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Talking the Talk: An Exploration of Parent-Child Communication about Cyberbullying

by

Veronica Anne Droser

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Communication

Thesis Committee:
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2013

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ABSTRACT

Technology has, without a doubt, altered the social fabric of society. Mediated forms of communication have paved the way for more efficient production, and the vast amount of information available online has given people the opportunity to be more informed than ever. However, the rise of mediated communication has also presented a number of new threats. The current study focused on one of these threats, cyberbullying, and was interested in looking at how parents talk about and understand their child's cyberbullying behavior.

This study had the goal of uncovering if parents talk to their child about cyberbullying, and how they approach these conversations. The intent of this study was grounded in the idea that parent-child communication is a valuable tool for developing belief systems, as well as making sustainable, positive and effective changes to behavior and perceptions.

Ultimately, parents do not avoid conversations about cyberbullying with their children. Parents structure these conversations with the intention of positively changing their child's behavior and beliefs. Specifically, parents talk about cyberbullying with their children as an effort to decrease the perceived risk their child faces if he or she participates in cyberbullying. However, these conversations are limited because they are grounded in misrepresented media coverage of cyberbullying which intensifies cyberbullying behaviors. As such, media producers must work toward presenting more all-encompassing and wide spread coverage of cyberbullying as an effort to educate parents about the variety of behaviors which relate to cyberbullying.

DEDICATION

The following thesis is dedicated to my parents. To my mom for her endless support and positive attitude, and for always making me want to be a better person. To my dad for his perseverance and dedication. You will always be the best role model. Thank you for always being there for me, and thank you for teaching me the value of hard work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wonderful advisor, Dr. Rill, for dealing with me these past 2 years. She has been a wonderful role model and an incredible resource. I also want to thank my committee members, Dr. Frank and Dr. Woo, for all of their valuable feedback. They have been a great help in making my project the best it can be. I would also like to thank Corey Callahan for being my personal savior and copy editor of all things graduate school. I need to thank my family for all of their support, and for listening to me talk endlessly about communication theories and research methods even though I know they had better things to talk about. I would like to thank my beautiful, thoughtful and supportive cohort, without whom I would have been lost. It is also important that I thank Sophie Marie for being an unconditional love machine.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2011 President Barack Obama and first Lady Michelle Obama welcomed congressmen and women, school children, teachers and parents to the White House for the first ever White House Conference on Bullying Prevention. At this conference, the President made it clear that he and his administration were not going to address bullying lightly, but that they were going to work “to dispel the myth that bullying is just a harmless rite of passage or an inevitable part of growing up” (President Obama, 2011). The President indicated two important things about bullying at the conference: 1) how important and serious of a problem bullying is; 2) that bullying can no longer be understood as the problem of a single individual, but rather that it needs to be classified as a social problem whose solution rests in effective communication between students, parents, teachers and school administrative staff. The President encouraged conference attendants to understand that “as parents and students, as teachers and members of the community, we can take steps -- all of us -- to help prevent bullying and create a climate in our schools in which all of our children can feel safe; a climate in which they all can feel like they belong” (President Obama, 2011).

The President’s recognition of bullying as a social problem represents an important component of bullying that has only started to become incorporated into research. By acknowledging that bullying is a community-wide problem, it becomes apparent that bullying and the consequences of bullying are related directly to children’s greater social networks. Bullying is not isolated, but rather influences and is influenced by many different facets of the child’s existence (Dixon, 2012). Although bullying is related to a child’s larger social system, the current research is specifically interested in

the family, and more precisely the child's relationship with his or her parents. Similar to the President, Dixon (2012) argued that it is necessary to use an integrated systematic model for understanding bullying behavior and purported that understanding how bullying behavior is related to other aspects of a child's life is vital for coming to a solution to the problem.

Traditionally, bullying behavior has been understood as the act of intentionally causing harm to an individual or a group of individuals (Beran & Wade, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010). An integrative approach to understanding bullying behavior creates a way of conceptualizing the different pathways such harmful behaviors can take by providing a way of identifying the problem early on. In most cases of traditional bullying, the harm is committed in a physical environment, for instance at school, where the individual taking part in the bullying can be monitored. However, advances in technology have, to some extent, made space obsolete and in doing so, have opened the door to new forms of bullying behavior.

Cyberbullying, or bullying behavior which takes place in electronic environments such as online, or through cell phones, is an emerging concern for educators, parents, children and even the President. This new form of bullying makes it possible for the harmful behavior to continue once the child has left school, making it a difficult problem to solve because there are many individuals responsible for supervising the child. This research study is focused on cyberbullying as opposed to traditional bullying because, while a great deal of research has presented trends and patterns in traditional bullying, little research has concentrated on how such behaviors are situated within the realm of cyber technologies.

Despite differences between the two types of bullying, many characteristics of traditional bullying carry over to cyberbullying. For instance, in both forms there exists a bully, the individual who performs the aggressive acts, and a victim, the target of the aggressive acts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Li, 2006; Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). In both traditional and cyber forms of bullying, there is a power imbalance between the individuals involved in the behavior that separates the victim from the bully. In traditional bullying, the power imbalance is rooted in physical build and popularity, but in cyberbullying such imbalance is based on computer literacy and skill (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Greene, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). In both types of bullying the behavior is constructed with the intention of bringing harm to the victim. However, the behaviors differ in the medium through which the harm is inflicted. Unlike traditional bullying which takes place in a face-to-face context, cyberbullying takes place over a variety of electronic means such as e-mail, text messaging and social networking (Beran & Wade, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). This difference in medium makes cyberbullying an important area to study within communication research because it represents a troublesome phenomenon that has resulted from an increase of new media technologies like the internet and mobile communications.

The current research is fueled by a desire to learn from research on traditional bullying in an effort to further understand and expand knowledge on specific behaviors and patterns that apply to cyberbullying. This interest stems from findings which indicate that cyberbullying is a very real problem facing society (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Specifically, reports indicate that, since 2004, at least 20% of students ages 10-18 have

been the victim of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The exception of these findings being May 2007 where only 18.8% of students reported being the victim of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). These reports also indicate that since 2004 (with the exception of November 2009) at least 14% of students (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Moreover, teenagers are steadily gaining access to mediated forms of communication such as cell phones and social networking sites, where most cyberbullying takes place (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Specifically, over 80% of youth ages 10-18 have cell phones, over 50% of these children have Facebook profiles, and over 45% have e-mail accounts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In sum, children are continuing to cyberbullying, while also gaining more access to cyberbullying tools such as cell phones (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Further, news reports are flooded with stories of young people ending their lives because of online tormenting. For example, 15-year-old Amanda Todd after years of torment at multiple different schools ended her life in October 2012 (Ng, 2010). However, cyberbullying has implications for those who bully as well. For instance, in 2010, nine high school students were charged in the death of 15-year-old Phoebe Price who committed suicide after months of online and offline harassment (Goldman, 2010). Ultimately, these stories and studies indicate that cyberbullying is a very relevant problem facing society.

Despite the negative implications of cyberbullying behavior, school administrators, parents, and even young people themselves are unaware of how to handle such threats (Chibbaro, 2007). Thus, increasing knowledge about cyberbullying is vital because the implications of such behavior can be tragic (Chibbaro, 2007; Hinduja &

Patchin, 2007; Snakenborg, Van Acker, & Gable, 2011). Within this overarching goal, there is a focus on understanding cyberbullying in relation to other facets of an individual's life. Dixon's (2012) integrative model provides a useful lens to approach cyberbullying because it recognizes that cyberbullying is not bound by physical space and that consequently it involves a multitude of individuals and must be dealt with on a community level.

From an integrative perspective, the solution to cyberbullying behavior is contingent on understanding how an individual operates within their entire system of interactions (Dixon, 2012). That being said, in the current research there is an emphasis on uncovering if and how parents are communicating with their children about cyberbullying because "the influence of the family is a powerful force shaping the personality of the individual children" (Dixon, 2012, p. 203). This recommendation stems from family systems theory work which emphasizes both the interconnectedness of family members and the constant creation of shared beliefs (Checkland, 1999).

The relationships and communication that exist within a family play a key role in the child's socialization because they are the leading way in which a child learns to interact with others (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Checkland, 1999). When considered with relation to bullying, parents are a key factor in reaching an effective solution to the problem of bullying because the child's relationship and communication with them has implications for how the child will behave in a given situation (Dixon, 2012). Further, Dixon (2012) purports that examination of parent-child relationships may provide an effective starting place for greater understanding of bullying behaviors because it may

indicate “which parts of the system play an active role, how these parts interact and what can be done” (p.38).

A key component of family systems theory and the basis of both Dixon (2012) and President Obama’s arguments is that interpersonal communication among family members plays a key role in creating and maintaining relationships because it creates an individual’s conceptualization of the world (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Further, a great deal of literature indicates that communication between parents and their children is vital to children’s construction of reality and their perception of other individuals (Aifif & Guerrero, 1995; Anderson, Krueger & Riesch, 2006; Kohn, 1963). It is important to examine parent-child communication about cyberbullying because understanding how cyberbullying behavior is approached in parent-child communication may provide insight into an effective solution.

In sum, the two major conceptual areas of interest in the current study are cyberbullying and parent-child communication. Past research has called for exploration of the relationship between the two concepts because it has been suggested that an understanding of how they are related may lead to the creation of more effective solutions to the problems they cause (Connolly & O’Moore, 2003; Dixon, 2012; Easton & Aberman, 2008). Specifically, previous work has advocated for better parental understanding of cyberbullying, as researchers argue that such increased awareness could be key in implementing intervention and prevention strategies (Chibbaro, 2007; Snakenborg et al., 2011). Researchers point out that

“parents may be unaware of their child’s online behavior and need to know that they have a legal obligation to monitor their child’s online activities. It is possible

that some of the cyberbully's words and acts of cyber abuse may be punishable by law" (Chibbaro, 2007, p. 66).

That being said, gathering insight into parental understandings of cyberbullying, and specifically exploring how they may talk about cyberbullying behaviors with their children is an important piece of preventing harm. By understanding how parents conceptualize cyberbullying behavior, it is possible that steps can be taken to help them more efficiently monitor their children's online behavior. The current research aims at making the first steps toward creating an integrated model of cyberbullying by improving understanding of how cyberbullying is talked about in a family.

Research Goals

Stemming from Dixon's (2012) argument that it is important to take an integrated approach to solving the problems associated with bullying behavior, the first goal of the current research is to learn whether parents are talking with their children about cyberbullying behaviors. This goal is rooted in the idea that interpersonal communication is a valuable tool for effective problem solving especially within a parent-child relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995; Anderson et al., 2006; Contreras - Grau, Gentzler, Kerns, & Weimer, 2005). Knowing where cyberbullying stands in parent-child communication is a fundamental step in helping to solve the problems associated with the behavior because it will provide a clear starting place for building solutions.

Despite the importance of open parent-child communication, literature has indicated that many conversational topics are avoided in conversations between parents and their children. These topics generally relate to sensitive matters such as dating and sex, but they also involve conversations about negative experiences and peer

relationships (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995). Bullying behavior, in both traditional and cyber forms, is grounded in peer relationships and creates the potential for negative experiences because the behavior is intended to cause harm to an individual or group (Beran & Wade, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Erdur - Baker, 2010). Thus, based on the nature of cyberbullying, it is possible that conversations relating to experiences with cyberbullying are frequently avoided in parent-child conversation. However, because research on cyberbullying is so slim, this is only a speculation. The current research intends to uncover where cyberbullying stands in parent-child communication because identifying it as a sensitive topic will help indicate clear areas for future research and solution building.

The second goal of the current research builds on the first and is focused on learning how parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying. This goal is built on research that has indicated that effective parent-child relationships are vital to a child's socialization and that parent-child communication is imperative to the child's development and progress all through life (Heflin & Putallaz, 1990; Rosen, Rothbaum, Uchida, & Ujiie, 2002). The importance of parent-child communication is a driving factor in the current research because it creates a context for examining if cyberbullying relates to different facets of the child's life (Dixon, 2012). To understand how parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying, the current research will draw from Hoffman and Saltzstein's (1967) work which indicates three primary communicative strategies parents use when talking or problem solving with their children: power assertion, love withdrawal and induction. These three communicative approaches will help uncover how parents communicate about cyberbullying because each strategy represents a different type of parental behavior or reaction. For instance, while power

assertion capitalizes on the parents' power over the child, induction works to make the child realize the faults of their actions, and love withdrawal relies on the extraction of attachment and emotions as a way to solve the problem through avoidance (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Further, knowledge of the communicative strategies taken by the parents will help create a more integrated and systematic perspective of the problem because it will start to indicate the role parents can have in eliminating cyberbullying.

A third and final goal of the current research is to understand how parents conceptualize their children's cyberbullying behavior. Literature on cyberbullying is relatively scarce because the topic is much newer than other, more traditional areas of social science. Mixed understandings of such behavior make creating solutions to the problems difficult because what constitutes problematic cyberbullying behavior to one parent may be normal behavior to another (Dixon, 2012). To understand parental perceptions of cyberbullying behaviors, the current research will draw from recent work which has uncovered seven primary cyberbullying behaviors: flaming, online harassment, cyberstalking, denigration, masquerade, outing and exclusion (Beran & Wade, 2011; Dixon, 2011; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004). Specifically, the study hopes to learn from participants if and who they would talk with their children about a variety of different cyberbullying behaviors. Such knowledge may help in creating a more comprehensive understanding of how parents understand cyberbullying. As such, the current study focuses on exploring how parents perceive their child's cyberbullying behavior in the hopes that such information will help improve knowledge and understanding of how parents could talk to their children about cyberbullying.

In the end, this study hopes to advance current knowledge of cyberbullying. There is an emphasis on how cyberbullying relates to the child's larger social system and specifically on how cyberbullying is presented in parent-child communication. Additionally, cyberbullying is positioned amongst other social issues facing today's youth in the hopes that it be taken seriously as a society wide problem whose solution lies in research like the current study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

What follows is an overview of the literature which examines the concept of family and the interconnectedness of the parent-child relationship. Literature on parent-child relationships emphasizes the function and role of communication with particular focus on topics which are frequently avoided within their conversations. Similarly, Further, research on the communicative strategies in parent-child communication is examined, with a focus on how parents approach conversations about sensitive topics with their children. With regard to cyberbullying, the literature on both traditional and cyberbullying behavior is explored with particular emphasis on the presence of such behaviors in schools and by children ages 10 to 18. Seven primary cyberbullying behaviors are examined with a particular focus on how such behaviors often play out in a group process rather than solely by an individual. Further, characteristics and personality traits of the various participatory roles within bullying, such as bully and victim are also examined.

What is Family?

A family is a unique cluster of individuals, which differs from a group of strangers because members of a family have special bonds and relationships with one another (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Relationships between individuals are vital, and in a family setting they play a large role in the creation of the shared values, understandings and meanings which exist within the family environment. Family systems theory as explored by Bavelas & Segal (1982) emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals in a family by purporting that individuals not only exist in a shared physical environment, but that the relationships between individuals are what makes the environment exist in

the first place. This understanding of family accentuates the importance of interpersonal relationships between family members and insists that, “relationships are established, maintained and evidenced by the members communicating with each other” (Bavelas & Segal, 1982, p.102).

Utilizing family systems theory as an aid in defining family allows researchers to look beyond the technical and biological interpretations of family because it focuses on the relationships and communication which take place between the members of any particular family unit (Bavelas & Segal, 1982; Bornstein, Hoff, Laursen, & Tardif, 2002; Checkland, 1999; Yerby 1995). Within the parent-child relationship, communication is used not only to develop and maintain the bond between the two members, but also to indicate complex emotions such as fear or desire for protection in a mutually understood way (Anderson et al, 2006; Bogenschneider, 1996). Communication is a catalyst for influence and change in the parent-child relationship because it is the means through which a child or a parent can convey his or her ideas, attitudes or feelings (Anderson et al., 2006). It is these same ideas, attitudes and feelings which will fuel a reaction by the other member of the relationship, which will in turn continue the communication and further progress the parent-child relationship (Yerby, 1995). Therefore, when approaching parent-child relationships, it is important to understand the function of communication because without discourse there would be no way to build and maintain the bond.

Parent-Child Communication

In a parent-child relationship, communication is used to convey feelings and ideas, solve problems, develop bonds and reveal and pass on beliefs and values (Afifi &

Guerrero, 1995; Anderson et al., 2006; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Hubbard & Mazur, 2004; Keijsers & Laird, 2010; Kohn, 1963; Newcomer & Udry, 1985). Within the parent-child relationship, communication is a means through which changes in behavior, beliefs and feelings can begin because “communication processes are modifiable, and thus may be a promising target for intervention” (Anderson et al., 2006, p.41). However, not all parent-child relationships effectively use communication as a catalyst for behavioral or emotional changes because the effectiveness of communication is contingent on the structure or amount of comfort that exists within a parent-child relationship (Contreras-Grau et al., 2005). For instance, Contreras-Grau et al. (2005) have looked extensively at parent-child communication and have found children who are able to talk comfortably about negative feelings or experiences with their parents are more likely to receive and consider parental advice on dealing with their feelings.

Children use communication to express their emotions and to help understand their role not only in the parent-child relationship, but also in the larger family unit and in the greater culture (Rosen et al., 2002). Communication practices are imperative to the development of the child and necessary for the maintenance of the parent-child relationship because they allow individuals to create a shared environment in which they can coexist. For the current research, it is important to understand the function of communication in the parent-child relationship and specifically how different communication styles may produce different reactions and behavioral changes. Further, it is also important to consider what topics are approached or avoided in parent-child communication because what children choose to share with their parents will shape communication’s capacity for creating change in behavior or beliefs. That being said, in

the current research it is important to consider two facets of parent-child communication: parental communicative approaches, and topic avoidance.

Parental Communicative Approaches

Contreras-Grau et al. (2005) suggest that there are two primary ways a parent can respond to their child: supportively or unsupportively. Parents who react to their children's attempts to communicate in a supportive manner allow the child to feel validated and comforted. Validation of a child's communication is essentially validation of his or her feelings and attitudes, and parental acceptance of the child's emotions fosters an environment where the child is open and accepting to advice and strategies for future communication (Contreras-Grau et al., 2005). In contrast, unsupportive parental reactions, which often employ punitive tactics such as minimizing the importance of the child's communication, often leave the child feeling neglected or ashamed (Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Fabes, Kupanoff, Leonard, & Martin, 2001). As a result of their parents' unsupportive reactions, children often have trouble communicating their feelings, which leads to difficulty both within and outside of the family unit (Fabes et al., 2001). In this sense, communication is both an indicator of the structure of a parent-child relationship and a tool used to maintain or diminish the cohesiveness of the relationship.

Hoffman and Saltzstein (1967) note that there are three primary communicative approaches parents can take when communicating with their children: power assertion, love withdrawal, and induction. Power assertion is the most physical of the three categories and occurs when parents use verbal or nonverbal communication to capitalize on their control over the child (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Within parent-child communication power assertion is typically unsupportive and often takes the form of

“physical punishment, deprivation of material objects or privileges, the direct application of force” (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967, p. 48). Examples of power assertion are spanking and punishments such as being grounded or not allowed to leave the house or bedroom for a period of time. Love withdrawal generally makes more of a mental impact on the child and typically occurs when the parent “more or less openly withdraws love by ignoring the child or isolating him” (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967, p. 48). In a sense love withdrawal is emotional denial, where the parent is actively isolating the child by remaining distant and unengaged. Similar to love withdrawal, induction is a communicative approach which hinges on mentally impacting the child. Induction techniques are focused on evoking feelings of guilt in the child by making them realize how their actions have hurt others. The inductive approach is based on “telling the child that his action has hurt the parent, that an object he damaged was valued, that the parent is disappointed” (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967, p. 48). For example, if a parent were to inductively respond to their child’s cyberbullying behavior his or her reaction would emphasize how the child’s actions were hurtful to them as a parent, or to other children, rather than how the child’s behavior was bad.

There are discrepancies in the effectiveness of the parent’s reaction to the child’s behavior. For instance, Barnett, Quackenbush and Sinisi (1996) found that children are more receptive to the induction approach because they perceive their parents as being more fair. Additionally, Attili, Roazzi and Vermigli (2010) discovered that negative, controlling and disconfirming parent-child interactions can often have negative consequences both inside and outside of the family. Further, Hoffman and Saltzstein (1967) found that of the three communicative approaches, power assertion was the least

effective in enacting sustainable behavioral change in the child. Hoffman and Saltzstein (1967) also found that induction is the most effective of the three approaches because the child is “gradually enabled to pick out on his own, without help from others, the effects of his behavior, and to react with an internally based sense of guilt” (p. 55). Within the spectrum of Hoffman and Saltzstein’s (1967) communicative approaches, love withdrawal falls in the middle because it is more effective and better received than power assertion but lacks “the cognitive material needed to heighten the child’s awareness of wrongdoing and facilitate his learning to generalize accurately to other relevant situations” (p. 55).

The above categories represent three different strategies used by parents to help control, teach and discipline their children. Despite having been created over 50 years ago, they have remained a useful tool in developing researcher understanding of parent-child communication. In fact, many researchers have used Hoffman and Saltzstein’s (1967) three categories as a building block for their research. For instance, Attili et al. (2010) referred to Hoffman and Saltzstein’s (1967) work on parent-child communication to gauge the quality of parent and child interactive styles in their research on the relationship between parent-child relationships and children’s social competence. They found that popular children, or children with higher levels of social competence, had more inductive and supportive communication with their mothers (Attili et al., 2010). In contrast, children who were rejected at school and those with lower levels of social competence were more likely to have aggressive and controlling parent-child relationships and more often experienced power assertion parental reactions (Attili et al., 2010).

For the current research, Hoffman and Saltzstein's (1967) categories are important because they provide a way of measuring how parents approach conversations with their children. More specifically, the three communicative strategies create a framework for understanding potential ways parents could talk about cyberbullying with their children. However, before it is possible to understand how parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying it is important to examine if cyberbullying is a topic in parent-child conversations.

Topic Avoidance

Communication is a key part of parent-child relationships. However, despite its importance, parent-child communication can often create issues and lead to detachment between the individuals because there may be confusion or disagreement about the appropriateness of certain topics or conversations (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Hubbard & Mazur, 2004; Keijsers & Laird, 2010). The disagreement in communication that is most often seen in parent-child relationships is topic avoidance because as the child is socialized, he or she learns, not only from parents but also from outside sources, how to act in certain situations. Within a parent-child relationship this discrepancy often exists because "topic avoidance and self-disclosure are both forces that shape family communication" (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995, p. 276). In parent-child communication the line between the appropriate and inappropriate levels of self-disclosure is a moving target, meaning it can be different for each relationship and within each context (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995). Sharing too much information can limit an individual's privacy and can strain the relationship by making that individual feel vulnerable (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995). In contrast, sharing too little information can leave

individuals feeling disconnected because it fosters an environment of individuality and isolation (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995).

When examining the parent-child relationship it is important to explore literature on topic-avoidance because it defines “the scope and boundaries of intimacy in close relationships” (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995, p. 277). There is variety in the subject matter deemed suitable for conversation, and topic appropriateness depends greatly on the nature and structure of the relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Rosen et al., 2002). For instance, boys often feel comfortable sharing private and personal information with their mothers, but limit their conversations with their fathers to those related to advice giving and solving of practical issues (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005). Similarly, girls often avoid sharing private or personal information with their fathers because they believe their fathers will be unresponsive to what they have said (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005). Afifi and Guerrero (2005) posit that personal discussions are often avoided with fathers because one of the general principles of self-disclosure states that “regardless of the discloser’s sex, people tend to display more topic avoidance with male than female targets” (p.278).

Afifi and Guerrero (1995) suggest that within parent-child communication there are four major reasons for topic avoidance: 1) self protection, 2) relationship protection, 3) partner unresponsiveness, and 4) social inappropriateness. These categories are each unique in their purpose but are connected by the individual’s desire for privacy as well as his or her ability to save face and maintain order in the relationship. Children employ self-protection techniques in conversations about their peers (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005; Anderson et al., 2006; Angera, Brookins - Fisher & Inungu, 2008; Hubbard & Mazur,

2004). Although parent-child communication about sex and contraceptives increases the likelihood that the child will effectively use contraceptives, many children avoid or only partially disclose information about sex because they believe their parents are ineffective sex educators (Angera et al., 2008; Newcomer & Udry, 1985). Further, parent-child communication is a key factor in preventing drug and alcohol abuse in children because “it increases open and factual discussions of drug use and also strengthens bonds between parents and youth” (King & Vidourek, 2011, p. 12). However, despite the importance of this communication, children are likely to avoid or not engage in these conversations (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005). Children avoid communication about sensitive issues, such as drug or alcohol use, as a way to protect themselves because they fear their parents will become angry, and they will be abandoned (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005). In this sense, children are responsible for avoiding the topics because they want to protect themselves and their parent-child relationship from topics they feel are contextually inappropriate or irrelevant to their relationship to their parent.

On a general level, topics which are typically avoided in parent-child communication tend to relate to intimate or extra-familial relationships, sex, and negative life experiences (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995). Individuals often avoid these because they “fear exposure, abandonment, angry attacks, loss of control, their own destructive impulses, and losing individuality” (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995, p. 280). Patterns in topic avoidance literature presents an interesting way of approaching cyberbullying because although Afifi and Guerrero’s (1995) work does not address cyberbullying, it does indicate that negative life experiences and extra familial relationships, two factors of cyberbullying experiences, are commonly avoided in parent-child relationship.

Specifically, children's unwillingness to share information about their peer relationships suggests that they are likely to avoid conversing with their parents about cyberbullying because such experiences occur in relationships outside of the family. Additionally, because cyberbullying is rooted in intentionally harmful behavior, cyberbullying could constitute a negative life experience, and thus may be avoided in parent-child relationships (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hindjuja & Patchin, 2010).

Communication patterns within a parent-child dyad are indicators of the relationship structure, the perception of support and the level of comfort felt by the individuals within the relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Fabes et al., 2001; Rosen et al., 2002). A child's perception of parental support and communicative approach is a factor in his or her willingness to share information about private topics, such as experiences with cyberbullying (Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Fabes et al., 2001). Specifically, inductive parental reactions help foster a deeper understanding of why certain behaviors are problematic by emphasizing and deconstructing the damaging effects of the child's actions (Attili et al., 2010). That being said, it is important to examine if parents and children are communicating about cyberbullying, but also how parents are approaching these conversations, because the parents' communicative strategy may play a role in the child's propensity to disclose about cyberbullying experiences.

Connecting literature on cyberbullying and literature on topic avoidance establishes a starting place for cyberbullying research by providing a context within which cyberbullying can be examined. Currently this connection is important because previous literature indicates that open and supportive parent-child communication is

beneficial and effective at building and maintaining healthy relationships (Attili et al., 2010; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; King & Vidourek, 2011). In a different vein, literature on topic avoidance indicates that many characteristics of cyberbullying experiences, such as peer relationships, are present in commonly avoided subjects in parent-child communication. Ultimately, this connection has two important functions in the current research. First, it creates a strong case for cyberbullying being an avoided topic in parent-child communication. Second, it suggests that open, supportive, and inductive approaches to parent-child communication about cyberbullying may work to prevent cyberbullying by strengthening understandings of the negative implications of such behavior. That being said, the current research is concerned with answering the following research questions:

RQ1: Do parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying?

RQ2: What communicative approach (i.e. power assertion, love withdrawal and induction) do parents take with their children when communicating about cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying

In the current research, the function of parent-child communication in the prevention and education of children is of utmost importance because cyberbullying combines social and health risks. Cyberbullying is “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” and generally “involves sending harassing or threatening messages (via text message or e-mail), posting derogatory comments about someone on a Web site or social networking site, or physically threatening or intimidating someone in a variety of online settings” (Hinduja

& Patchin, 2010, p. 208). Similar to understandings of traditional bullying, cyberbullying is a harmful and risky behavior for children, no matter the capacity of their involvement, which makes it a topic important to cover in parent-child communication. Despite similarities between cyberbullying and its traditional counterpart, there are many differences between the two behaviors.

Although bullying has been of interest to researchers since the 1970s, its behaviors and consequences have long been considered an “accepted as a fundamental and normal part of childhood” (Campbell, 2005, p. 2). However, recent advances in technology have paved the way for new channels through which bullying behavior can travel and have sparked researcher interest in cyberbullying (Beran & Wade, 2011; Campbell, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010). Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying or online bullying as it is sometimes referred to, is an “intentional act(s) of aggression-or intentional act(s) causing harm toward someone else” (Beran & Wade, 2011, p.45). What sets cyberbullying apart from its traditional counterpart is the medium through which the aggression travels. By its nature, cyberbullying can occur through a variety of electronic sources such as e-mail, cell phones and online social communities whereas traditional bullying is limited to face-to-face interactions. This change in medium has made it possible for bullying behavior to occur outside of the school grounds which, has in turn made bullying an issue that needs to be dealt with by a more widespread audience (Campbell, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010). Further, a key factor in traditional bullying which takes a different form in cyberbullying is the unequal distribution of power between the individual performing the acts, or the bully, and the individual receiving them, the victim (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Greene, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). Researchers of traditional

bullying indicate that there is an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim which is linked to a combination of popularity status and physique (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Greene, 2006; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). Conversely, in cyberbullying, power imbalance is often linked to computer literacy and skill (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006).

Research on traditional bullying has acted as the foundation for a great deal of cyberbullying research. One of the important aspects of traditional bullying which has been a building block for the current research is the notion that bullying is an inherently social behavior which allows individuals the ability to participate in a number of different capacities, for instance the bully or the victim. Although the behaviors of a cyberbully may differ from those of a traditional bully they are, on a basic level, fulfilling the same role of aggressor. Similarly, although the behavior causing the harm may differ between cyber and traditional bullying, the victim plays the same role in both situations, the target. The bully and the victim each have unique roles in bullying behavior and are often identifiable by characteristics not necessarily directly related to bullying.

Who is a Cyberbully?

First and foremost, because it is a relatively new field of study, research which has examined characteristics of cyberbullies has yielded varied results. With regard to gender, researchers are especially divided. Some research has suggested that in general males are more likely to take on the role of cyberbully (Li, 2006); however competing research has found that girls will more frequently find themselves in the cyberbully position (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Further, some researchers even indicate that gender is not a significant contributing factor in a child's propensity toward being a cyberbully (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006). Aside from gender there is also debate about the typical age

and grade of cyberbullies. However, researchers are generally in agreement that

cyberbullies are, or consider themselves to be, effective internet and computer users (Li, 2006; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004; Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009).

In addition, there are also a number of psychological characteristics and personality traits which researchers have found to be typical in cyberbullies. For instance, children who frequently fall into the role of cyberbullying are likely to participate in other problematic behavior such as physical aggression and drug and alcohol use (Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004). Further, Li (2007) found that many of the psychological characteristics of a cyberbully overlap with those of traditional bullying, and that an overwhelming majority of individuals who bullied in face-to-face situations also bullied in cyber or online situations. That being said, when generating an understanding of who a cyberbully is, it is useful to consider personality traits which overlap between traditional and cyber forms of bullying. Further, this link is also important because research on cyberbullying is limited and therefore a connection between cyber and traditional forms of bullying establishes a starting place for cyberbullying research.

Much literature on bullying is linked to aggression and violence. For instance, children who engage in traditional bullying behavior are often aggressive and have very little empathy for those they victimize (Bosworth, Espelage & Simon, 2000; Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Davis, Parault & Pellegrini, 2007; Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005; Olweus, 2003). In addition to higher levels of aggression, research on traditional bullying has also indicated that bullying behavior can be associated with positive attitudes relating to violence (Finkelhor, Holt, & Kantor, 2009; Olweus, 2003). A child's propensity toward aggressive behavior is directly linked to his or her experiences within the family and

specifically within the parent-child relationship (Binney, Bowers, & Smith, 1993;

Connolly & O'Moore, 2000; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005). For instance, a child who perceives his or her family to be unstructured and believes his or her parents are cold, disagreeable and rejecting are likely to be more aggressive than those who find their home environments to be warm, affectionate and accepting (Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Finkelhor et al., 2009; Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005).

Additionally, children whose parents are authoritative and who use violence and aggression as a form of punishment are likely to see violence as a means to an end, and thus more likely to use violence in a relationship because of their more positive associations with it (Finkelhor et al., 2009). Children from these families learn to appreciate the authority and power which come as a result of violent action because they are rewarded or receive attention from their parents when they use violence (Baldry, 2003).

When coupled with the child's tendency to be aggressive, the value a child places on violence can lead to severe and serious incidents of bullying. This connection between aggression and violence is escalated even further when considered in unison with research indicating that bullies have a tendency to be impulsive, hot tempered and have very low levels of tolerance for frustration (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005; Olweus, 2003). When these characteristics are approached as a big picture of bullying behavior, they suggest that bullies are easily frustrated, that they act on their frustrations in a violent and aggressive manner and that they feel little or no remorse or empathy for those who are impacted by their actions.

Similar to literature on cyberbullies, literature which profiles the victims of cyberbullying is quite slim. For instance, there is little to no agreement on how age and gender factor into a child's likelihood to be a victim of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Li, 2006; Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Further, researchers also found that there is great overlap between a child's tendency to be bullied in a traditional form and his or her likelihood of being the target of cyberbullying (Erdur - Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Li, 2007). Many children who are frequently targeted in traditional bullying find that the bullying continues through the internet well after leaving school grounds (Li, 2007). That being said, for the current research it is important to consider the characteristics of victims of traditional bullying because research which has profiled them may provide a starting place for looking at characteristics of victims of cyberbullying.

Research suggests that children who are victims of bullying behavior are nervous, easily intimidated and lack self-esteem (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005). This connection between lower levels of self-esteem and victimization has also been made in cyberbullying research, demonstrating the likely connection between being the target of traditional bullying and being the victim of cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Further, victims' lack of self-esteem often leads them to be overly sensitive and to lack competence in social settings and relationships (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005).

Victims' inability to communicate in social settings and their insecurity with themselves and with their perceptions of how other people view them make them an easy target for bullying behavior because they are often abandoned by other children, left

alone and socially ostracized (Dixon, 2011; Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005; Olweus, 2003).

Victims have also been found to relate better to adults, such as their teachers or their parents, because of the protection these adults offer the child (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005; Olweus, 2003). While a victim's tendency to gravitate towards adults often plays a large factor in traditional bullying because the child is frequently physically isolated from his or her peers, it also manifests itself in cyberbullying. Victims of online bullying can be left out of internet communities, chats and forums (Campbell, 2005; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010).

Additionally, victims are often unable to be effective problem solvers and when confronted with problematic situations, tend to hold themselves responsible for whatever has happened, a behavior called self-blaming (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005; Olweus, 2003). This characteristic of a victim is especially important to consider in this research because it has implications for the child's likelihood to share details of victimization with parents or other adults.

Many of the above traits such as lack of social competence, low levels of self-esteem and propensity to gravitate towards adults rather than peers are directly linked to the child's experiences within his or her family unit and specifically to his or her parent-child relationship. For instance, victims' tendency to gravitate towards adults is related to parents being overprotective and sheltering (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005). Further, by sheltering their children, overprotective parents hinder children's ability to develop problem solving skills, which increases their likelihood of being victimized because they will not know how to handle conflict (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005).

These factors, coupled with research which suggests that a majority of victims are physically weak, small and frail (Kopasz & Smokowski, 2005), indicate that victims are often nervous, scared, socially inept children who are easy targets for bullying behavior because they lack the self-confidence to stand up for themselves. Although victimology which is specific to cyberbullying has not been well documented, research has indicated there is a strong likelihood that children who are victims of traditional bullying are also victims of cyberbullying. It is important to consider any connections between a child's role in cyberbullying (the victim or bully) and the structure of their parent-child relationship because, as research has indicated, perceptions of a parent-child relationship, and the nature of parent-child communication, has implications for the child's behavior (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005; Attili et al., 2010; Connolly & O'Moore, 2003; Contreas-Grau et al., 2005; Dixon, 2011).

Cyberbullying Behavior

Bullying behavior, both traditionally and of the cyber kind, can both directly and indirectly impact the target (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Traditional bullying is typically direct, meaning that the exchange takes place between the bully and the victim (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Common forms of direct bullying include hitting or physically hurting someone, calling someone names, gesturing to them inappropriately, or purposely excluding them from a group (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). In contrast, indirect traditional bullying (eg. the spreading of rumors), is harmful behavior exchanged through a number of other people rather than solely the bully and the victim (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Direct cyberbullying occurs when a message, such as an insulting text message or email, is sent

from the bully to the victim (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Indirect cyberbullying is the most common form of cyberbullying and most frequently involves the circulation of gossip or the sharing of private and personal emails, pictures and text-messaging (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Although there are similarities between traditional and cyber forms of bullying, the differences between the two effectively demonstrate the changing nature of bullying with advanced technologies.

Similar to traditional bullying, there are a number of different behaviors which are classified as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying behavior can be organized into seven different categories: flaming, online harassment, cyberstalking, denigration, masquerade, outing and exclusion (Belsey, 2005; Li, 2007). These behaviors are similar to behaviors which take place in traditional bullying in that they can happen between both individuals and groups (Beran & Wade, 2011; Dixon, 2011; Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004). Flaming occurs when an individual sends angry or harmful messages either to the victim or others. This type of behavior happens commonly on social media websites such as Facebook where the aggressors are able to rapidly share messages through virtual wall postings, comments, or by posting something to their own virtual or group walls for others with access to read.

Much like flaming, denigration and outing occur when an individual posts or shares private and embarrassing (outing) or false and cruel (denigration) information with others online (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). This type of behavior typically utilizes pictures or video footage of the victim which is unwillingly being shared with others (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). For example, a boy sharing private photographs of his girlfriend with his

friends is an example outing. In contrast, a girl who negatively manipulates a photo of another girl and then shares it with the school is an example of denigration.

Online harassment is the act of bombarding an individual with offensive material, such as violent imagery or computer viruses over the internet (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). Similarly, cyberstalking is online harassment which also contains threatening messages (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). Similar to how it functions in traditional bullying, exclusion occurs when an individual or a group intentionally ostracizes another individual from an online group or community. Within cyberbullying this happens on social media websites where children are excluded from virtual groups by their peers.

The final of the seven cyberbullying behaviors is masquerading which is “pretending to be someone else and sending or posting material that makes that person look bad” (Li, 2007, p. 437). The ability for the aggressor to choose whether or not to reveal their identity is a major difference between cyberbullying behaviors and traditional bullying behaviors. When bullying takes place in a face-to-face situation, the bully and the victim are aware of each others’ identity, making the aggression and harm more personal, but with cyberbullying it is possible for the bully to keep his or her identity unknown (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Greene, 2006). Erdur-Baker (2010) purports that “anonymity can provide a feeling of safety for impersonators and decreases the fear of being caught” (p. 111). Further, the decreased fear of being caught may be a factor in the rise and frequency of cyberbullying in schools because it allows children to partake in potentially harmful behavior without repercussions. Additionally, because of the virtual nature of cyberbullying, the aggressive and harmful behavior is not limited to face-to-face encounters or restricted by physical boundaries such as teacher intervention and

classroom rules and structure, meaning that the number of children being negatively impacted is much higher in cyberbullying than in traditional bullying (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2004).

Group Dynamics and Bullying

Although the above behaviors are specific to cyberbullying, the participants and roles remain rooted in traditional bullying. As mentioned above, in both traditional and cyberbullying there is an individual who sends or conveys the aggressive acts, known as the bully, and there is the receiver of the aggression who is known as the victim (Bjorkqvist, Kaukiainen, Lagerspetz, Osterman, & Salmivalli, 1996; Cary & Swearer, 2003; Dekker, Goossens, & Olthof, 2006; Huttunen, Lagerspetz, & Salmivalli, 1997). In addition to those directly involved in the action, the bully and the victim, there are also a number of bystanders who play an important role to the initiation and end result of the behavior (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996; Huttunen et al. 1997). The presence of participants in addition to the bully and the victim is important to consider when researching cyberbullying because cyberbullying is a group process (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996; Dekker et al. 2006; Huttunen et al. 1997; Sutton & Smith, 1999).

Within the realm of research on bullying, both cyber and traditional, there is a focus on the primary participants: the bully and the victim. While this emphasis is sensible, it often underestimates the impact of individuals outside of those two categories. For one, a great deal of bullying behavior “is an interpersonal activity often arising within the context of a group of peers” (Huttunen, 1997, p. 305). A great deal of research has approached traditional bullying behaviors from the standpoint of peer networking and has posited that when examining the function of bullying amongst children, it is “important to

look at not only whether or not a child has friends or belongs to a social cluster, but also at who these friends are, what kinds of attitudes they have, and how they behave”

(Huttunen, 1997, p. 305). Further, because “bullying is social in its nature, and takes place in relatively permanent social groups” (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996, p. 1), in order to grasp the best understanding of bullying behavior it is vital to consider how individuals other than the bully and the victim function in its occurrence.

That being said, Bjorkqvist et al. (1996) created six major categories for participation in bullying: bully, victim, reinforcer of the bully (socially supporter of the bully), assistant to the bully (physically supporter of the bully), defender of the victim and outsider. They then examined how each of these roles functioned in the larger social context. Their results suggested that boys tended to participate more actively in bullying behavior and most frequently participated as either a reinforcer or an assistant (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996). Conversely, girls were found to be further removed from the bullying process and most frequently held the roles of outsider or defender (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996). Additionally, the children who were considered popular by their peers tended to be the defenders; ranking second were the reinforcers and assistants (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996). Further, their results indicated that while victims were most frequently ranked as rejected, bullies followed closely behind them in peer rejection (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996). This study also suggested that children often underestimate their participation in bullying behavior, meaning they tend to classify themselves as less active in harmful bullying behavior. Ultimately, this study makes the point that although only a fraction of children are classified as bullies or victims, most children are involved in bullying behavior

somehow. Specifically, the results indicate that males are most likely to be reinforcers, and females are most likely to be defenders.

The above research is in line with studies which have shown that bullying behavior is “violence in a group context” where “children reinforce each other through their interactions” (Huttunen et al., 1997, p. 305). This suggests that although the violence may stem from one individual, it is often enacted by a group. Research done on participation and roles in bullying behavior has focused largely on traditional bullying. However, given children’s propensity toward social group membership and their adherence to group behavioral norms, it is likely that the presence of peer groups still plays an important part online despite the behaviors taking place in different spaces (Jones, Livingston & Manstead, 2011).

For the current study it is important to consider a child’s participation in peer social groups and relationships because although parents may be reluctant to share the true capacity of their children’s participation in bullying behavior, peer group behavior is a strong indicator of the role that children may play. Specifically, previous research on parent-child relationships has indicated that parents are often overly positive in how they perceive their child (Wenger & Fowers, 2008). This optimistic outlook is referred to as the positive illusion model, and it purports that parents idealize perceptions of their child as a way to maintain positive beliefs about themselves as a parent, while also romanticizing their parent-child relationship (Wenger & Fowers, 2008). Thus, in the current research it is important to consider the group dynamics of cyberbullying as a way to compensate for parents’ overly positive perception of their children.

A guiding force in the current research is the sheer magnitude and widespread participation in cyberbullying behavior. Although an overarching statistic showcasing the percentage of children who cyberbully has not been made official, research indicates the number of individuals affected by cyberbullying is growing (Aydogen & Dilmac, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Based on the extensive nature of cyberbullying effects, a primary goal in the current research is to gather a greater understanding of how parents of children aged 10 to 18 conceptualize cyberbullying behavior and in particular how they perceive their child to participate in such behavior. Further knowledge of parental understandings of cyberbullying is a key factor in effectively preventing the potential harm cyberbullying can cause because it will provide the parents with the tools for effective communication with their children. The current research hopes to tap into parental understandings of cyberbully behavior by answering the following research question:

RQ3: How do parents perceive their child's role in the online bullying network?

Further, based on the literature above which explored the relationship between topic-avoidance and parent-child relationships, the following predictions are made:

H1: Male children will more frequently disclose information about cyberbullying to their parents than female children.

H2: Mothers are more likely than fathers to be the recipients of information about their child's experiences with cyberbullying.

The above literature indicates that the interconnectedness of a parent-child relationship is built on shared experiences which are constantly changing and progressing the bond between the individuals. Further, it was suggested that communication is the

primary means through which values and emotions are conveyed. Literature explored demonstrated the powerful influence parent-child communication can have, and revealed that such communication is a key factor in the growth and development of the parent-child relationship because conversation offers a space for effective intervention (Anderson et al., 2006).

The exploration of literature on topic avoidance in parent-child communication indicates that sensitive topics, such as those related to sex, negative life experiences and relationships outside of the family are often intentionally avoided for fear of rejection or because of a belief that the topic is socially inappropriate (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; Rosen et al, 2002). This literature also suggests that children often gauge their willingness to engage in conversations about certain topics on the structure of the parent-child relationship (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995). The influence the parent-child relationship has on a child's willingness to share private or personal information reinforces the interconnectedness of the parent-child dyad by suggesting that some topics which are deemed appropriate in some parent-child relationships may be off limits in others. For the current research it is important to consider how topic avoidance functions in specific parent-child relationships because communication is a key aspect of the prevention of negative behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (King & Vidourek, 2011). Further, literature reviewed on topic avoidance also indicated that cyberbullying may fit well among the topics frequently avoided in parent-child communication because of its status as a negative experience and its relationship to peers.

That being said, the above literature related to cyberbullying both emphasizes the connection and makes clear the differences between traditional and cyber forms of

bullying. A major part of the literature explored above provided information on the group nature of bullying behavior and indicated that there are a number of different roles an individual can play in bullying (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996). For the current research the group nature of cyberbullying is important to consider because it will create a more well-rounded understanding of how a parent perceives his or her child's participations in cyberbullying. Additionally, the seven specific behaviors associated with cyberbullying were considered and will be particularly important for the current research because they will aid in creating a more detailed understanding of how parents conceptualize cyberbullying behavior.

Beyond indicating specifics about the dynamics of parent-child relationships, communication and cyberbullying, the above research suggests there are a number of gaps in the literature regarding the function of roles in cyberbullying and parent-child communication about cyberbullying. Specifically, little research has explored if cyberbullying is talked about in parent-child communication. Additionally, although literature emphasizes the positive impacts of open and supportive parent-child communication about difficult subjects, no research to date has examined how parents are approaching conversations about cyberbullying. Further, although many researchers have noted the negative implications of being involved in cyberbullying, research has yet to establish whether definitions of cyberbullying are consistent across different groups of individuals, for instance parents and children. These gaps limit the ability to develop effective tools and programming which would prevent or limit cyberbullying because not enough information is available. The current research hopes to fill these gaps and provide

meaningful data which will be useful in generating an open and supportive dialogue about online behavior.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The goal of the current study was to gather insight into if and how parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying while emphasizing how they understand their child's cyberbullying behavior. Further, an additional goal of the current study was to gain information relating to the approach parents take when communicating with their children about cyberbullying. The following section will offer a detailed overview of the steps taken in this research study and will introduce and explain the measures and instruments used to answer the research questions and hypotheses in the previous chapter.

Methodology

Within the realm of social science research, most studies are designed with at least one of the following three goals in mind: exploration, description or explanation (Babbie, 2007). The current research was most heavily focused on the goal of exploration because it examined an area of research that is relatively unmapped. Parent-child communication about cyberbullying has seldom been studied because the larger topic under examination, cyberbullying, is a new topic of study. A secondary purpose of this study was description because it aimed to collect information that is helpful in eventually describing parental perceptions of cyberbullying and parent-child communication regarding cyberbullying. That being said, the current study was aimed at collecting data from which descriptive claims about parent-child communication regarding cyberbullying could be made. One way to generate descriptive claims about the items under study is to collect data that is measurable (Williams & Monge, 2001). Measurable data allows for comparisons across large groups of participants, and such comparisons

bring to the surface any trends in the data. Thus, because the current study was interested in identifying patterns in parent-child communication, it was conducted quantitatively using a survey design.

Williams and Monge (2001) suggest three reasons for utilizing quantitative data “1) when measurement can offer a useful description of whatever you are studying, 2) when you wish to make certain descriptive generalizations, and 3) when you wish to calculate probabilities that certain generalizations are beyond simple, chance occurrences” (p. 5). The current study was conducted quantitatively because it was aimed at creating useful and applicable descriptions of a specific facet of cyberbullying which, as mentioned above, is a relatively new field of study. Additionally, the quantitative nature of the current study allowed for more thorough comparison between groups because the specific items under study were measurable, and analysis of them indicated whether behaviors are thematic as opposed to chance occurrences.

Quantitatively designed research studies are “more structured, rigid, fixed and predetermined in their use to ensure accuracy in measurement and classification” (Kumar, 2005, p. 104) meaning that they are intentionally designed to produce data that answers designated research questions. The predetermined nature of quantitative research designs was vital to the current study because it was committed to answering a set of specifically formulated research questions rather than focusing on an unstructured exploration of a general topic at hand. Additionally, quantitative research is designed to be replicated (Kumar, 2005) and because the current study centered on a relatively new field of research, a quantitative design was useful in developing future research on similar topics.

Babbie (2007) indicates that “survey research is probably the best method available to the social researcher who is interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly” (p. 243) because its questionnaire design allows for consistent data across a cross-sectional study with a greater number of people. Further, the consistency in information given and received from a large group of individuals creates the possibility for descriptions that are more reflective of the attitudes of the population under study (Babbie, 2007). The end result of reflective descriptions is a leading factor in why the current research was conducted using a survey instrument. However, a second reason survey design was used in the current research is because it is measurable by design. A survey, and in particular a questionnaire, has the potential to produce statistical data which is inherently measurable, meaning that it can be compared, ordered and ranked (Williams & Monge, 2001). Through comparison of responses the current research was able to make specific claims about the phenomena being observed. Thus, statistical data was vital to successfully achieving the goal of describing parent perceptions of cyberbullying and parent-child communication about cyberbullying.

Ultimately a quantitative survey design was vital to effectively achieving the goals of the current study because such a design lends itself to successful description and exploration of the phenomena under study. The methodology of this current study was selected and designed based on the research questions identified in the above review of literature. What follows is an overview of the specific aspects of how this study was conducted.

The population under study in this research was parents with at least one child between the ages of 10 and 18. The age range of 10 to 18 was chosen because previous research on cyberbullying has focused primarily on children that age, and thus literature explored for the current research is most applicable to individuals who meet this criteria (Aydogan & Dilmac, 2010; Dixon, 2008; Hinduja & Patchin, 2012). The child must live in the home of the parent who took the survey at least 50% of the time. The goal of the survey was to gather information about the parent-child relationship, and specifically parent-child communication. Additionally, if the parent had more than one child who met the above criteria, he or she was asked to answer the survey questions with regard to only one of their children. This child was selected, at random, using the survey flow and piped text feature on the survey building software *Qualtrics*.

The unit of analysis for this study was individuals, and the sample ($N = 148$) was collected using non-random snowball sampling. Of the 213 individuals who started the survey, 20 individuals did not meet the participant criteria and were not allowed to respond to survey items, 45 individuals did not finish the survey, and 148 completed it. A majority of the 45 individuals who started, but did not complete the survey did not meet the participant criteria because they did not have children, and thus very little information was collected about them. The sample consisted mostly of white women, who were married and had an average age of 45.79 ($SD = 6.93$). Specifically, the sample population was made up of 115 women and 30 men. Most participants (57.1%, $n = 80$) indicated their annual household income was \$100,000 or more, 18.6% ($n = 26$) said \$75,000 - 99,999, 12.10% said \$50,000 - 74,999, 9.50% ($n = 17$) said \$25,000 - 49,999, and 2.1%

($n = 3$) said less than \$24,999. A majority of the participants (31.1%, $n = 46$) indicated their highest level of education was a Master's degree, followed by 29.7% ($n = 44$) with Bachelor's degrees, 12.2% ($n = 18$) with Associate degrees, 8.8% ($n = 13$) with some college experience, 6.8% ($n = 10$) with a Professional degree, 7.4% ($n = 11$) with a Doctorate degree, and 4.1% ($n = 6$) with a high school diploma or equivalent.

As mentioned, most participants (76.0%, $n = 111$) were married and had never been divorced, followed by those who indicated they had been divorced but were remarried (10.3%, $n = 15$), then those who said they were divorced and not remarried (7.5%, $n = 11$), then those who indicated they were single (4.1%, $n = 6$), and those who said they were widowed (2.1%, $n = 3$). A majority of participants (91.0%, $n = 131$) were White, followed by other (3.5%, $n = 5$), Asian/Pacific Islander (2.8%, $n = 4$), African American (1.4%, $n = 2$), and Hispanic (1.4%, $n = 2$). Most participants said they were employed full-time (56.5%, $n = 83$), followed by part-time (27.7%, $n = 41$), homemakers (10.9%, $n = 16$), unemployed but looking for work (2.7%, $n = 4$), retired (1.4%, $n = 2$), and lastly by student (0.7%, $n = 1$). Participants lived mostly in urban neighborhoods (56.8%, $n = 83$), followed by suburban neighborhoods (37.0%, $n = 54$), and lastly by rural neighborhoods (6.2%, $n = 9$).

Most participants (91.9%, $n = 136$) indicated they had talked previously with their child about cyberbullying, while only a small percentage (8.1%, $n = 12$) said they had not talked about cyberbullying with their child in the past. Participants who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child indicated they talked about cyberbullying an average of 7.45 times per year ($SD = 15.6$), and an average less than one time a month

Procedures

Upon approval from Portland State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), an e-mail containing information about the study as well as a link to the survey instrument was sent from the primary investigator to a number of friends and acquaintances who were believed to meet the inclusion criteria. Participants who received the survey email were asked to forward the email to as many people as they could who they believed may fit the participant criteria. Snowball sampling increased the likelihood that individuals who received the survey email met the required criteria because they were selected by individuals who were eligible for the survey and thus constituted a smaller selection of the general population. This, in turn, increased the sample size. That being said, the sample was non-random because the survey was sent to individuals who fit the participant criteria rather than members of the general population (Babbie, 2007). The study benefited from using non-random snowball sampling because it allowed the survey to be accessed by a larger number of individuals who met the participant criteria.

The link in the e-mail took individuals directly to the survey instrument, designed using *Qualtrics*. *Qualtrics* was used because of its accessibility and ease, both for the researcher and for the survey participants. Once on *Qualtrics* participants were prompted to read an informed consent form which assured that their responses were both confidential and anonymous (see Appendix A). By choosing to continue, the participant indicated agreement to the virtual consent form and continued on to the remainder of the survey (See Appendices B-F).

Survey items were grouped into five different sections which were dedicated to collecting specific types of information. Prior to the first section participants were asked to answer five qualifying questions that were designed to ensure they were eligible for participation. The first section was aimed at gathering information on the topics that are avoided in parent-child communication and contained seven of the 43 items. Following the items on topic avoidance, participants were asked to respond to ten items related to how likely they would be to engage in conversations with their child about cyberbullying. In the third section of questions participants were asked to respond to six questions relating to two scenarios about their potential communicative approaches to cyberbullying conversations. In the fourth section participants were instructed to answer six questions focused on gathering information about the role they perceived their child to play in cyberbullying. At the end of the survey, in the final section of questions, participants were prompted to answer nine questions designed to gather demographic information. A *Qualtrics* report indicated that participants took an average of 14 minutes to complete the survey.

At the end of the survey, participants were given the opportunity to participate in a raffle for one of six \$25 gift cards. If they elected to participate, they were instructed to click a link which brought them to a second survey where they entered their contact information. This ensured that participants' responses were not linked to any identifying information. The survey was open for six weeks. After six weeks the survey was closed, and data was downloaded from *Qualtrics* and transferred to the statistical analysis program SPSS for data analysis.

The current study was focused on describing and exploring parental perceptions of cyberbullying as well as parent-child communication about cyberbullying. To successfully describe and explore the above phenomena and to answer the guiding research questions identified in the previous chapter, four primary variables were measured: topic avoidance, parent-child conversations about cyberbullying, parental communicative approaches and parental perceptions of their child's cyberbullying behavior. What follows is an explanation of each of the primary constructs as well as an overview of demographic information that was collected.

Topic Avoidance

Topic avoidance was measured using participants' self-reported responses to survey questions aimed at uncovering what cyberbullying topics are frequently avoided in conversations with their children (see Appendix B). The scale was designed based on Afifi and Guerrero's (1995) topic avoidance scale which was created prior to the rise of cyberbullying behavior and thus did not include cyberbullying as a potentially avoided conversation. Based on the literature reviewed for the current study it was suggested that because of its propensity to be a negative experience and because it is directly connected to a child's outside of the family relationships, cyberbullying is likely a sensitive topic that is frequently avoided in parent-child communication (Afifi & Guerro, 2005; Contreras-Grau et al., 2006; Fabes et al., 2001). That being said, the seven items were designed in the same structure as Afifi and Guerrero's (1995) topic avoidance scale to represent aspects of the overall construct of cyberbullying with the goal of uncovering if cyberbullying behavior is frequently avoided in parent-child communication.

For this study, topic avoidance was defined as the subject matter or topics, relating to cyberbullying behavior, which are frequently absent from conversations between parents and children. Specifically, topic avoidance was measured using a seven item questionnaire that prompted participants to self-report their responses using a 7-point Likert type response system. Participants were asked to indicate whether a topic, such as their child's online communication, is never avoided (1) or always avoided (7) in their parent-child communication. Each of the seven items stems directly from previous research on cyberbullying (Belsey, 2005; Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). For instance, the non-friend cyber behavior item gathered information about parents' conversations with their child about the online or cyber behavior of people the child knows but are not friends with. Similarly, the cyber behavior item gathered information about parents' conversations with their child about the child's online behaviors and activities, for instance what websites and online communities they frequent.

Questions on the topic avoidance scale were designed to reflect how parents view their child's disclosure about cyberbullying behavior and experiences rather than to indicate the parents' individual behavior. A principle components factor analysis showed that the seven topic avoidance items worked together as one factor, and did not load with the other items (variance explained = 72.57%, eigenvalue = 5.08). Further, the seven items yielded a good reliability ($\alpha = .94$) (Williams & Monge, 2001).

Conversations about cyberbullying

Conversations about cyberbullying were measured using participants' self-reported responses to a number of scenarios regarding instances of parent-child communication about specific cyberbullying behaviors (see Appendix C). For the current

research, conversations about cyberbullying were defined as instances where communication regarding behaviors typically associated with cyberbullying occur between parents and children. Further, the items included in conversations about cyberbullying were measured using responses to a series of seven scenarios which prompted participants to indicate on a 5-point Likert type response scale how likely (5) or unlikely (1) it is that they would engage in a conversation with their child about the scenario they just read.

Each of the scenarios related to one of the seven cyberbullying behaviors identified in the literature reviewed for this study: flaming, online harassment, cyberstalking, denigration, masquerade, outing and exclusion (Belsey, 2005; Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). Additionally, each item was pre-tested prior to the final survey. The pre-test was designed to ensure that each of the seven scenarios was indicative of the cyberbullying behavior it intended to portray. Results from the pre-test indicated that at least 85% of individuals were in agreement that each of the scenarios displayed its intended cyberbullying behavior.

Parental Communicative Approaches

Parental communicative approaches were measured using participants' self-reported responses to hypothetical scenarios and reactions relating to conversations the participants could have with their child about cyberbullying behaviors (see Appendix D). For the current research, parental communicative approaches was defined as the technique employed by the parent when communicating, either verbally or non-verbally, with their child. Specifically, parental communicative approaches were measured using responses to six items, each corresponding with one of Hoffman and Saltzstein's (1967)

three communicative approaches: power assertion, love withdrawal and induction. For each of the given reactions, participants were prompted to indicate on a 5–point Likert type response scale how likely (1) or unlikely (5) they would be to respond to their child in the way outlined.

Each of the scenarios was designed to relate to a hypothetical cyberbullying scenario, and each was accompanied by three potential parental reactions. Each of the parental reactions was pre-tested prior to the final survey. The pre-test was designed to ensure that each of the hypothetical reactions was indicative of its intended communicative approach. Results from the pre-test indicated that at least 90% of participants were in agreement that the given reaction expressed the parental communicative approach it was intended to.

Parental Perceptions of Child's Behavior

Parents' perceptions of their child's cyberbullying behavior were measured using participants' self-reported responses to a number of scenarios where they were asked to place their child and their child's closest friend into specific roles in the given cyberbullying situation (see Appendix E). For the current research, parental perception of their child's behavior was defined as the role parents believe their child plays in specific cyberbullying behaviors and instances. Parents' perceptions of their child's cyberbullying behavior were measured using a survey instrument designed specifically for this study that was based on both the seven cyberbullying behaviors and the numerous ways a child can participate in such behaviors (Bjorkqvist et al., 1996; Huttunen, 1997). The items in this section were pre-tested to ensure that each of the hypothetical roles corresponded to the appropriate participant role. Results from the pretest indicated that for each of the

scenarios created, at least 75% of participants found the hypothetical characters to be suggestive of the appropriate bullying participant role.

The survey instrument provided participants with three cyberbullying scenarios which each contained five different types of behaviors. Each of the five behaviors was represented by a character, for instance Liz or Jeff, who corresponded to one of the five participatory roles outlined by Bjorkqvist et al. (1996): bully, victim, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim and outsider. Participants were asked to indicate, in two separate items, which of the five characters they believe represented how their child would act and how their child's best friend would act. Participants were asked to respond to the scenarios with relation to both their child and their child's closest friend because the literature reviewed for this research suggested that cyberbullying is a largely social and group practice, and therefore the child's closest friend is a likely indicator of the child's cyberbullying behavior.

Demographic Questions

For the current research, participants were asked to provide information relating to their employment status, gender, education level, race, ethnicity and household income (see Appendix F). Additionally, participants were also asked to provide some demographic information relating to the child about whom they answered the questions. These questions were specifically designed to gather information about the child's age and gender and were placed at the beginning of survey as qualifying questions.

Data Analysis

This study's exploratory nature stemmed from the fact that cyberbullying is a relatively new construct, and thus research on topics related to it is slim. The data

analysis phase of the current study was primarily concerned with providing descriptive analysis of the constructs under study. To provide the descriptive information data was uploaded from *Qualtrics* into the statistical analysis program SPSS where it was labeled and organized according to a codebook which corresponded directly to the survey instrument.

To answer research question one, ‘Do parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying?’, descriptive analysis was used to indicate what percentage of the participants had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying. This provided a baseline understanding of whether parents talk about cyberbullying. Using an independent samples *t*-test, the researcher compared the mean score for topic avoidance among those who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child and those who had not. Utilizing descriptive information from the conversations about cyberbullying responses, a more in-depth analysis created a rank order of the specific types of cyberbullying behaviors being talked about in parent-child communications. The researcher then used a series of paired samples *t*-tests to determine the significance of the rank ordered relationships. Additionally, because so many paired samples *t*-tests were run, a Bonferroni adjustment was calculated, and the *p*-value was adjusted to 0.002.

To answer research question two ‘What communicative approach (i.e. power assertion, love withdrawal and induction) do parents take with their children when communicating about cyberbullying?’, the researcher reported frequencies and compared mean scores for each of the three approaches. Using the mean scores, a rank order was created, and a series of paired samples *t*-tests were run to indicate whether the pairings in the rank order were significant.

To answer research question three, ‘How do parents perceive their child’s role in the online bullying network?’ frequencies in responses across the three scenarios were combined to create an overall percentage of how frequently each of the five bullying roles outlined by Bjorkqvist et al. (1996) appeared. Specifically, these percentages were computed by re-coding response values for each of three scenarios five separate times to indicate whether a certain role was selected or not. These recoded values provided a overall frequency for each of the five roles. The percentages were compared, and a rank order of which role parents most frequently perceived their child to play was established.

To test hypothesis one ‘Male children will more frequently disclose information about cyberbullying to their parents than female children,’ the researcher ran independent samples *t*-tests using the independent, variable of the child’s sex and the dependent, variable of topic avoidance. The topic avoidance measure was used because the items on the scale were related to the parents’ perception of their child’s communicative behavior. Similarly, to test hypothesis two, ‘Mothers are more likely than fathers to be the recipients of information about their child’s experiences with cyberbullying’, the researcher ran independent samples *t*-tests using the dependent variable of topic avoidance, and the independent variable of parent gender.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

When answering research question one, ‘Do parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying?’, a frequency report indicated that most participants (91.9%) had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying. In contrast, only 8.1% of participants indicated they had never spoken to their child about cyberbullying. Further, an independent samples *t*-test indicated that participants who had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying were significantly less likely to avoid conversations about topics relating to cyberbullying behavior ($M = 1.69$, $SD = 1.09$) than those participants who said they had not previously talked about cyberbullying with their child ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.58$), $t(146) = -1.80$, $p < .05$. Thus, a majority of participants do not avoid discussing topics related to cyberbullying behavior with their children. Further, those with previous experience talking about cyberbullying with their child were significantly less likely to avoid conversations about cyberbullying than those with no previous experience talking about cyberbullying.

An additional, more in-depth analysis revealed that on a 5-point Likert type scale, where one meant *always avoided* and five meant *never avoided*, participants who had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying were most likely to talk about the behavior of denigration ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 1.09$). Denigration was followed by flaming ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.08$), cyberstalking ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.25$), outing ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.18$), masquerading ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.25$), exclusion ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.21$) and lastly by online harassment ($M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.26$). A series of paired sample *t*-tests were run and using a Bonferroni adjustment the p-value was changed to 0.002. The paired

sample *t*-tests indicated that parents who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child were significantly more likely to talk about denigration than exclusion ($t(135) = 3.58, p < .001$); and online harassment ($t(135) = 4.28, p < .001$). Similarly, these same participants were significantly more likely to talk about flaming than online harassment ($t(135) = 3.95, p < .001$) and exclusion ($t(135) = 3.27, p < .001$). In the same vein, these participants were also significantly more likely to talk about cyberstalking than online harassment ($t(135) = 3.66, p < .001$) (See Figure 1).

Among participants who indicated that they had not previously talked about cyberbullying with their child, were most likely to engage in conversations about exclusion ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.24$), followed by online harassment ($M = 2.92, SD = 1.73$), denigration ($M = 2.83, SD = 1.53$), flaming ($M = 2.75, SD = 1.49$), cyberstalking ($M = 2.67, SD = 1.44$), and lastly by masquerading ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.68$) and outing ($M = 2.58, SD = 1.56$). A series of paired sample *t*-tests revealed that none of the rank ordered relationships were significant¹ (See Figure 1).

In answering research question two, ‘What communicative approach (i.e. power assertion, love withdrawal and induction) do parents take with their children when communicating about cyberbullying?’ frequencies were used to create a rank order of the three communicative approaches. Keeping in mind the response pattern of the survey items, where one is most likely and five is most unlikely, the ranking of mean scores indicated that participants who had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying were most likely to utilize the induction strategy when talking about cyberbullying with their child ($M = 1.97, SD = 0.85$), followed by power assertion ($M = 3.49, SD = 1.04$) and lastly with love withdrawal strategy ($M = 4.59, SD = 0.67$). Specifically, a series of

paired sample *t*-tests indicated that these participants were significantly more likely to utilize the induction strategy when communicating about cyberbullying than the power assertion strategy ($t(134) = -12.17, p < .001$) and the love withdrawal strategy ($t(134) = -26.69, p < .001$). Further, these participants were also significantly more likely to utilize a power assertion strategy over a love withdrawal approach ($t(134) = -12.24, p < .001$) (See Table 1).

For participants who had not previously talked about cyberbullying, the rank order of parental communicative approaches was consistent with those parents who had previously talked about cyberbullying. These participants were more likely to use the induction strategy ($M = 2.00, SD = 0.88$), than the power assertion ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.01, t(11) = -4.04, p < .01$) and love withdrawal strategies ($M = 4.42, SD = 0.79, t(11) = -6.00, p < .001$). Additionally, these participants were also significantly more likely to approach conversations about cyberbullying with their child using a power assertion strategy than a love withdrawal strategy ($t(11) = -2.97, p < .01$).

In answering research question three ‘How do parents perceive their child’s role in the online bullying network?’ responses across the three scenarios were combined. Specifically, for each of the three scenarios five new variables were computed, creating a total of 15 new variables. These variables were developed by re-coding responses to identify whether a participant chose a role, for instance bully, or not. This created 3 variables for each role, and provided an opportunity to identify an overall mean score. The overall frequencies were compared to create a rank order of which bullying role was most frequently chosen by the participants. The rank order indicated that most participants (58%) perceived their child to be the defender of the victim, followed by

21% who said their child was the victim, 15% who indicated outsider, 5% who said reinforcer of the bully, and 1% who perceived their child to be the bully (See Table 2). Thus, it can be concluded that participants are more likely to perceive their child as the defender of the victim than any of the five other cyberbullying roles.

In testing hypothesis one, 'Male children will more frequently disclose information about cyberbullying to their parents than female children', an independent sample *t*-test using child gender and responses to the topic avoidance measure did not support this hypothesis. Specifically, for parents who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child, female children ($n = 74$) were not more likely to avoid cyberbullying topics ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.08$) than male children ($n = 62$, $M = 1.75$, $SD = 1.12$, $t(134) = -.53$, $p = .60$). For those participants who had never talked about cyberbullying with their child, responses indicated that female children ($n = 7$) were not less likely to avoid cyberbullying topics ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.09$) than male children ($n = 5$, $M = 2.80$, $SD = 2.14$, $t(10) = -.90$, $p = .39$).

Similarly, in testing hypothesis two, 'Mothers are more likely than fathers to be the recipients of information about their child's experiences with cyberbullying', an independent sample *t*-test using parent gender and responses to the topic avoidance measure did not support this hypothesis. For participants who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child, female parents ($n = 106$) were not more likely to be the recipients of cyberbullying information ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 1.06$) than male parents ($n = 27$, $M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.25$) and the difference is not significant, $t(131) = 1.45$, $p = .15$. Further, for participants who had not previously talked about cyberbullying with their

child, female parents ($n = 9$) were not more likely to be the receivers of cyberbullying information ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.24$) than male parents ($n = 3$, $M = 2.81$, $SD = 2.65$) and again, the difference was not significant, $t(10) = .62$, $p = .55$.

¹ Parents who reported never having talking about cyberbullying with their child were not significantly more likely to talk about exclusion than online harassment ($t(11) = 1.25, p = .24$); denigration ($t(11) = 1.10, p = .29$); flaming ($t(11) = 1.48, p = .17$); cyberstalking ($t(11) = 1.92, p = .08$); masquerading ($t(11) = 1.70, p = .12$); or outing ($t(11) = 1.70, p = .12$). Similarly, these parents were also not significantly more likely to talk about online harassment than denigration ($t(11) = .12, p = .92$); flaming ($t(11) = .25, p = .81$); cyberstalking ($t(11) = .51, p = .62$); masquerading ($t(11) = .46, p = .65$); or outing ($t(11) = .46, p = .65$). Further, parents who had not previously talked about cyberbullying with their child were not significantly more likely to talk about denigration than flaming ($t(11) = .29, p = .78$); cyberstalking ($t(11) = .34, p = .74$); masquerading ($t(11) = .64, p = .54$); or outing ($t(11) = 1.39, p = .19$). Additionally, they were also not significantly more likely to talk about flaming than cyberstalking ($t(11) = .27, p = .80$); masquerading ($t(11) = .56, p = .59$); or outing ($t(11) = .80, p = .44$). Lastly, parents who had not previously talked about cyberbullying with their child were not significantly more likely to talk about cyberstalking than masquerading ($t(11) = .19, p = .85$), or outing ($t(11) = .21, p = .84$).

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study was designed to explore an unmapped area of social science research: parent-child communication about cyberbullying. The results from this study bring to the surface a number of interesting characteristics of parent-child communication about cyberbullying. Most notably, data collected indicates that parents are talking with their children about cyberbullying. However, a rank order of results suggested that there is a significant divide in which of the seven cyberbullying behaviors are brought up in these conversations. Further, the results indicate that parents take an inductive approach to conversations about cyberbullying and that, by and large, parents perceive their child to participate in cyberbullying as the defender of the victim. These results have a number of implications for society, and more specifically for parent-child communication. What follows is an interpretation of the results as well as an overview of the theoretical and practical applications of this study's findings.

A key finding from this study is that, in general, parents talk with their children about cyberbullying. Specifically, results from research question one indicate that parents are unlikely to avoid engaging in conversations relating to their child's online behavior. This finding is further solidified in testing hypothesis one and two where results indicated that neither gender of the parent nor gender of the child is a factor in the disclosure of cyberbullying experiences. Specifically, the results which suggest that gender plays a non-significant role in disclosure patterns within parent-child communication about cyberbullying sets cyberbullying apart from traditionally avoided topics, such as dating, where both parent and child gender influence whether or not conversations are avoided (Afifi & Guerrero, 2005); Contreras-Grau et al., 2005). This suggests that, although

cyberbullying shares features, such as its tendency to be a negative life experience, with frequently avoided topics such as sex and dating, conversations about cyberbullying are somehow different.

One major difference between topics such as sex and dating, and the topic of cyberbullying may be the degree of threat the behaviors pose to the child. Literature which focuses on the Protection Motivation Theory purports that the perceived severity of a threat will mediate an individual's willingness to participate in risk-reducing behavior (Maddux & Rogers, 1983; Rogers, 1975). Thus, the more severe the threat seems, the more likely one will be to engage in protective or preventative behaviors (Maddux & Rogers, 1983; Rogers, 1975; Youn, 2009). In this sense, it is possible that cyberbullying presents a threat which is more severe than sex or dating, and as a result parents feel compelled to engage in conversations about cyberbullying to protect their children.

However, this is not to say that sex and dating are not threatening behaviors, but rather than parents may perceive cyberbullying to be a higher risk activity than dating or sex. This suggestion is consistent with research which has examined how parents and children are educated about behaviors such as sex, dating and cyberbullying. Specifically, previous work has looked into the effectiveness of media campaigns which were designed to encourage parents to talk with their children about sensitive issues such as sex and drug use. This research has found that parents often look to media coverage as a starting place for gathering information which will help them in developing a positive and effective dialogue with their children about these difficult topics (DuRant, Wolfson, LaFrance, Balkrishnanm, Pharn, & Altman, 2006). Specifically, with regard to behaviors

such as sex, research has also found that both parents and children look to the media for information about a variety of topics (Ward, 2003). Within these media representations, sex is often portrayed in a comical sense, focusing less on prevention of disease, and more on humor (Ward, 2003). When considered with the idea of perceived severity, the finding that parents are gaining insight about sex from media suggests that parents may not identify sex as a high risk behavior, and thus they do not feel compelled to engage in risk-reducing behaviors.

This connection between media presentation and perceived severity presents an interesting way to thinking about the ramifications of media coverage of cyberbullying. Specifically, the connection between media coverage and parents' knowledge about certain topics was reflected in the results of the current study where participants indicated that cyberbullying was brought up in conversation when there was media coverage surrounding the topic. For instance, one participant mentioned she and her child "talk usually when there are events that have occurred that prompt discussion," while another said "I always mention it when I see them on Facebook or when a story comes up". This suggests that media coverage of cyberbullying may impact if and how parents engage in conversations about cyberbullying with their child.

In sum, media may function as a catalyst for conversations about cyberbullying. However, media stories related to cyberbullying focus largely on severe instances and consequences of being involved in cyberbullying, emphasizing youth suicide and death as the end result of cyberbullying behavior (Tokunaga, 2010). By covering cyberbullying this way, the media may be indicating to parents that cyberbullying is a high risk activity. This sense of fear, and specifically the concern that their child could die if they

participate in cyberbullying is perhaps why parents do not avoid conversations about cyberbullying behavior with their child. Specifically, while behaviors such as sex and dating, which are typically avoided in parent-child communication, can have negative repercussions for a child, the consequences of cyberbullying may be perceived as more threatening. Thus, media presentations of cyberbullying function to not only instill a sense of fear in parents, but also to prompt parents to engage in conversations about cyberbullying with their children.

This line of thinking is consistent with previous research which suggests that parents use communication techniques to protect their child from harm. Specifically, literature indicates that parents attempt to communicate openly with their children about dangers such as drug use and unprotected sex because supportive dialogue about such risks is effective in decreasing the threat to the child (Castrucci & Gerlach, 2006; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005; King & Vidourek, 2011). This type of preventative and supportive communication is important to a child's development because parent-child communication is where bonds are developed, problems are solved and beliefs and behaviors are changed (Afifi & Guerrero, 1995; Anderson et al., 2006; Contreras-Grau et al., 2005). As such, it is possible that parents are using conversations about cyberbullying as a way to protect their child from the harms of cyberbullying by teaching positive behaviors related to cyberbullying. Ultimately, the fact that parents do not avoid talking to their child about cyberbullying implies that they feel open and supportive communication about cyberbullying behavior is important to their child's well-being and safety.

On the surface, the finding that parents do not avoid conversations about cyberbullying suggests that cyberbullying behavior is talked about openly in parent-child communication. However, findings reveal that there are certain cyberbullying behaviors parents are more likely to talk about than others. Specifically, results indicate that parents who had previously talked about cyberbullying with their child are more likely to engage in conversations about denigration, flaming, cyberstalking and outing than online harassment, exclusion and masquerading. This suggests that parents prioritize conversations about specific types of cyberbullying behavior over others.

The divide in cyberbullying behaviors parents choose to talk about with their child suggests that denigration, flaming, and outing possess characteristics that the other behaviors do not. Specifically, when considered with regard to previous literature on cyberbullying behaviors, the findings from the current study reconfirm that there may be two categories of cyberbullying behaviors: indirect and direct (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). As previous work has suggested, indirect cyberbullying behavior involves an indirect transmission of harm from the bully to the victim, specifically the harmful outcome is contingent on the spreading of materials to others (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). For instance, flaming refers to the spreading of rumors in mediated settings such as a text message or email (Belsey, 2005; Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). Similarly, denigration happens when an individual shares falsified materials, such as photographs of another person, with others, while outing occurs when an individual shares private or personal information such as emails with other people online (Belsey, 2005; Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). In each of these behaviors, the harm is two-fold because it happens initially when the information is created and is followed by the

dissemination of the information to others. The meandering nature of these indirect

behaviors involves a number of people in the process while also allowing harm to flow indirectly from the bully to the victim.

In contrast, a direct cyberbullying behavior occurs when the harm flows directly from the bully to the victim and requires no sharing or repetition (Van Cleemput & Vandebosch, 2009). Behaviors such as online harassment and exclusion are more direct, in that the harm often occurs as one event or one grouping of events. For instance, exclusion occurs through social isolation, where the individual is ostracized from an online group or community (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). In this behavior, the harm is inflicted once, when the isolation takes place, rather than on two separate occasions. Similarly, online harassment can occur when a victim is bombarded with violent imagery or material over the Internet (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). Although online harassment can occur more than once, as in the victim being sent more than one image, the harm is not contingent on the diffusion of materials and information to others. Further, masquerading, which is in essence trickery through false representation, can occur when bully misrepresents a victim's personality or deceives the victim into believing something false (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007). For example, a bully could use the anonymity of the Internet to impersonate a victim in a bad light (Li, 2007). In this instance there may be some degree of harm that happens as a result of sharing misleading information in a social setting, but the root of the harm is that the bully has impersonated the victim. Thus, the harm stems primarily from the bully to the victim. The seventh cyberbullying behavior, cyberstalking, remains the outlier of the current research. Specifically, although cyberstalking fit statistically with indirect cyberbullying behaviors, it is by definition, a

direct cyberbullying behavior. Cyberstalking stems from online harassment, and occurs primarily when a bully bombards a victim with content that is offensive and threatening, for instance sending warnings of death or physical punishment (Chibbaro, 2007; Li, 2007)

In sum, it is possible that these two groups of cyberbullying behavior, indirect and direct, possess different characteristics which may impact parents' propensity to engage in conversations about them with their child. Specifically, parents may choose to engage in conversations about indirect cyberbullying behaviors such as denigration and flaming because the harm involves a group of people, and therefore they are able to focus less on the harmful behavior of their child as an individual and more on the actions of a group. Further, parents may avoid conversations about direct cyberbullying behaviors such as online harassment and exclusion because the behavior involves only a bully and a victim, and as a consequence they have to focus specifically on the harmful actions of their child. As such, parents may choose to engage in conversations about indirect cyberbullying, where they can hold a group of children accountable for the harmful actions, as a way to maintain a positive perception of their child's involvement in cyberbullying.

Parents' propensity to emphasize indirect over direct cyberbullying behaviors in their parent-child communication presents an interesting lens with which to interpret the findings from research question two. Results revealed that parents would most likely approach conversations about cyberbullying with their child using the inductive communication strategy proposed by Hoffman and Saltzstein (1967), as opposed to the

power assertion or love withdrawal approaches. The inductive communication strategy focuses on making positive changes to a child's perceptions and behaviors, and emphasizes using parent-child communication as a learning tool (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Within the current study, parents indicated that they would be more likely to approach conversations about cyberbullying with their children in a way that is effective in both creating a supportive parent-child bond and in altering the child's behavior or perception of the action. By indicating they would most likely take an inductive approach to conversations about cyberbullying, parents may be suggesting that they would favor using supportive communication to change their child's perception of cyberbullying by teaching the child the consequences of his or her actions. Further, by remaining supportive parents, they may be attempting to positively alter their child's online behavior by developing a positive belief system surrounding online behavior which they can internalize. Moreover, participants' likelihood to utilize an inductive approach, as opposed to power assertion and love withdrawal, suggests that they recognize the value in having productive communication about cyberbullying. Specifically, the finding that parents are less likely to use power assertion and love withdrawal strategies when talking about cyberbullying with their children is consistent with previous work which has found that these two approaches are ineffective in instilling sustainable behavioral changes in a child (Attili et al, 2010; Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). In sum, the results which find that participants are more likely to employ an inductive approach to conversations about cyberbullying suggest that parents may be attempting to use supportive communication strategies to effectively and positively impact their child's cyberbullying behavior.

However, although employing an inductive communication strategy during conversations about cyberbullying is important because it emphasizes positive changes in behavior and perception, when considered with research question one's finding that most parent-child conversations are likely to focus on indirect cyberbullying, the effectiveness of their dialogue is called into question. Specifically, results suggest that parents are more likely to talk about indirect cyberbullying behaviors such as denigration, where responsibility for the harmful actions is shared amongst a group of children, than they are to talk about direct cyberbullying behaviors, such as outing, where typically only one individual is held accountable for the harmful actions. The emphasis on group oriented cyberbullying behaviors may limit parents' ability to focus on the specific behaviors of their child because they are unable to parse out their child's actions from the actions of the group. This presents an issue for the effectiveness of parent-child communication about cyberbullying. Specifically, if parents are utilizing supportive and inductive communicative strategies to positively alter their child's behaviors, focusing on a group of people may restrict the child's ability to interpret how he or she should change their own individual actions. For example, when talking about an indirect cyberbullying behavior such as denigration, parents may be unable to point out specific actions their child may have taken, and as a result may be ineffective in teaching their child the consequences of his or her actions. This is problematic because if the goal of supportive and inductive communication about cyberbullying is to positively impact the child's behavior, yet the child cannot identify their wrongdoings, they will be unable to make adjustments to their actions. As such, although it is positive that parents are talking to their children about cyberbullying, and that they are doing so using an inductive

communication strategy, it is important that they engage in conversations about both indirect and direct cyberbullying as a way to help their children identify specific changes they can make to their behavior. A more well-rounded approach to conversations about cyberbullying, which includes conversations about both indirect and direct behaviors, will allow parents to have more of a positive and sustainable impact on their child because it will give them an opportunity to talk both about their child's individual actions and about the child's actions within a group.

The discovery that parents are talking about cyberbullying, coupled with the finding that they are selective in the cyberbullying behaviors they communicate about, relates well to the results of research question three. Specifically, responses collected in the current study indicated that of the five participatory roles (bully, reinforcer of the bully, defender of the victim, victim, and outsider) outlined by Bjorkqvist et al. (1996), an overwhelming majority of participants (58%) perceived their child to play the role of defender of the victim. In contrast, findings revealed that only 1% of participants perceived their child to be the bully and only 21% perceived their child to be the victim. In a sense, this suggests that parents may believe their child's involvement in cyberbullying is heroic because they are not instilling the harm, nor are they being targeted by the harm, but rather they are protecting and caring for the child who is being victimized (Bjorkqvist et al, 1996).

These results are interesting for two primary reasons. First, in a 2010 survey of over 4000 children ages 10-18, 19.8% of students reported they had cyberbullied another child in the last 30 days, and 11.2% indicated they had cyberbullied more than two times

in the last 30 days (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Consistent with parental perceptions,

Hinduja and Patchin (2010) also found that 20.8% of youth participants had been the victim of cyberbullying, with 17.0% indicating that the victimization had happened two or more times in the last 30 days (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Thus, there are large segments of the youth population who are participating in cyberbullying, both as the bully and as the victim. When coupled with the findings from the current study, these results present an interesting disconnect between parents' perceptions of their child's cyberbullying behavior and children's perceptions of their cyberbullying behavior.

Specifically, the results from the current study found that parents overwhelmingly believe their child is not a victim or a bully, yet Hinduja and Patchin (2010) suggest that sizable groups within the youth population report being both the victim and the bully. As such, there may be a difference in how parents perceive their child's involvement in cyberbullying and how children are participating in cyberbullying.

A second primary reason why it is interesting that so few parents perceive their child to be the bully or the victim follows closely with the above statistics but looks at the findings in a more conceptual light. Specifically, the fact that so few parents perceived their child to be the bully, while so many believed their child to be the defender of the victim, extends previous research on the positive illusion model which suggests that parents often perceive their child in an overly optimistic manner (Wenger & Fowers, 2008). Previous research which has examined the function of the positive illusion model in parent-child relationships has found that "positive perceptions are an important component of the satisfactory nature of the parent-child relationship" and that "enhancing positive perception of a child can be part of a general effort to move from a distress -

maintaining cycle to a satisfaction-maintaining pattern of parent-child interaction”

(Wenger & Fowers, 2008, p. 630). Similar to parents’ tendency to engage in conversations about indirect cyberbullying behaviors, the propensity to perceive their child in a positive light gives parents the opportunity to protect and maintain their parent-child relationship. In this sense, parents increase positive perceptions of their child’s cyberbullying behavior as a way to maintain an optimistic outlook on their parent-child relationship, and also their parenting skills, because by limiting acknowledgment of their child’s problematic behaviors, parents limit their responsibility for such actions (Wenger & Fowers, 2008).

This notion of positive illusions relates to the earlier conclusion that parents are less likely to engage in conversations about direct forms of cyberbullying such as online harassment. Specifically, the positive illusion model is a possible explanation for why parents emphasize indirect cyberbullying behaviors in their parent-child communication because it suggests that they may focus on group-initiated harm in an effort to limit the perception of their child’s involvement in cyberbullying. Thus, parents provoke a positive illusion of their child in order to maintain a positive perception of both their parent-child relationship and of themselves as a parent. These two conclusions: the emphasis on parent-child communication about indirect cyberbullying behaviors and the illusive perception of cyberbullying participation, indicate that there is much to be learned about parent-child communication relating to cyberbullying.

Ultimately, the interpretations of this study’s results highlight three important features of parent-child communication about cyberbullying. First, parents are talking

about cyberbullying with their children. Second, parents most commonly talk about indirect cyberbullying behaviors such as denigration. Third, parents most commonly perceive their child to participate in cyberbullying as the defender of the victim. It is important to consider the theoretical and practical implications of the above findings.

Theoretical Implications

The results from this study relate to and extend knowledge on two theoretical areas: topic avoidance and positive illusion. Cyberbullying is an area of communication that is talked about in parent-child communication. Findings extend the positive illusion model by suggesting that parents may be overly positive in how they believe their children participate in cyberbullying. That being said, what follows is an overview of the theoretical implications of this study's findings.

Topic Avoidance

Results from the current study present an interesting way of looking at existing literature on topic avoidance. Specifically, one goal of the current study was to identify if cyberbullying is an avoided topic in parent-child communication. An exploration of literature on both traditional and cyber forms of bullying indicated that cyberbullying shared two primary traits with already established avoided topics: first, cyberbullying is typically considered a negative life experience, and second, cyberbullying behavior can happen in non-familial relationships. Thus, because of its nature, it was posited that cyberbullying would be a topic avoided in parent-child communication. However, results from the current study found that parents were not avoiding cyberbullying in conversations with their children. This suggests that although cyberbullying shares

characteristics with typically avoided topics such as dating, parents see value in talking about it with their children.

It was posited that parents may find value in talking about cyberbullying with their child because cyberbullying presented a higher risk than behaviors such as sex and dating. This heightened perception of risk stems largely from the finding that both parents and children use the media to learn about different behaviors such as sex, drugs and cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010; Ward, 2003). Moreover, a comparison between media depictions of cyberbullying and media coverage of sex suggests media is presenting cyberbullying as a higher risk activity than sex. Specifically, media covers topics such as sex and dating in a more humorous way, which focuses less on negative ramifications and more on romance and love affairs (Ward, 2003). Conversely, media presents cyberbullying in a more intensified manner which emphasize youth suicide as the end result (Tokunaga, 2010).

In this sense, topics such as sex and dating are perceived as less harmful than cyberbullying. To that end, although cyberbullying may share characteristics with typically avoided topics, the perceived severity of the risk associated with the behavior may play a larger role in the decision to engage in conversations about cyberbullying than the potential social risk. As such, the findings from the current study suggest that future topic avoidance research examine and distinguish differences in how social and physical risks function in the decision to avoid or engage in conversations about certain topics.

Positive Illusion Model.

The conclusions drawn from the current study, and in particular the finding that parents overwhelmingly perceive their child to be the defender of the victim, extend previous literature relating to the positive illusion model. Specifically, the finding that so few parents perceive their child to be the bully, yet almost 20% of youth have acted as a cyberbully suggests that parents may be overly positive in how they perceive their child's cyberbullying behavior (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). This optimism is the basis of the positive illusion model, and it implies that parents not only idealize their child's behavior, but they also limit negative perceptions of their child as a way to maintain relationship stability (Wenger & Fowers, 2008). Results from the current study demonstrate this idealistic viewpoint by indicating that parents most frequently believe their child to play the role of defender of the victim, which, of the roles outlined by Bjorkqvist et al. (1996), is the most heroic and compassionate. Further, the finding that only 1% of participants perceive their child to be the bully showcases parents inclination to limit negative perceptions of their child because it indicates parents are less likely to believe their child is a destructive participant in cyberbullying. Specifically, because so few parents perceive their child to be the victim or the bully, yet so many children report being the bully, it is possible that parents are overly optimistic in how they perceive their child to participate in cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In this sense, the results from the current study support and extend the positive illusion model because they demonstrate that within the context of cyberbullying, parents may be romanticizing how they perceive their child.

The current study was designed to explore an area of contemporary social culture not previously examined: parent-child communication about cyberbullying. As such, many of the findings revealed some important practical implications. Specifically, results increased knowledge of parent-child communication about cyberbullying, and suggest that truthful and open dialogue about the many facets of cyberbullying may lead to more sustainable and positive behavioral changes. Further, the finding that there are certain types of cyberbullying parents talk about more than others suggests parents need to be better educated about cyberbullying. Finally, the results, as well as the interpretation of the results, suggest that media representations of cyberbullying are important because they have serious implications for parent-child communication and relationships, and could greatly benefit knowledge and understanding of the serious health issue posed by cyberbullying. Moreover, a shift toward more encompassing media coverage of cyberbullying would help close the gap between child and parent perceptions of cyberbullying behavior because it would help better educate parents about a variety of cyberbullying behavior, rather than emphasizing only severe instances.

Parent-Child Communication.

The current study was interested in exploring if and how parents talk with their children about cyberbullying. This interest was grounded in literature which presents a strong case for the positive results of open and supportive parent-child communication about tough topics. The results indicate that while the majority of parents are talking with

their children about cyberbullying, their conversations are stifled for a number of reasons, but most generally because they are poorly educated about cyberbullying.

As such, the current study suggests that parents work toward increasing their knowledge about cyberbullying. Specifically, this increase in knowledge should embrace the whole spectrum of cyberbullying behaviors, including both direct and indirect cyberbullying behaviors. An awareness of the different types of cyberbullying behaviors will give parents better tools for engaging in conversations with their child. For instance, instead of speaking generally about cyberbullying, parents could point to specific incidents and refer to them as distinct behaviors such as outing or online harassment. This would decrease ambiguity about what constitutes cyberbullying. Further, this would create more stringent guidelines for what is regarded as good behavior, and what is thought of as bad behavior within the realm of mediated communication.

These conversations should also work toward encompassing the range of ways a child could participate in cyberbullying behavior. Results from the current study suggest that there may be a disconnect between how parents perceive their children to participate in cyberbullying, and what that child's experience with cyberbullying is. Specifically, less than 1% of parents indicated their child was the bully, while previous work has found that over 20% of the youth population has cyberbullied in the last 30 days. As such, parents should work toward acknowledging that their children may be involved in bullying, while also realizing that there are a number of different capacities within which he or she could be participating.

By working toward a more all-encompassing presentation of cyberbullying in parent-child communication, parents will be increasing the likelihood that their conversations will be effective in creating positive change. As the results indicated, parents are approaching conversations about cyberbullying with their child in the most effective way, using the inductive communicative strategy, but that the content of such conversations is limiting. Thus, if parents work toward making the content of their conversations more inclusive they may be able to increase the effectiveness of their parent-child communication about cyberbullying.

Media Presentations of Cyberbullying.

An important finding of the current study is that parents are not avoiding conversations about cyberbullying with their children. However the results and interpretations indicate that there are a number of nuances surrounding these conversations. Namely, results suggest that parents are overly positive in both their communication about cyberbullying and their perception of their child's cyberbullying behavior. Specifically, the findings suggest that parents are more likely to talk about indirect cyberbullying behaviors such as denigration, where responsibility and consequence are spread amongst a grouping of people rather than pinned on an individual. Further, an examination into the connection between the results of the current study and previous work on the positive illusion model suggests that many parents believe that cyberbullying is not a behavior that effects their child, or more specifically, that parents do not believe their child is negatively involved (Wenger & Fowers, 2008). Coupled with the research which has indicated that media coverage of cyberbullying

often emphasizes more severe and intensified cases of cyberbullying, this implies that parents may have false impressions when it comes to both their understanding of cyberbullying behavior, and of how they perceive their child to participate in cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010).

Specifically, the results suggest that media's emphasis on severe cases of cyberbullying plays a role in parents' decision to begin a dialogue about cyberbullying with their child. The argument was made that cyberbullying, although sharing characteristics with typically avoided topics, poses a large enough threat to the child that parents feel compelled to participate in risk reducing behavior, specifically in communication about the behavior. While this can be viewed as positive because media coverage provides the necessary catalyst to begin the conversation, the intensified presentations of cyberbullying limits parents' ability to relate to the behavior, and more specifically limits their capacity to relate such behaviors to their child. This limitation extends further because of parents' propensity to engage in conversations about indirect cyberbullying behaviors. Specifically, by emphasizing indirect cyberbullying behaviors, parents are focusing more on group initiated harm, and are thus less able to concentrate on the individual actions of their child. This is further solidified by parents' overly positive perception of their child's involvement in cyberbullying because it allows parents to approach such conversations in a way that distances their child from the harmful behavior. The combination of intensified perceptions of cyberbullying, the tendency to engage in conversations about indirect cyberbullying and parents' overly positive perceptions of the child's participation in cyberbullying creates a distance between the behaviors being talked about in parent-child communication and the actual

behaviors of the child. As such, when they communicate with their child about cyberbullying, they do not approach it as something their child is involved in, rather they emphasize the serious physical threat such involvement poses. Thus, attempts to communicate effectively about the risks of cyberbullying are limited because there is no sense of immediacy or realistic threat.

That being said, media coverage of cyberbullying should work toward creating a more well-rounded presentation of cyberbullying behaviors. These presentations should emphasize the range of cyberbullying behaviors and should work toward showing people what cyberbullying looks like, rather than just intensified incidents of it. For instance, a media campaign focused on showcasing less severe, more commonly occurring cyberbullying behaviors may shift parents' perceptions about what cyberbullying is. By providing news coverage or information about cyberbullying that indicates how common such behaviors are, and the different ways one can be involved in cyberbullying, media can help bridge the gap between the reality of cyberbullying and how parents perceive their child's role in cyberbullying. Specifically, by presenting a more realistic picture of what cyberbullying looks like from a child's perspective media will give parents the tools for approaching conversations about cyberbullying in a socially appropriate way. Further, effective news coverage of cyberbullying, which highlights more than just severe instances of cyberbullying behavior, can increase parents' knowledge of the problem and may ultimately lead to open, prevention-based communication about the threat of cyberbullying.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study presents a range of findings which pave the way for a great deal of future research. This is in part because the study was designed to be exploratory, but also because the topic of cyberbullying is relatively new. That being said, the results of the current study give researchers an excellent building block for future studies.

However, the current study was conducted using a non-random sample, which was effective in exploring how a certain population understands parent-child communication about cyberbullying; the results are not generalizable. As such, future studies should attempt to examine whether the findings from the current study are similar in a more random sample. In a similar vein, a majority of the survey population were white women, and thus it would be interesting if future research were to compare findings between the current sample and other populations such as men or parents of different races.

The results from the current study presented an interesting contrast between parents who had previously talked with their child about cyberbullying and those who had not previously had such conversations. However, the population of participants who had no previous experience talking about cyberbullying with their child was small ($n = 12$), and thus no significant claims were able to be made. As such, future studies should attempt to explore perceptions of cyberbullying amongst parents who have no prior experience with cyberbullying in an effort to glean insight into why they are not talking about it.

The current study was designed to explore a largely uncharted area of social science research: parent-child communication about cyberbullying. As such, the previous

research used to build arguments and develop the survey instrument was limited in its capacity to fill the needs of the researcher. Specifically, in designing the survey instrument, many of the items on the questionnaire were speculative. Although they were designed based on fundamental cyberbullying literature, and rigorously pre-tested, future research should examine actual instances of online bullying behavior. In particular, a content analysis of online bullying behavior would help bridge the gap between how the public perceives cyberbullying and what specific types of behaviors constitute cyberbullying.

The current study was interested in one facet of communication about cyberbullying, that which happens within a parent-child relationship. Specifically, the current study looked at parental perceptions of this communication. Based on the findings from the current study, and specifically the proposed disconnect between parent and child perceptions of cyberbullying behavior, it would be interesting to gain insight into how children perceive their parent-child communication about cyberbullying. A study which examines both child and parent perceptions of cyberbullying would allow for an understanding of how children conceptualize cyberbullying and would also provide an opportunity for comparison between the two groups.

The current study highlights the importance of parent-child communication about cyberbullying and provides some suggestions for how to make such conversations more effective. These findings, and specifically those relating to what types of cyberbullying parents talk about with their children, relate to Dixon's (2012) integrated model of bullying because they suggest there is a value in looking at the child's larger system

when thinking about their participation in bullying. That being said, it would be

interesting to build on Dixon's (2012) model and examine how teachers and school administrators understanding cyberbullying. This research would allow for a comparison between conceptualizations of cyberbullying between teachers, administrators and parents, which would help in generating an effective and widespread dialogue about the consequences associated with cyberbullying behaviors.

Conclusion

The current study was designed to explore if and how parents communicate with their children about cyberbullying, with an emphasis on how they perceive their child's cyberbullying behaviors. A review of literature on parent-child relationships and communication, as well as an examination into previous work on topic avoidance and traditional bullying helped develop a number of research questions which were designed to explore this new area of research while also making connections between the findings and earlier literature. Results found that parents were talking about cyberbullying, and that they were doing so using an inductive communication approach. However, more in-depth analysis indicated that their conversations were limited in scope and focused largely on indirect cyberbullying behaviors. Further, it was found that parents are likely to be overly positive in how they perceive their child's participation in cyberbullying. Ultimately, a number of theoretical and practical applications, such as more effective media coverage of cyberbullying, were highlighted and future research ideas, such as examination of child perceptions of parent-child communication cyberbullying, were proposed.

Cyberbullying is a very real problem facing current society. However, no one person is responsible for solving the problem. President Obama can host conferences, schools can attempt to teach online safety and parents can restrict their children's access to certain media, but as this study has tried to demonstrate, communication may be a key factor in limiting the harmful effects cyberbullying can have. Although the current research looked only at one type of communication, that which happens between a parent and child, the results have suggested that understandings of what constitutes cyberbullying must be reconsidered. Specifically, this study advocates for a more well-rounded conceptualization of cyberbullying, one that includes the varying degrees of behaviors, as well as the different types of participatory roles involved in cyberbullying. Ultimately, in order to put a stop to cyberbullying, it is essential that cyberbullying is first understood.

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Informed Consent

Dear Survey Participant,

Thank you so much for choosing to participate in my survey! During this survey you will be asked a number of questions regarding your communication with your child. You will also be asked about your perceptions of cyberbullying behavior. As a reminder, your child should be between the ages of 10 - 18. There are minimal risks associated with taking this survey, as you might feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions.

I would like to remind you that the answers collected from this survey are both ANONYMOUS and CONFIDENTIAL, meaning there will be no way to link you to the responses you provided. In addition to being anonymous and confidential, this survey is also voluntary, so you may choose to skip questions which you feel uncomfortable answering.

At the end of the survey you will be given an option to enter a raffle for a chance to win one of six \$25 gift cards. If you choose to enter the raffle you will be directed to a separate link to enter. This survey should take approximately 15 - 20 minutes to complete. Please answer the questions as honestly and carefully as possible, remembering that there is no way to trace you to the responses you give. From this point on in the survey, once you hit the next button you will be unable to go back to previous pages. So make sure to answer all the questions on the page before moving on.

If you have any questions about the study please contact the primary researcher, Veronica Droser, at vdroser@pdx.edu.

Topic Avoidance

The following table contains a list of seven potential topics which may appear during conversations with your [age of child] year old child. For each of the topics listed in the left column I would like you to choose the number 1 through 7, 1 being never avoided and 7 being always avoided, which best indicates how these topics are handled in your conversations with your oldest child who meets the criteria explained on the previous page.

[illegible]

[illegible]

Appendix C

Conversations about Cyberbullying

In this section you will be presented with seven short scenarios. Please read each of the scenarios and indicate on a scale of 1 through 5 how likely, 1 being very unlikely and 5 being very likely, it is that you would engage in a conversation with your [child's age here] year old child about the given scenario.

	1 Very Unlikely	2 Unlikely	3 Unsure	4 Likely	5 Very Likely
You read in the paper that a school has just expelled a group of students for participating in flaming. They were making fun of a transfer student they didn't like on a Facebook page.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
A colleague of yours tells you someone on her daughter's soccer team recently made the decision to quit because her teammates started and spread a rumor that she was doing drugs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
While watching the news you hear a story about a girl who recently had to change schools because her ex - boyfriend shared private pictures with their entire grade.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
You overhear someone on the train talking about having to get a new computer because their son's email had been bombarded with computer viruses by a student at his school.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
You hear on the radio that a student is in critical care after trying to commit suicide	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

<p>because they had been stalked and harassed by members of the school's baseball team for years.</p> <p>You learn that in the town over from you a parent and a child pair had been posing as a teenage boy online and had started an online relationship with a girl in the child's school.</p> <p>A friend of yours mentions that the principal at her child's school recently had to intervene with some of the student's online behavior because they had created a Facebook group to promote school spirit, but had excluded a number of students they did not like from the group.</p>	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Please indicate the answer which you believe best represents your experience talking about cyberbullying.

8. Have you ever talked about cyberbullying with your [child's age here] year old child?

☐ Yes

☐ No

9. Approximately how many times in the last year have you have talked with your [child's age here] year old child about cyberbullying?

10. Approximately how many times have you talked about cyberbullying with your [child's age here] year old child in the last month?

Appendix D

Parental Communicative Approaches

Below are two short scenarios, and attached to each of the scenarios are three different ways that you could react. I would like you to read each of the scenarios as if the child was your [child's age here] year old child, and then indicate on a scale of one through five, 1 being very likely and 5 being very unlikely, how likely you would be to react each of the 3 ways.

Scenario 1

Your 16 year old son has recently broken up with his 15 year old girlfriend, who you found to be sweet and charming. Shortly after she ended things with your son, you receive a call from Johanna, her mother. Johanna sounds incredibly upset and informs you that your son forwarded nude picture messages of her daughter to his group of friends, both male and female, through text messages. Johanna explains these photos were taken privately for your son.

	1 Very Likely	2 Likely	3 Unsure	4 Unlikely	5 Very Unlikely
When your son arrives home you immediately raise your voice to him and let him know how angry you are at what he did. You tell him he is grounded for a week and you ban him from using his cell phone until future notice.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When your son arrives home you ignore his attempts to talk to you. When he asks why you are ignoring him you ask if he has something he wants to tell you. When he says no you tell him you will ignore him until he comes clean about his actions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When your son arrives home you greet him normally. After hearing about his day you ask him if there is anything he wants to tell you, and when he says no you bring up the call you received. You hear his side of the story and tell him even though he was upset what he did was wrong and it has really hurt your feelings, and the feelings of his ex - girlfriend.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scenario 2

Your 11 year old daughter is turning 12 soon. You have given her permission to have a big sleepover to celebrate. She tells you she wants to make the event on Facebook instead of sending out invites in the mail because paper invites are for losers. You agree that it is a good idea to send Facebook invites because it will save you money on postage but tell her that it is important to make sure she doesn't leave anyone out. Two days before the big party the mother of your daughter's childhood best friend approaches you. She asks you why her daughter is the only girl in the entire class who has not been invited to your daughter's birthday party.

	1 Very Likely	2 Likely	3 Unsure	4 Unlikely	5 Very Unlikely
When your daughter comes outside you angrily tell her it is time to go. In the car you tell her how embarrassing it was to have the other parent approach you about the guest list for her party. You threaten her by saying if she doesn't invite her childhood best friend then you will not let her have the party.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
You greet your daughter normally. Once in the car you ask her when she stopped hanging out with her childhood best friend. When she responds defensively you tell her about the discussion you had with her friend's mother. You tell her you understand that friends come and go, but that it is upsetting to you, and her childhood best friend and her mother that she was excluded from the guest list.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
When your daughter comes outside you wait for her to walk over to you. You ignore her attempts to greet you and give her the silent treatment for the ride home. Upon arriving home she angrily asks you why you are ignoring her and you respond only by telling her you are giving her a dose of her own medicine.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Parental Perception of child's cyberbullying behavior

The following section is aimed at understanding the role that you perceive your [child's age here] year old child to play in specific situations. You will be asked to read five scenarios which each contain 5 characters. After reading each scenario please indicate which character you believe your child, and which character your child's friend would be most likely to play.

Scenario 1

Martin, Hannah, Corey, Jeff and Cathy are all on the same swim team. Corey moved up to the higher level in practice because he has been doing so well at swim meets. Jeff feels angry because he believes Corey thinks he is too good for his old friends since he moved up a level. After talking to Jeff, Hannah begins feeling the same way and even though she previously had a crush on Corey she starts to not like him. Jeff and Hannah start ignoring Corey, and they threaten Martin and Cathy into ignoring him too by saying if they talk to him Jeff will beat them up. Jeff and Hannah begin sending Corey text messages from an unknown number and start posting viruses on his Facebook wall. Eventually Martin goes to Corey and explains everything that has been going on. Corey and Martin decide that they are going to start being friends again even if Hannah and Jeff don't like it.

	Jeff	Hannah	Cathy	Martin	Corey
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child's closest friend would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scenario 2

Jason, Chris, Sarah, Liz and Joey are all classmates. Liz is a new student at school and she is having a hard time making friends. Jason is the only person who will talk to her, but Jason is dating Sarah so he can only talk to Liz sometimes. Sarah is jealous and angry that Jason is friends with Liz so she and Joey decide to play a trick on her. Sarah creates a fake Facebook account of a boy who lives a town over from them. Joey helps Sarah fill in the details like the fake boy's interests and activities. Sarah starts talking to Liz on the fake Facebook account and Liz and the boy start an online relationship. Joey thinks the relationship is so funny that he and Sarah create a private Facebook group where they post about the fake relationship and make fun of Liz. One day Sarah invites Jason to the group and when he sees the group he breaks up with Sarah. Sarah is so angry that she makes the Facebook group open to the public and tells everyone in the school that Liz has been having an online relationship with a fake person.

	Sarah	Joey	Chris	Jason	Liz
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child's closest friend would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Scenario 3

Mateo, Steve, Bobby, Justin and Max all play soccer on the same team. Justin is the newest member of the team and Mateo and Bobby, being the captains of the team, decide they need to haze him before he can be officially inducted into the team. They do not want to risk injury because it would hurt the team, they decide they will play a game with his mind. Mateo begins sending Justin threatening text messages and prank phone calls at late hours of the night. He then asks Bobby to use his good camera to take secret photos of Justin while he changes in the locker room. Once the photos have been taken Mateo sends the photos to everyone on the team and to all the girls he knows from Justin's school. Having received the text messages Steve goes to their coach and tells them what has been going on.

	Mateo	Bobby	Max	Steve	Justin
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
In the above scenario what character do you think best represents the role your child's closest friend would play?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Demographic Questions

1) What gender do you most identify with?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Other

2) What is your age?

3) Please select which of the following best represents your annual household income?

- ☐ \$0 - \$9,999
- ☐ \$10,000 - \$24,999
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 or more

4) What is the highest level of education you have received?

- ☐ Less than High School
- ☐ High School/GED
- ☐ Some College
- ☐ Associate Degree
- ☐ Bachelor's Degree
- ☐ Master's Degree
- ☐ Professional Degree
- ☐ Doctorate Degree

5) What race do you most identify with?

- ☐ White
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Asian/Pacific Islander
- ☐ Native American
- ☐ Other

6) What is your ethnicity?

- ☐ Hispanic
- ☐ Non-Hispanic
- ☐ Don't Know

7) Please select which of the following represents your marital status:

- ☐ Married and Never Divorced
- ☐ Divorced
- ☐ Remarried after Divorce
- ☐ Widowed
- ☐ Single

8) How you would best describe your current employment status?

- ☐ Employed Full-Time
- ☐ Employed Part-Time
- ☐ Unemployed/Looking for work
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Homemaker
- ☐ Retired

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9) How would you best describe your neighborhood?

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Suburban
- ☐ Rural

Table 1

Rank order of parental communicative approaches

Communicative Approach	Had previously talked about cyberbully (<i>n</i> = 136)		Had not previously talked about cyberbully (<i>n</i> = 12)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Induction	1.97 (1) _a	0.85	2.00 (1) _a	0.88
Power Assertion	3.49 (2) _b	1.04	3.75 (2) _b	1.01
Love Withdrawal	4.59 (3) _c	0.67	4.42 (3) _c	0.79

Note: Different subscripts in each column indicate a significant difference, $p < .05$. Numbers to the right of mean scores denote placement within the rank order. Response pattern ranged most likely (1) to least likely (5).

Table 2

Rank order of perceived cyberbullying role

Cyberbullying Role	Perceptions of Child's role in Cyberbullying			
	Overall	Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3
Defender of the Victim	58.0%	55.4% (n = 82)	54.7% (n = 81)	62.8% (n = 93)
Victim	21.0%	28.4% (n = 42)	22.3% (n = 33)	12.8% (n = 19)
Outsider	15.0%	8.1% (n = 12)	19.6% (n = 29)	17.6% (n = 26)
Reinforcer of the Bully	5.0%	5.4% (n = 8)	2.7% (n = 4)	6.8% (n = 10)
Bully	1.0%	2.7% (n = 4)	0.7% (n = 1)	0.0% (n = 0)

Figure 1: Rank order of Conversations about Cyberbullying