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## **Teacher, parent and student perceptions of the motives of cyberbullies**

### **Abstract**

Understanding the motivation of students who cyberbully is important for both prevention and intervention efforts for this insidious form of bullying. This qualitative exploratory study used focus groups to examine the views of teachers, parents and students as to the motivation of students who cyberbully and who bully in other traditional forms. In addition, these groups were asked to explain their understanding of what defines bullying and cyberbullying. The results suggested that not only were there differences in definitions of cyberbullying and bullying between the three groups, but also that there were differences in perceptions of what motivates some youth to cyberbully. The implications of these results are discussed for both prevention and intervention strategies.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, motivation, teachers, parents, young people, focus groups

## **Introduction**

Bullying is a societal problem that exists within communities and schools throughout the world (Cole, Cornell, and Sheras, 2006). An examination by Rigby and Smith (2011) of international bullying research showed that the occurrence of traditional bullying appeared to be reducing in many countries around the world (including England, America, Spain and Lithuania), with an overall prevalence of around 10% of the school aged population (Molcho et al., 2009). Recently, with the technological advancements that have occurred, another form of bullying has emerged, cyberbullying. Due to the more recent nature of cyberbullying, our understanding of this phenomenon is limited (Campbell, 2013). The small body of research available in this area and explored by Rigby and Smith indicates that in America, the occurrence of cyberbullying is on the rise. This exploratory study sought to determine the understanding teachers, parents and students in Australia have of traditional bullying and cyberbullying, and uncover what these groups believe motivates students to bully. Gaining a greater awareness of these factors may serve to inform the ways in which schools and parents can intervene in, and ultimately prevent, both types of bullying.

### ***Defining traditional bullying and its consequences***

Bullying occurs when an individual or a group of people repeatedly and deliberately try to hurt, intimidate or harass another person who is less powerful than them (Rigby, 2007). Until recently, there were three main categories to describe bullying: verbal, physical, and relational (McGuinness, 2007) (termed in this paper as 'traditional bullying'). Verbal bullying refers to incidents of aggression that are verbal in nature, such as name calling and teasing (Bauman and Del Rio, 2006). Physical bullying encapsulates physical acts of aggression,

such as punching and hitting. Relational bullying, also referred to as social exclusion bullying, is characterised by deliberately leaving others out of activities, withholding friendship, and spreading rumours (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995).

Bullying in Australia is a serious issue for young people. Early studies of traditional bullying reported findings from a national survey of over 38,000 students between the ages of 7 and 17 years old, showing that almost 17% were bullying victims (Rigby, 1997). More recently, around 27% of young people between the ages of 8-14 years old reported being victims in a large scale study of participants from over 200 schools (Cross et al., 2009). It is known that the psychological and physical effects of bullying can be long lasting for victims (Beaty and Alexeyev, 2008). Being a victim of bullying can lead to increasing isolation due to a lack of trust of others, depression, and absenteeism from school (Slee, 2001), contemplating revenge and in extreme cases, thoughts of suicide (Rigby, 2003). Craig (1998) reported from a study of grade 5-8 students that victims were likely to suffer anxiety as an outcome of being bullied, thought to occur as a result of repeated exposure to potentially harmful situations (Silverman, La Greca, and Wassterin, 1997). Self-esteem can also be diminished (Rigby, 2007) as victims who are repeatedly unable to “stand up” to bullying develop feelings of inferiority.

### ***Defining cyberbullying and its consequences***

In recent years, cyberbullying has emerged as a new kind of bullying (Reeckman and Cannard, 2009), which takes place through the use of communication technologies such as mobile phones, internet social networking sites, and instant messaging (Campbell, 2005;

Rigby, 2007). Cyberbullying has been defined as intentional and repeated harmful behaviour carried out by a group or individuals over time, using electronic devices to communicate with a victim who is unable to defend him/herself (Konig, Gollwitzer, and Stefgen, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). However these three propositions: intentionality, repeated harmful behaviour and an imbalance of power, taken from the literature on traditional bullying have been questioned by some researchers (Dooley et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008). A definition suggested by Belsey (2004) includes deliberate, repeated harmful behaviour through the use of ICT's but suggests by omission that an imbalance of power is not an important factor of cyberbullying (Dooley et al., 2009). Wolak, Mitchell and Finkelhor (2006) state that victims may have more power in cyberbullying instances as they have the ability to stop some cyberbullying behaviour by deleting or blocking; a power they would not have in traditional bullying.

Similarly, repetition is a contentious factor in the cyberbullying definition. In the instance of a perpetrator continuously sending their victim intentionally hurtful or threatening text messages, the repetitive nature of the behaviour is obvious (Slonje and Smith, 2008).

However, it has also been suggested that the social and emotional consequences of a single harmful act carried out intentionally through the use of ICT's, such as posting an embarrassing or incriminating photograph to a website, can be damaging for victims.

Although the act of posting the photograph is not repeated, the effects, such as humiliation and embarrassment can be recurring for the victim (Dooley et al., 2009). This is supported by Mishna et al. (2010) who believe that cyberbullying is repetitive in its nature as harmful messages or images can be viewed by a potentially large audience and distributed continuously by those who have access (Campbell, 2005; Slonje and Smith, 2008). Although there is controversy surrounding the definition of cyberbullying, most researchers use the

three indicators of power imbalance, repetition and intent to hurt when conducting cyberbullying studies in order to ensure consistency.

Unlike traditional bullying, cyberbullying can potentially infiltrate the lives of victims twenty four hours a day and involve an instant and ever expanding audience (Campbell, 2005; Feinberg and Robey, 2009). There is increasing research which has investigated the consequences of cyberbullying. In a study of 84 American students aged 13 to 18 years, participants who identified as victims of cyberbullying reported experiencing negative feelings such as sadness and hopelessness (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007). The authors believed this stemmed from the victims feeling powerless to stop the cyberbullying attacks. The victims in this study however, had also been victims of traditional bullying, making it difficult to come to any conclusion about whether the effects reported could be attributed to cyberbullying alone. However, lending weight to the findings of Raskauskas and Stoltz, similar findings were reported from an Australian study of 91 students by Reeckman and Cannard (2009). In this study, victims who discussed their cyberbullying experiences admitted to feeling distress and anxiety as a result of being cyberbullied. Students and staff also reported that cyberbullying had contributed to absenteeism.

A relationship between cyberbullying and low self-esteem for both victims and perpetrators in American early adolescents was reported by Patchin and Hinduja (2008), while depression, substance use, and delinquency were found to be consequences experienced by American youth (aged 10 to 17 years) who reported being victims of cyberbullying (Mitchell, Ybarra, and Finkelhor, 2007). A study undertaken by Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Cercan, Calmaestra, and Vega (2009) explored the emotions most consistently reported by Spanish 12 to 17 year old

victims of both cyber and traditional bullying. While the dominant emotion felt was anger, more severe cyberbullying was correlated with a profile of emotions labelled “alone, defenceless and depressed” (p. 202). In a large Australian study (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, and Kift, 2012) cyber victims reported significantly more social difficulties and higher levels of anxiety and depression than traditional victims. Importantly, those who were bullied in both ways had similar anxiety and depression scores to cyberbullying only victims, suggesting the power of cyber- victimisation to impact over and above traditional victimisation.

While research on cybervictimisation is necessary, it is also important to research the actions of students who cyberbully, especially their motivation. The ability to recognise motivational factors may assist in prevention and early intervention when dealing with cyberbullies (National Centre Against Bullying [NCAB], 2010). Schools and teachers are given the responsibility of ensuring the safety of their students not only within the school grounds but also in the cyber-world (Shariff and Hoff, 2007). Teachers are aware of the difficulty faced by students who are trying to learn when feeling threatened or scared (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009). In addition many researchers have reported on the “digital divide” that exists between young people and adults, where young people use technology as a social tool and adults use it as a working tool (Shariff, 2008). This divide can leave adults feeling ill equipped to deal with cyberbullying issues. With the digital divide that exists between adults and young people, it is imperative for the opinions of all those involved in cyberbullying intervention and preventions to be considered, in order to combat this insidious form of bullying (NCAB, 2010).

### ***Motivation to Engage in Traditional Bullying***

As cyberbullying is another form of psychological bullying (Konig, Gollwitzer, and Steffgen, 2010), it could be assumed that the motives that drive students to bully would be the same motives that drive them to cyberbully. This argument is supported by the fact that the same students seem to be involved in both cyber and traditional forms of bullying (Cross et al., 2009). When looking at motives involved in traditional bullying, a main motive is the 'desire to feel powerful' (Ziegler and Rosenstein-Manner, 1991), and bullying 'purely for fun' (Lee, 2010; Raskouskas and Stoltz, 2007) and 'because others are different' (Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan, 2007) are also factors. Difference encompasses many facets such as ethnicity, disability, accent, clothing and sexual preference.

Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) explored the reasons Swedish teenagers (mean age 15.3 years) gave as explanations for why bullying occurred at school. Their results indicated that young people attributed bullying motivation in the following five ways: 1) blamed the bully ('the bully has low self-esteem'); 2) blamed the victim ('the victim was bullied because he/she was overweight'); 3) peer pressure; 4) boredom and lack of teacher supervision; and 5) societal expectations (such as how we, as a group, should look and act). Bully and victim attributing were found to be the most common ways young people described motivation for bullying. This indicated that these teenagers had a tendency to attribute bullying motivation from an individualistic viewpoint to either the bully or the victim and overlook the societal, situational or cultural conditions in which the bullying took place.

### ***Motivation to Engage in Cyberbullying***



Few studies have examined the factors that impact on young people in relation to their motivation to cyberbully (Dooley, Pyżalski, and Cross, 2009). Anonymity is believed to be a factor that motivates young people (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009). Other factors include cyberbullying ‘just for fun’ (Englander and Muldowney, 2007; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Dacuik, and Solomon, 2010) and for revenge (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009). One Australian study which examined students’ (12 to 17 years of age) perceptions of the motives of traditional and cyberbullies found there were different reasons given for the different kinds of bullying (Wilton and Campbell, 2011). Adolescents perceived ‘wanting to make themselves feel good’ as a prime motivator for cyberbullying, whereas ‘picking on someone for being different’ or ‘getting attention’ were what adolescents perceived to lead to traditional bullying.

While the studies discussed above have explored students’ perceptions of what motivates bullying and cyberbullying behaviour, no studies to the authors’ knowledge have compared the perspectives of teachers, parents and students on cyberbullying motivation. This is remiss as research in this area has shown that differences exist between teachers’ and students’ understanding of traditional bullying (Mishna, Scarcello, Pepler, and Wiener, 2005; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, Bettencourt, and Lemme, 2006). From this it could be assumed that differences potentially exist between teachers’, parents’ and students’ perceptions of cyberbullying motivation. Therefore, this qualitative exploratory study addressed the research question: *What differences and/or similarities exist between the perceptions of teachers, parents and students on the motivation of students who cyberbully?*

## **Method**

Using a qualitative focus group design, this study investigated teachers', parents' and students' perceptions of bullying and motivations for engaging in bullying (both traditional and cyberbullying). Focus groups are informal discussions generated by a moderator (Berg, 2004) that allow for a rich exploration of new and emerging research areas of which little is currently known (Creswell, 2011), as is the case with cyberbullying. As participants are believed to be more willing to take risks and disclose information in a group situation than they might be in a one on one interview (Morgan, 1993; Kitzinger 1995; Wilkinson, 2004), focus groups were chosen as the data collection method for the current study. In order to protect participants from disclosure of potentially painful and confrontational information, they were not asked to disclose whether they themselves had ever been the victim or perpetrator of bullying or cyberbullying.

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited from two independent schools in a large Australian city. To be included in the study, teachers were required to be teaching Year 9 students (13-14 years of age), parents were required to have a child/ren in either Year 9 or Year 10 (13-15 years of age) and students were required to be enrolled in Year 9 or Year 10 (13-15 years of age). In total, 35 participants took part in the focus groups, with 11 being teachers (female = 4; male = 7; age range 25 to 60 years; length of teaching experience 3 to 31 years), 12 being parents (female = 11; male = 1; mean age = 41.1 years), and 12 being students (female = 7; male = 5; mean age = 13.9 years). All participants were Caucasian and from a middle-high socio-economic background.

### ***Procedure***

The school principals of eight independent schools were contacted via email and phone in one major city in Australia with two responding with consent. The principals provided the names and contact details of Year 9 teachers who had expressed interest in being involved in the study. An item in each school newsletter invited parents with a child in either Year 9 or Year 10 to contact the researchers by email. Students in Years 9 and 10 in each school were given a talk by the first author and a form sent home with interested students for parental consent. Each focus group was then scheduled for an after school timeslot that participants had indicated would be appropriate. Each school conducted three focus groups (one of teachers, one of parents, and one of students), resulting in a total of six focus groups with between four to seven participants in each. Each focus group took no more than one hour and was audio recorded with participant consent. Appropriate ethical clearances were obtained from the university and the schools.

### ***Focus Group Questions***

The researchers developed four short questions to guide the discussion during the focus groups. As this study was interested in determining how participants understand bullying and cyberbullying, and what motives they ascribe to those who engage in bullying, the questions focused on these key areas. The questions used to guide the discussion were:

- 1. What is your understanding of cyberbullying?*
- 2. What is your understanding of bullying?*
- 3. Why do you think some students engage in bullying?*
- 4. Why do you think some students engage in cyberbullying?*

Part way through each focus group, after participants had provided their insight into questions 1 and 2, a definition of bullying was provided to participants on a printed sheet. Bullying in this study was defined as “*intentionally harmful and repeated behaviour carried out by one or more person(s) against someone unable to defend themselves. 1. Intentionally harmful 2.Repeated 3. Imbalance of power*”. Providing this definition at this stage ensured participants had a shared definition of bullying to guide their discussion during the last two questions which explored people’s motivation to bully and cyberbully.

### ***Data Analysis***

Analysis was done by hand rather than a computer program as the transcripts were small enough to ensure that locating themes, phrases and quotes was manageable (Creswell, 2011). The process of analysing the focus group data followed Creswell’s (2011) data analysis spiral method, consisting of three main stages. The first stage of analysis was to type out the transcripts of each focus group, affording the researcher a valuable opportunity to become immersed in the dialogue of the participants (Flick, 2006). Next, thematic analysis was used to search for key themes. This was achieved by comparing participants’ statements within and across groups, looking for similarities and differences in their responses. All questions asked, and comments made, by the participants were highlighted and grouped. In doing so, key words that participants emphasised (such as power, anonymity and peer pressure) became apparent as important themes within the data. Finally, through synthesis, themes were examined with one another in order to see whether any were similar and could therefore be combined.

As qualitative research is interpretative, a second opinion was sought to verify the data and interpretation of themes, thus ensuring triangulation (Creswell, 2011). The third author

analysed the focus group data following the same steps outlined above. Both sets of results were compared and differences in interpretation were discussed. Key themes were only accepted when both researchers felt that there was sufficient data to warrant their inclusion. This process resulted in a clear understanding of the similarities and differences of participants understandings of bullying and cyberbullying, and their perceptions of factors that motivate students to engage in traditional bullying (five key themes emerged) and cyberbullying (six key themes emerged).

## **Results**

### ***What is your understanding of cyberbullying?***

In each groups' definition of cyberbullying, bullying via (some form of) technology was identified as central to explaining the meaning. In relation to cyberbullying having three key components (an intent to hurt, repetition, and an imbalance of power), parents and students mentioned only an imbalance of power, teachers mentioned only an intent to hurt, and repetition was not mentioned as a factor by any group.

### ***What is your understanding of bullying?***

In relation to bullying having three key components (an intent to hurt, repetition, and an imbalance of power), only an imbalance of power was mentioned by all three groups and agreed upon as a component of bullying. While an intent to cause harm was mentioned by all groups, there was disagreement amongst parents as to whether this factor needed to be present for the behaviour to be considered bullying. Repetition was not mentioned by teachers or students, and parents were divided over whether negative behaviour needed to be repeated to be considered bullying. All three groups of participants mentioned that bullying

could take a variety of forms (verbal, physical, psychological) and teachers identified that bullying could be undertaken by individuals acting alone, or in groups.

As participants disagreed with various aspects of what constituted bullying and cyberbullying, they were given a definition of these behaviours to guide the rest of their discussions (see section – *Focus group questions* of this paper for definition). The second stage of the focus groups was to find out perceptions on what motivates some students to engage in cyber and traditional bullying.

### ***What Motivates Students to Engage in Bullying?***

In relation to motivations for traditional bullying, the key themes that emerged were ***Power and Status, Difference, Peer Pressure, Anger/Frustration at Having Been a Victim of Bullying, and Fun/Boredom***. These themes are discussed below, with comments drawn from the focus groups to illustrate the theme.

#### ***Power and Status***

To gain power and status amongst peers was believed to be the main motivation for some students to engage in traditional bullying and was the most frequently occurring theme discussed amongst all three groups of teachers, parents and students. Teachers and parents continually mentioned power as a motive, and one parent believed low self esteem issues fed a need to gain power amongst peers through bullying. While both student groups frequently

cited power and status as a major motivator for why students bully, it was the second focus group, who were mostly male, who cited this reason the most.

*“Well, um it’s that need for power...absolutely...and um...it all depends on the kid, whether they’re a new kid, they may need to establish themselves in front of a group of people...”*

(Teacher, School 2)

*“They feel that they’re not as good as or the other kids have got something or are something more or better than they are and so in order to feel better than them or equal they have to pull them down in some way and the bullying comes through the name calling it comes through the intimidation and that’s how they make themselves feel bigger and feel better and feel smarter.”* (Parent, School 1)

*“To look tough, to get respect or something”* (Student, School 2)

*“Well, like I said before they want more, like their reputation, they want a bigger reputation so they bully people.”* (Student, School 1)

## ***Difference***

A dominant theme amongst all three groups was difference, when students bully other students because of perceived differences in various attributes, such as race, weight, and academic ability. Teachers, parents and students all mentioned many times that student differences would be a motivator for some students to bully.

*“I would say definitely differences, because of hair colour, religious beliefs, all of those sort of ...a different variety of things that kids...their weight, um what they’re interested in, those*

*sort of things often get kids bullied..or not why they get bullied but that's the reason students bully.” (Teacher, School 2)*

*“...also they are just picking on someone because they are different. Might be the quiet short one or the...well anyone I suppose...”. (Parent, School 1)*

*“Like people with special needs and stuff usually get bullied. Yeah and with Down Syndrome kids and stuff like that they don't know what they're doing half the time” (Student, School 1)*

### ***Peer Pressure***

Peer pressure was discussed as motivation for engaging in traditional bullying by a number of participants, though not as frequently with the teachers as it was with parents and students. Peer pressure as a theme only surfaced on a couple of occasions with the teachers, being mentioned only once in each focus group. A considerable number of parents believed that peer pressure was a motive for bullying. One parent believed peer pressure was something that would be experienced more by older children who want to “*show off in front of their peers*”. (School 2) Similarly, this theme was mentioned frequently by the student groups as a key reason why students bully.

*“...peer pressure's pretty important at this age and they join in bullying because it's a fun activity at the time, without much thought, there is very little thought quite often, when peer pressure causes activities to happen.” (Teacher, School 1)*

*“It can also be at that age, an identity issue. That's when kids are discovering who they are what they're about and so that, that need to fit in and also that need to identify with something or someone, so it's good to be part of the big powerful, you know, pack, rather than, you know, like you said, be out on your own and be the victim.” (Parent, School 1)*



*“Um you do it with your friends, like peer pressure, even if you don’t want to do it.”*

(Student, School 2)

*“Yeah or maybe just because when they see someone else bullying...a person, they think, ah so this is what everyone else is doing so I’ll just like....try and go with the in crowd and then they start bullying them as well.”* (Student, School 1)

### ***Anger/Frustration at Having Been a Victim of Bullying***

Parents frequently discussed their opinion that some students engaged in bullying because these students were themselves victims of bullying, and so would lash out in anger or frustration. The student group also mentioned this motive, although not as frequently as the parents. Significantly, teachers did not mention being a victim of bullying as a motivation for bullying others.

*“Bullies bully. People who are bullied bully. It’s like kicking the dog. They’ve been intimidated or harassed or abused by someone above them, so they go for the next one down.”* (Parent, School 1)

*“I would say reputation, attention and them being bullied before. So they’ve been hurt so they have to hurt someone else kind of thing...”* (Student, School 1)

### ***Fun and/or boredom***

The final theme that arose from the discussions came from teachers who believed that fun and or boredom could be a factor for students engaging in traditional bullying. While this

theme was not mentioned as a factor by parents or students, it was mentioned many times by teachers.

*“And I think you’ll learn it at a very young age, you think back to being in grade 1, maybe if you made a joke about someone and you had three people laugh you get that thrill from having others jump on your ship and to get their support it makes you feel good and powerful, this is the power thing that we are talking about and good kids wrap themselves up in being bullies as well, particularly in grade 8 and 9 they test the waters out and you see good kids trying to see how many supporters they can get and when you approach them and ask “Why did you say that to that, that hurt that person?” their response is “I was just being funny.” (Teacher, School 1)*

### ***What Motivates Students to Engage in Cyberbullying?***

When looking at motives for cyberbullying amongst participants, similarities and differences were found with the themes that emerged for traditional bullying. The key themes that emerged were ***Avoiding Punishment/Retaliation, Anonymity, Power and Status, Fun and Boredom, and It’s Easy***. These themes are discussed below, with comments drawn from the focus groups to illustrate the theme.

### ***Avoiding punishment/retaliation***

Avoiding punishment and/or retaliation was a prominent theme which was present in all three group discussions. This theme is rarely described in the literature as a motive for cyberbullying (Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris, and Cuttis, 2010) and the theme was discussed with enthusiasm amongst each group. Teachers and parents felt that the internet provided a

forum where people would say things they wouldn't necessarily say face to face, and one teacher described cyberbullying as "*smarter bullying*" (School 1), implying that students who chose to bully this way were protected as they were hidden. Avoiding punishment/retaliation was the most commonly mentioned motivation perceived by students and the notion of avoiding punishment was raised many times during the student focus group discussions.

*"... Um I also think that largely it goes...they become unaccountable in...we probably only see the tip of the iceberg here and we probably only see the massive cases of cyberbullying and not the everyday cases here at school and let's be honest parents probably don't see anything at home either. So...if you can bully and get away with it then you're going to go for it... um...for real."* (Teacher, School 1)

*"There's no fear that they are going to get a punch in the head after they send a text message or put a message on the internet."* (Teacher, School 2)

*"They can remain anonymous; they can't get in trouble because it's not in their face so they can hide themselves from the possible consequences."* (Parent, School 1)

*"Uh huh and also because they could like seem like the innocent ones, like um, like like um, if the person who's being bullied by the other person comes to school and tells the teacher like the teacher can't do anything about it because they don't have any proof about it and so the person who was bullying them could act innocent and stuff like that and so yeah..."*

(Student, School 2)

## ***Anonymity***

Anonymity is often discussed in the literature as one of the main factors that differentiates traditional and cyberbullying. It proved to be a significant factor amongst all three groups although it was a contentious issue with disagreement arising within the teacher groups. This motive proved to be most popular amongst parents, and was mentioned regularly by students. One student suggested that anonymity would not be a motive for cyberbullying if the bully perceived the victim as weaker than themselves, and another believed that anonymity provided a way for students to bully and avoid responsibility for their behaviour.

*“They prefer to do it behind closed doors so to speak so no one can see who it is or they can also make an anonymous name as well, nobody can track who the bully is...”* (Parent, School 1)

*“They can be faceless like we talked about before and so it’s a lot easier for them to say and do things.”* (Parent, School 1)

*“If they’re not anonymous they probably do (cyberbully) someone weaker.”* (Student, School 2)

*“People (bullies) could use it as an excuse and say ‘someone else said this about you’ when it was actually them who did it.”* (Student, School 1)

Teachers however, were not as convinced that anonymity would be a reason for some students to engage in cyberbullying. The following excerpts highlight the differing opinions amongst the teacher groups on the issue on anonymity being a motive:

*“...one of the main reasons why they become a (cyber) bully is because it is so anonymous, so non-physically threatening; it’s just the way cowards work.”* (Teacher, School 1)

Another teacher within the group stated his disagreement when asked if he thought that cyberbullying made it easy for students to bully because they could remain anonymous.

*“Not necessarily anonymous. I don’t think that all cyberbullying is anonymous. I think some people go out there intentionally with their own mobile phones and their own name and number on it so that people will know they’ve done it and, they can see people say, ‘well that was pretty funny’, which eggs them on even further.”* (Teacher, School 1)

A participant in the second group stated their belief that some students used technology as a medium to bully because they can do it without having the other person in their presence. When asked if there was an anonymous element to bullying via technology this particular teacher agreed that it could be. However one other participant did not believe this was the case stating, *“but it’s not anonymous though, ‘cause everyone knows who it is.”* (Teacher, School 2)

### ***Power and Status***

Power and status as a motivation for cyberbullying, although mentioned during the focus groups, was not perceived to be as strong a motive by any group as it had been in traditional bullying. This motivation was again mentioned most frequently by parents and although not discussed as frequently by teachers or students, it was mentioned enough to merit inclusion. When looking at this theme within the parent discussion groups, it became apparent that some parents believed that functions found in social networking sites, such as Facebook, would appeal to students who bully, mindful of trying to improve their status and gain power. One such function is the ability to “like” a comment or a photograph posted by someone else. A number of parents thought this would encourage students who bully to try and improve the number of “likes” and comments they received. Students commented a few times throughout the discussions on the power and status effect that cyberbullying offers, focusing mainly on the wide exposure offered by using technology to bully.

*“[Students engage in cyberbullying] ...to just try and impress, yeah, just to impress people.”*

(Teacher, School 2)

*“[Cyberbullying is appealing because] ...it’s something they can do that a lot of people are going to see very quickly, they’ll probably get praise from it straight away as well.”* (Teacher, School 1)

School 1)

*“On Facebook they want a reaction from their peers. They would be like, I’m going to try and get 200 of them to comment”* (Parent, School 2)

*“Yeah they can do “liking’ the comment as well like they do on Facebook yeah. They’re always on about how many people ‘liked’ their comment or ‘liked’ their photo.”* (Parent, School 2)

School 2)

*“That would be one way of going about it, ‘Gee yesterday I only got 200 likes, I’ll see if I can get more. I’ll see if I can make it nastier.’ It’s like a status boost.”* (Parent, School 2)

*“Some people do it because they seem cool, and they get lots of ‘likes’ on their comments.”*

(Student, School 2)

*“They do it by writing on someone’s wall (comment section on facebook) so everyone can see it.”* (Student, School 1)

### ***Fun/Boredom***

The idea of cyberbullying just for fun, or to relieve boredom, was perceived as being a strong motivator amongst students in particular and also with parents. On multiple occasions during the discussions, parents led their response to the question of why some students engage in cyberbullying with the opinion that it was just for fun or for something to do. This theme

emerged many times during discussions with students who believed it to be a strong motive for students who bully to choose cyberbullying as a platform to target potential victims. A number of statements made by the students conveyed their belief that engaging in cyberbullying is a form of entertainment for bullies. Despite this theme being prevalent during the parent and student focus group discussions, teachers did not mention fun or boredom as a motive for cyberbullying.

*“I think it’s just fun for them to start off with don’t you think? I think they just get on there and start things and see what kind of reaction they get.”* (Parent, School 1)

*“It could well be some of it from sheer boredom, teenage boredom.”*(Parent, School 2)

*“...maybe they just have nothing better to do than to just bully someone.”* (Student, School 1)

*“Yeah like people just like get on the computer and go ‘I’m bored’ so they have nothing better to do so they think ‘ah I’ll just go and cyberbully someone.”* (Student, School 1)

### ***It’s Easy***

The advancement of technology and its availability as a bullying “tool” presented opportunities which some participants believed would make cyberbullying easier and therefore be a motive for some students to engage in cyberbullying. This was mainly perceived as a motive by teachers where the theme emerged several times during discussions. Parents touched on this theme a few times; however students did not mention this idea at any stage during their focus group discussions.

*“I think it’s just because the medium is so readily available.”* (Teacher, School 2)

*“It’s easy for them, sort of thing. Maybe with how technology has become more prevalent in our lives now...”* (Teacher, School 2)

*“I guess my point of comparison is simply that it’s easier to say things electronically than it is to people’s faces. I think it’s true for kids too.”* (Teacher, School 1)

*“Yeah it is just easier, they have access to it.”* (Parent, School 1)

*“...they might find it easier to say bad things because they’re typing into a computer as opposed to actually looking at the person as they say whatever it is they’re saying.”* (Parent, School 2)

## **Discussion**

Most participants understood cyberbullying to be bullying though some kind of technology, yet the technology component seemed to be more understood than the bullying component. In respect to the three main tenets of bullying, differences were apparent between the groups. Teacher groups omitted an imbalance of power as pivotal. Parent and teacher groups omitted an intent to hurt. No group mentioned repetition as a necessary component, consistent with the findings of previous research (Mishna et al., 2005) that teachers omitted repetition from their definition of traditional bullying. The concept of repetition however, is still a controversial issue in definitions not only of traditional bullying but also of cyberbullying (Dooley et al., 2009).

All three groups of participants perceived a different main motivation for young people to cyberbully. For teachers, the main motivation was the ease with which students could



cyberbully. Parents believed that the ability for students to be anonymous when they cyberbully was their main motivation. With students, the main motive reported was to avoid retaliation from victims or punishment from teachers, schools and parents. There were more similarities found in the perceptions of all participant groups of motivations to traditional bullying than there were to cyberbullying.

Anonymity as a motive to cyberbully was considered differently by the different groups. Parents were convinced that anonymity was the main motivation for youths to engage in cyberbullying, supporting the opinion of some researchers (Hoff and Mitchell, 2009; Li, 2005). However, there was some disagreement in the students' and the teachers' groups. This mirrors the findings in existing literature where anonymity is often cited as a motive by some students (Kowalski and Limber, 2007). However, findings from other studies (Junoven and Gross, 2007; Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris, and Cutts, 2010) report that victims often believe they know their perpetrator's identity and that those who bully do not necessarily hide behind technology but sometimes want to be known. Students in this study were of the opinion that anonymity was a motivational factor at times but if there was an imbalance of power favouring the bully, then anonymity was not viewed as necessary. As an imbalance of power is accepted in most definitions of cyberbullying, it could be assumed that this would generally mean that anonymity was not an issue.

A surprising finding was the perception of cyberbullying being motivated by a desire for self-preservation, in other words, to avoid retaliation or punishment. This was the most commonly discussed motivation among students and was frequently mentioned by parents, though rarely by teachers. When examining the cyberbullying literature this motive is seldom mentioned.

Only one recent study (Varjas et al., 2010) has reported avoiding consequences as motivation for engaging in cyberbullying. A possible explanation for the scarcity of this motive in existing literature may be due to the majority of studies using quantitative methods such as questionnaires for gathering data, therefore limiting participant responses. This may indicate a need for further research using qualitative methods to gather the views and opinions of teachers, parents and students.

Teachers were the only group to suggest that cyberbullying was motivated by technology being so accessible to young people. The main argument against this line of reasoning however, is that it is mostly the same students who are engaging in cyberbullying who engage in traditional bullying (Cross et al., 2009). Both parents and teachers gave weight to the technology, rather than social relationship between the bully and the victim, as motivation to cyberbully. This is a significant finding as some victims have been found to be hesitant in reporting cyberbullying incidents as they believe adults will restrict their use of computers and mobile phones (Campbell, 2005; Mishna, Saini, and Solomon, 2009). If adults perceive the technology is motivating some young people to cyberbully they may be inclined to restrict the use of technology either in the home or at school; often punishing the victim.

Although not perceived as the strongest motivator, a key similarity across the groups was attributing a student's need for power and status as a motivation to cyberbully. This finding partly aligns with traditional bullying literature where this theme emerges as the most common motivation to engage in traditional bullying (Burns, Maycock, Cross, and Brown, 2008; Lee, 2010). Engaging in cyberbullying for fun and to relieve boredom was believed to be a motivator in the parent and student groups. Teachers however did not mention this as a

motivator for cyberbullying, yet they did feel this was a motivator for more traditional forms of bullying. Thornberg and Knutsen (2010) attribute boredom as a motivation for bullying when bullying occurs in schools. It appears that boredom may be a motivator to bully outside the school also, as cyberbullying mainly occurs outside of the school grounds and outside school hours (Cross et al., 2009).

A victim's difference (including race, weight, sexual orientation, and academic ability) was perceived to be a common motivation for traditional bullying. Many of these forms of difference have been reported in previous studies as reasons for some young people to bully others (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Frisen, Holmqvist, and Oscarsson, 2008). However, difference was only discussed by one student participant as a motive for cyberbullying. The reason for difference being omitted from the discussions on cyberbullying by the majority of participants, when it had been perceived as a strong motivation for traditional bullying, is unclear at this stage and requires further investigation. Peer pressure has also been discussed in the literature as a motive for traditional bullying, but is less common and was not mentioned for cyberbullying. The differences in perception of the motives of traditional and cyberbullies from this group of participants seems to stem from the differences the technological features of cyberbullying offer; such as anonymity, ease of accessibility to technology and the perception that their actions will not be detected.

### ***Limitations of the current study***

One limitation of this study was that it was not known what personal experiences participants had with bullying and cyberbullying. This was done as previously stated in order to protect

participants from disclosure of potentially painful and confrontational information in the group. Any previous experiences with cyberbullying may have influenced participants' opinions and beliefs. This is important as it has been shown by Wilton and Campbell (2011) that the role of a student in bullying (as a victim or a bystander) did influence their perception of motives of students who bullied. A further limitation is the small number of participants involved and the voluntary nature of their recruitment. This could bias the results found in this study. Moreover, findings from this study indicate that some participants did not fully understand bullying and cyberbullying. This indicates a need for more explicit information on what constitutes these behaviours. Failure to understand these key terms may interfere with how interventions are handled.

### ***Implications and future research***

These findings have implications for both prevention and intervention strategies for cyberbullying in schools and for future research. As adults expressed very different views from young people about the definition of what constitutes bullying, students, teachers and parents need to discuss in each school what constitutes bullying behaviour. Until all groups have a shared understanding of the behaviour, interventions are unlikely to adequately address the issue and foster change. Students' perception of cyberbullying being a method that avoids retaliation or punishment needs to be addressed. These two practice issues could be addressed by a school policy written and agreed with all stakeholders which includes definitions of all types of bullying and the sanctions which will be provided (Butler, Kift, Campbell, Spears, and Slee, 2011). Future cyberbullying research needs to move beyond prevalence and consequence studies and examine risk and protective factors so that prevention and intervention studies can be conducted. Understanding the motives of students

who cyberbully is one way to unpick and address their behaviour. As adults are central to the implementation of prevention and intervention strategies for young people, the findings from this study indicate a need to include the opinions of all three groups in future research.

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