing in 18 posts) was that characters’ participation in or reaction to bullying appeared to influence the way fans felt about those characters. In some of these cases, it seemed to increase fans’ liking of a character. For example, *urfavgleek* posted that he or she wanted to hug Sam, Mike, and Artie after watching an episode in which they stood up for Kurt and Rachel when they were being bullied. Additionally, *martie* called Kurt “brave” for sticking up to Karofsky in the “Never Been Kissed” episode. Somewhat surprisingly, several forum members explained that they liked a character *because* they were a bully (especially if they were shameless about it). A post from *ziggy15* exemplified this trend:

Puck is a player, a badass, a bully and everything you want, but he is also one of the funniest characters, he says what he thinks and that's it and I like him for that...I like Puck because experience has taught me that most of the times, the people who seem to be the worse (sic) are better persons that (sic) other ones who looks like angels, and because he never pretends to be better than he is.

In other cases, a character’s bullying-related behavior appeared to decrease fans’ liking of him or her. For example, responding to an episode in which Dave

repeatedly verbally and physically harassed Kurt, *Gleeologist* wrote, “Karofsky, straight or gay, is a vicious thug. He is violent. He has little empathy for other people.” Furthermore, *WhataDoll* expressed that the bullying in “Theatricality” made her hate the bully characters, and suggested that this was a good thing:

I hated the bullies too...so much they made feel angry and sick to my stomach. But in a way it's a good thing that Glee portrayed those two bullying jocks as totally unlikable idiots, because real bullies are like (sic) a lot of times. They aren't always charismatic and funny, like I think Puck is. Sometimes they are just violent, hateful, morons with no redeeming qualities at all. You are not supposed to enjoy it, you're supposed to realize how much people like that suck in real life.

A post from *Pinky* demonstrated how some fans reacted negatively when characters failed to intervene as third parties to bullying. This fan posted, “Finn has a habit of withholding the truth...laughing at [his girlfriend, Rachel] with girls who bully her...flirting with other girls, and he only rarely sticks up for [Rachel]. These things make him a lousy boyfriend in my book.”

In sum, these trends suggest that Glee Forum members may change their opinions of characters based on the way they participate in or react to bullying in a given episode. It appears that in most cases, fans respond positively when a character stands up to a bully and negatively when a character bullies others or does not help someone who is being bullied. However, in some cases, fans react in more unexpected ways, such as expressing approval of characters who are “true to themselves” because they bully others without shame.

Fans’ Feelings Toward Characters: The Implications

Glee Forum members’ tendency to express their feelings and opinions of characters involved in bullying reveals how passionate *Glee* fans are about the

characters on the show. More specifically, the trend that characters' participation in or reaction to bullying behavior had an apparent effect on fans' feelings toward those characters (whether their feelings appeared to change in expected or unexpected ways) suggests that fans are so emotionally invested in the *Glee* characters, that they react strongly when the characters do something with which they agree or disagree. Additionally, it appears that some fans are so knowledgeable about the show and its characters that they demonstrate strong opinions when characters act consistently or inconsistently with their behavior in prior episodes.

Although it was common for characters' behavior to influence fans' emotional reaction to them, in some cases, fans' apparent emotional investment in characters worked in the opposite direction: their strong feelings about characters affected their reaction to those characters' participation in or reaction to bullying behavior. The most common example of this effect was when fans expressed sympathy toward a bully or victim character. On the one hand, sympathy toward victim characters seemed to have a positive implication, causing fans to become upset about the bullying behavior. On the other hand, sympathy toward bully characters was more often associated with fans providing justification for bullying or minimizing its severity.

Overall, the trends pointing to *Glee* fans' identification with and emotional attachment to specific characters underline the importance of studying how these feelings influence viewers' responses to bullying portrayals. Future research, grounded in media and literary theories related to identification with fictional characters (Oatley & Gholamain, 1997), wishful identification and parasocial

interaction with television characters (Hoffner, 1996), and empathy (e.g. Zillmann, 1991b) could reveal the implications of character favoritism as it relates to bullying portrayals.

Moreover, like intertexts surrounding the other themes, posts related to this final theme posed both potentially harmful and potentially helpful messages about bullying. The quality of the messages varied depending on how a forum member reacted to a character's involvement in bullying, and with which character (the bully or victim) a forum member's sympathy lied. Importantly, several posts criticized fans who unfairly favored the behavior of familiar characters or their favorite characters. These posts emphasized the positive message that bullying is wrong no matter who the bully or victim happens to be.

Glee Forum Themes: What Does It All Mean?

In sum, this pilot study of 294 Glee Forum posts referencing bullies or bullying behavior revealed four major themes: contextual elements of bullying (including justification/motives for bullying, humor associated with bullying, punishment to bullies, consequences to victims, and social status of bullies and victims), messages sent to viewers by characters who respond (or fail to respond) to bullying, categories of bullying activity (distinguished by type, form, or motivation), and feelings or opinions about *Glee* characters involved in bullying (as bullies, victims, or third parties.)

As representations of audience responses, the four themes across the sample highlighted how some *Glee* fans think critically about bullying portrayals and their potential effects. The "contextual element" theme revealed that fans notice, discuss,

and sometimes criticize high-risk bullying portrayals on *Glee* (particularly depictions of unpunished, humorous bullying shown without consequences). However, the observation that fans were not as critical about depictions of justified bullying or bullying conducted as a means of maintaining social status indicated that it may be particularly important to study the potential effects of these contextual factors (i.e. motivations for bullying and social status of bully and victim characters) in future research.

The “learning how to respond” theme pointed to fans’ acknowledgement of *Glee* as a potential teaching platform (and its characters as potential role models) and their desire for *Glee* creators to use this platform responsibly. This trend underlined the value of studying whether the creators of teen television series pay attention or respond to fans’ demands for more responsible and accurate bullying depictions.

The “categorizing bullying” theme observed in the sample suggested that fans understand bullying as falling into different categories. This trend highlighted the value of studying patterns across portrayals of different types of bullying (as in the content analysis portion of this thesis) and portrayals of bullying motivated by different reasons (a consideration for future research). As with the first two themes, this trend revealed that *Glee* fans are not always accepting of the way bullying is portrayed on the show.

On the other hand, the “feelings toward characters” theme indicated that while *Glee* fans may be particularly observant and critical about the show, they are also particularly invested in the characters. Fans appear to react strongly when

characters engage in certain bullying-related behaviors and seem to defend the behavior of their favorite characters, no matter what role they play in the bullying (bully, victim, or third party). These trends emphasized the importance of studying how fans' emotional attachment to characters influences their responses to bullying portrayals.

In addition to representing potential audience responses to bullying portrayals, the themes observed within the sample highlight potential intertexts contributing to the “overflow” (Brooker, 2004), “convergence” (Jenkins, 2006a) and “aesthetics of multiplicity” (Ross, 2008b) surrounding television content in the digital age. In other words, the aforementioned themes not only reflect some common attitudes within *Glee* fandom, but also represent the messages about bullying to which young forum members (active or lurking) could be exposed. While not all of these messages were necessarily accurate or apparently beneficial for young *Glee* fans, some of the critical messages (particularly messages from fans with more real-world bullying experience who compared *Glee* storylines to reality) demonstrated the potential to indirectly simulate the experience of co-viewing or parental mediation of television viewing, which research has shown to influence children's attitudes toward television violence (e.g. Corder-Bolz & O'Bryant, 1978).

At the very least, the variety of messages provided in the forum created a springboard for discussion, debate, and critical thinking about teen bullying—both on *Glee* and in the real world. The nature of these messages varied across and within themes. The sample included posts that both criticized and supported high-risk depictions of bullying, posts that argued for and against framing certain categories

of bullying as more serious than others, and posts that defended and rebuked bullying behavior (depending on the bully and victim characters involved). Considering the contradictory intertextual messages provided in forum posts, future research should involve a more comprehensive and quantitative study (including a variety of teen television fan forums) that identifies which messages about bullying are predominant among fan discourse.

Limitations

Being exploratory in nature, this reception analysis is limited in terms of scope, as it focuses on only one of numerous fan forums dedicated to teen television shows. This analysis is also limited in terms of representativeness. As described in chapter 6, fans comprise a unique subset of viewers that tend to be exceptionally committed, involved and knowledgeable about their favorite TV shows and characters (Hills, 2002). Therefore, a study of fan interpretations may or may not represent the interpretations of the "average" viewer. Moreover, the responses of online fans who post in forums are not necessarily representative of forum members who are "lurkers" (Baym, 1999), nor are they necessarily representative of fans who are not "social" about their fan practices (Rebaza, 2009). While the limited scope and representativeness of the sample should be acknowledged, the textual analysis portion of this study is both qualitative and exploratory in nature. Considering this research design, scope and generalizability were not expected, or even sought, in this portion of the thesis. It was not the goal of the textual analysis to identify the "preferred interpretation" of the "average" teen viewer. Conversely, the objective was to take advantage of the natural setting of online fan forums in order

to gain a better understanding of how *some* fans respond to and interpret depictions of bullying on teen television. Moreover, the overrepresentation of commentary from active members of the Glee Forum, whose opinions are “most viewed” by other members, was necessary in order to capture a glimpse of the intertextual messages to which less active members and lurkers are exposed.

Additionally, as mentioned above, it is impossible to be sure how many active Glee Forum members are actually children or teens (the target audience of focus in this thesis). In fact, particular comments in the sample posts revealed that active members of the Glee Forum include both adolescents (or children) that are currently in school and adults that are no longer in secondary school. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to claim that observed trends are representative of how *teen* fans specifically respond to bullying depictions on *Glee*. However, these trends should still be considered valuable, as they provide a picture of the potential ways that fans of any age may respond to, interpret, and evaluate television messages about bullying. Moreover, although this uncertainty about the age of the forum participants is not ideal, it is a limitation common to many online studies in which participants do not offer identifying information.

A last point to note is that unlike many prior studies of online fan communities, this analysis was not ethnographic; the researcher did not conduct participant-observation in order to experience, first-hand the dynamics of the Glee Forum. While it was a secondary goal of this study to explore how traditional media and online fandom converge to create meaning, the exploration of this meaning-

making process was limited to fan interactions surrounding bullying and their interpretations of bullying portrayals.

Patterns Across Portrayals and Posts: Final Thoughts

Both the content analysis and textual analysis portions of this thesis revealed a wealth of intriguing findings related to patterns across bullying portrayals on teen television and responses to those portrayals (particularly the ones on *Glee*). Considering that both studies focused on the relatively unexplored topic of depictions of bullying on popular television, the most important conclusion of this thesis is that this topic warrants an extensive research program consisting of a range of follow-up studies.

The content analysis findings indicate that teen bullying is a unique and complex media phenomenon; its depiction in entertainment media varies from that of other forms of aggression, and it encompasses multiple types of bullying that are contextualized distinctly from one another in media portrayals. Therefore, future research should investigate how bullying depictions vary by genre (cartoons, reality shows, sitcoms, etc.) and sub-genre (comedic teen television vs. dramatic teen television), how bullying portrayals have evolved in recent years, as well as how bullying is portrayed by the news media.

Furthermore, the textual analysis of the *Glee* Forum provides insight into the multitude of potential audience interpretations of and responses to media depictions of teen bullying. While the observed reception trends may not represent responses specific to teen audiences or be generalizable to other teen television shows, they suggest that contextual factors (particularly consequences,

punishments, humor, and motivations) and identification with characters likely play a role in viewers' interpretations of bullying depictions. While existing media theory points to how these contextual elements and individual differences might alter the effects that bullying portrayals have on young viewers, it is vital to test these specific relationships empirically. For instance, future studies should test how viewers' identification with bully and victim characters affects their reaction to bullying depictions and how humorous bullying portrayals influence viewer attitudes toward bullying. Additionally, related to the tendency for Glee Forum fans to relate storylines to personal experiences with bullying, future research should examine whether direct experience with bullying moderates the effects of exposure to media bullying.

Moreover, as an examination of a sample of intertexts connected to TV portrayals, the textual analysis highlights the range of bullying-related messages to which teen television fans are likely exposed, as well as their potential benefits and risks. Thus, it lays the groundwork for future research on various instances of television "overflow" and young viewers' responses to these texts.

Inarguably, bullying is an extremely serious, harmful, and prevalent real-world phenomenon that too often leads to tragic consequences. At a time when parents, school administrators, policymakers, and advocacy groups are desperately searching for ways to stop bullying, a close examination of the messages about bullying promulgated by the media world—an environment in which children and teens are increasingly immersed, working through their evolving identities and searching for support—is long overdue.

APPENDIX A

TEEN TELEVISION SERIES: DESCRIPTIONS AND RATINGS

Series Title	Network	Years Airing	Description (http://www.imdb.com)	Main Teen Characters	Genre	Viewership (in millions)
<i>90210</i>	CW	2008-present	A Kansas family relocates to Beverly Hills, where their two children adapt to the infamous social drama of West Beverly Hills High.	Annie Wilson, Dixon Wilson, Naomi Clark, Ethan Ward, "Silver," Navid Shirazi, Adrianna Tate-Duncan, Liam Court, Ivy Sullivan, Teddy Montgomery	Drama	1.7
<i>Big Time Rush</i>	Nickelodeon	2009-present	A look at life for the members of a boy band who are trying to make it big in the music industry.	Kendall Knight, James Diamond, Carlos Garcia, Logan Mitchell	Sitcom	3.9
<i>Degrassi (DTNG)</i>	TeenNick (US)	2001-present	Centralizing around the children of the original characters from Degrassi High, the show aims to deal with serious and sometimes taboo issues that plague teenagers.	Drew Torres, Eli Goldsworthy, Bianca DeSousa, Adam Torres, Wesley Betenkamp, Zane Park, Owen Milligan, Sav Bhandari, Holly J. Sinclair, Fiona Coyne, K.C. Guthrie, Dave Turner, Riley Stavros, and Declan Coyne, among others	Drama	1.0 (approx. avg. for summer 2010)

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APPENDIX A CONTINUED

Series Title	Network	Years Airing	Description (http://www.imdb.com)	Main Teen Characters	Genre	Viewership (in millions)
<i>Glee</i>	FOX	2009-present	A high-school Spanish teacher becomes the director of the school's glee club, hoping to restore it to its former glory.	Artie Abrams, Blaine Anderson, Rachel Berry, Mike Chang, Tina Cohen-Chang, Quinn Fabray, Finn Hudson, Kurt Hummel, Mercedes Jones, Santana Lopez, Brittany S. Pierce, Noah Puckerman	Drama-Comedy	10.0
<i>Hannah Montana</i>	Disney	2006-2011	Miley Stewart just moved from Tennessee to Malibu, and now has to adapt to a new lifestyle. She also lives a secret life as a pop star: Hannah Montana, overseen by her manager and father, Robbie Stewart.	Miley Stewart, Lilly Truscott, Oliver Oken, Moises Arias	Sitcom	5.7
<i>iCarly</i>	Nickelodeon	2007-present	Carly hosts her own web show, iCarly. Carly and sidekick Sam's regular Web casts feature everything from comedy sketches and talent contests to interviews, recipes, and problem-solving.	Carly Shay, Sam Puckett, Freddie Benson, Gibby	Sitcom	7.4

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APPENDIX A CONTINUED

Series Title	Network	Years Airing	Description (http://www.imdb.com)	Main Teen Characters	Genre	Viewership (in millions)
<i>Pretty Little Liars</i>	ABC Family	2010-present	Four friends band together against an anonymous foe ("A") threatening to reveal their darkest secrets, whilst unraveling the mystery of their best friend's murder.	Aria Montgomery, Spencer Hastings, Hanna Marin, Emily Fields, "A"	Mystery-Drama	3.3 (summer 2010)
<i>Shake It Up</i>	Disney	2010-present	Two Chicago teens attempt to realize their dream of becoming professional dancers by landing spots on a popular local show.	CeCe Jones, Rocky Blue, Ty Blue, Deuce Martinez, Tinka Hessenheffer, Gunther Hessenheffer	Sitcom	4.14 (at end of 2010)
<i>The Suite Life on Deck</i>	Disney	2008-2011	Twin brothers Zack and Cody and hotel heiress London enroll in a semester-at-sea program.	Cody Martin, Zack Martin, London Tipton, Bailey Pickett, Marcus Little	Sitcom	4.0 (season high)
<i>Victorious</i>	Nickelodeon	2010-present	A girl named Tori Vega navigates life at an elite Hollywood performing arts high school.	Tori Vega, Andre Harris, Robbie Shapiro, Jade West, Cat Valentine, Beck Oliver, Trina Vega	Sitcom	4.2 (May 2011)
<i>Zeke and Luther</i>	Disney XD	2009-present	Best friends set their sights on becoming the world's greatest skateboarders.	Zeke Falcone, Luther Jonesworth	Sitcom	.77

Notes. Ratings represent average viewership for the 2010-2011 season, unless otherwise noted. Figures were retrieved from the following sources: Andreeva (2011) (*90210* and *Glee*), ABC Family (2011) (*Pretty Little Liars*), Armstrong (2011) (*Degrassi*), Nickelodeon (2011a, 2011b, 2011c) (*Big Time Rush*, *iCarly*, and *Victorious*), Disney Channel (2010a, 2010b, 2011) (*Hannah Montana*, *Shake It Up*, and *The Suite Life on Deck*), and Disney XD (2011) (*Zeke and Luther*).

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Hypothesis/Research Question	Statistical Results	Most High-Risk	Least High-Risk
RQ1a: How do bullying types differ in terms of showing bullies as popular?	Significant differences across bullying types	Physical, verbal, indirect	Cyber
RQ1b: How do bullying types differ in terms of showing victims as unpopular?	Significant differences across bullying types	Physical	Cyber
RQ2: How do types differ in terms of depicting the motivation behind bullying?	Significant differences across bullying types	Physical, verbal	Cyber
H1: Bullying with a verbal element is portrayed as humorous more than other bullying types RQ3: How do non-verbal types differ in terms of humor?	H1 partially supported; significant difference between non-verbal bullying types	Physical, verbal	Cyber
H2: Bullying is more often unpunished than punished RQ4: How do types differ in terms of depicting bullying as punished?	H2 supported; significant differences across bullying types	Cyber	Physical, verbal
RQ5: How do types differ in terms of showing bullying as a group activity?	Significant differences across bullying types	Physical	Cyber
H3: Harm is more likely to be emotional than physical H4: Bullying with a physical element shows more harm to victims than other types of bullying RQ6: How do non-physical portrayals differ in terms of degree of harm demonstrated to victims?	H3 supported; H4 partially supported; significant differences across non-physical bullying types	Verbal	Indirect
H5: Bullying with a physical element is more likely than other types to show third party interventions RQ7: How do types differ in terms of intervening characters?	H5 not supported; RQ unable to be tested	All types	No types
RQ8: How do types differ in terms of likelihood of appearing in an anti-bullying episode?	Significant difference across bullying types	Cyber	Physical

APPENDIX C

SUMMARY OF MAJOR BULLYING PLOTS IN *GLEE* EPISODES

Episode Title	Major Bullying Events
Hell-O	The football players throw slushies at glee club members, Rachel, Kurt, and Mercedes. Santana and Brittany spread rumors about Rachel and talk behind her back. Finn hears them and tells them that they should stop.
Laryngitis	Puck, a jock and new glee club member, grabs and threatens Jacob, a nerdy journalist for the school paper, in an attempt to reestablish his popularity and credibility as a bully. Mercedes sees this and decides that she does not want to get involved with Puck.
Theatricality	The football players shove, insult, and threaten glee club members, Finn, Tina, and Kurt for wearing their Lady Gaga-inspired costumes. When the football players target Kurt again, Finn (backed by the rest of the glee club) comes to his defense.
Audition	The football players tease and throw a slushie at glee club member, Kurt. Threatened by Sunshine, a new girl auditioning for glee club, Rachel pays to have her slushied and gives her the wrong address for auditions (sending her to a crack house). Fellow glee club members, Mercedes and Kurt express their disapproval of Rachel's selfish behavior.
Britney/Brittany	Finn's former football teammates shove, insult, and threaten him for getting kicked off the team because of glee club. Artie, Finn's fellow glee club member, steps in and tells the bullies that it was his fault.
Never Been Kissed	Football player, Dave Karofsky repeatedly shoves, insults, and threatens glee club member, Kurt about his homosexuality. The bullying culminates when Kurt confronts Karofsky and insists that he is not going to change. Karofsky suddenly kisses Kurt, and it is revealed that he is struggling with his own sexual identity and taking out his frustration on Kurt.
The Substitute	Football player, Karofsky threatens to kill glee club member, Kurt if he tells anyone about their kiss.
Furt	Football player, Karofsky taunts glee club members, Finn and Kurt as they are practicing a dance.

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APPENDIX C CONTINUED

Episode Title	Major Bullying Events
Special Education	Cheerleader and glee club member, Santana mocks and insults fellow glee club member, Rachel about the fact that she slept with Rachel's current boyfriend (and fellow glee club member), Finn.
A Very Glee Christmas	A flashback shows glee club members, Tina, Mike, and Mercedes being slushied by football players.
The Sue Sylvester Shuffle	Football player, Karofsky repeatedly shoves, insults, and mocks his teammate, Finn about being in the glee club. Glee club member, Artie gets slushied by the football players.
A Night of Neglect	Football player, Karofsky insults glee club member, Kurt and his love interest, Blaine about their homosexuality. Cheerleader and glee club member, Santana jumps in to defend the two boys.
Born this Way	As football player, Karofsky apologizes to the glee club for all of the bullying he has done, a series of flashbacks shows Karofsky and his teammates throwing slushies at glee club members, Rachel, Kurt, Finn, Sam, Artie, Mercedes, Tina, and Mike.
The Purple Piano Project	A flashback shows football player and glee club member, Finn being slushied by hockey players.
Pot O' Gold	Rory, an Irish student who just arrived at McKinley High School, is repeatedly shoved and insulted by hockey players, as well as threatened by cheerleader and glee club member, Santana.
Mash-Off	After a dodgeball game, cheerleader and glee club member, Santana violently throws a ball at Rory, a new student and recent addition to the glee club, giving him a bloody nose. In the hallway, Santana insults Finn (football player and fellow glee club member) about his weight and singing abilities. In response, Finn calls her a coward and suggests that she come out of the closet, essentially "outing" her in front of other students.

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