

CYBER-BULLYING IN SOPHIE MCKENZIE'S *SWEETFREAK*

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ABSTRACT

This research is about the cyber-bullying in Sophie McKenzie's *SweetFreak*. This research's objectives are to describe the extrinsic element that are the causes, types and effects of cyber-bullying in the novel. This research used psychological approach in its method and the descriptive qualitative method for its research design. Through the use of the Lifestyle-Routine Activity Theory by Candace et al. (2023) a theory to determine the likelihood of victimization, the researcher found that the cyber-bullying in this novel happened because of three factors: motivated offender, target suitability, absence of guardianship. The motivated offender factor happened because the culprit of the cyber-bullying was driven to do the cyber-bullying, target suitability factor happened because the victim of the cyber-bullying had done something prior that made her suitable to be targeted by the perpetrator, the absence of guardianship happened because no real elders in the novel ever tried to protect or supervised the victim. Then in terms of types of cyber-bullying, the researcher found that there are five types of cyber-bullying that are used in the novel. The types of cyber-bullying are: online harassment, flaming, denigration, photograph & video, fraping. As for the effects, the researcher found there are three kinds of effect from the cyber-bullying, that are displayed by the main character in the novel. They are: academic effect, which disrupts the main character's school life, the social effect that ruined the main character's interaction with her peers, and finally the emotional effect that disturbed the psyche of the main character.

Keywords: *cyber-bullying, flaming, fraping, lifestyle-routine activity theory*

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is one of many violent acts that many has done to their common folks, yet it is more prevalent and always can be subtly disguised as jokes. Even in this much more civilized time, there are still people that are really enjoying the chance that they can to commit that ever-reoccurring annoying act, more so that it is one of the few things where the perpetrators can make elaborate excuses to avoid having any repercussions. Accordingly, to make the definition easier to understand, bullying already has a certain criterion being presented by Olweus (2021: p2) in that he states: "(a) It is aggressive

behavior or intentional "harmdoing"(b) which is carried out "repeatedly and over time"(c) in an inter-personal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power". With the rise of technology in the 21st century, however, which gave birth to the internet, it only provides more opportunity for the perpetrators to engage their dangerous activity more frequently and with unprecedented techniques; thus, giving rise to one of bullying's latest form that is cyber-bullying. The general consensus and the most common way to describe cyber-bullying, is the activity to bully people on the internet

throughout the hyperspace. Where a user of an online platform would use the advantage of their anonymity and less effort to restrain themselves as they commit this damaging act. (Suler, 2013: p53)

In truth, cyber-bullying itself actually came out only recently in human history, but its impact has been felt by many people in such a short amount of time. Considering the emergence of digital technology in the early millennium granting more access to many information and making contact more easily to one another, it is not surprising to see people having more ways in communicating with each other. The origin of this phenomena, stated by Mike Chu (2023) in dataoverhaulers.com (accessed on November 14th, 2023), could be traced back to the late 90s. With a variety of online forums first came to be, which then gave people a chance to interact through the internet. And only until the mid-2000s, that it would be taken as a serious case by researchers, after resulting in some of the first cases of suicide caused by cyber-bullying.

Unfortunately, there were so many instances where the platform that was used mainly for exchanging ideas and information being abused and then turned into a hostile environment even to this day. Case in point, the number of cyberbullying in the U.S. in 2021 shows that the most bullied are the middle and high school students in their 13-17 years of age, reaching around 45.5%, report Justin W. Patchin from cyberbullying.org (accessed on November 1st, 2023). With such a large number of people having to deal with this problem from just one country alone, it would not be a mistreatment to imagine how horrible the state of the other more misfortunate countries that had to deal with worse cases of cyber-bullying. It was not without cost, after all, for the very mental health of the victims is the

one that is heavily affected. Being in their most vulnerable and unstable state, teenagers were prone to make many irrational decisions that sadly would not have benefited anybody aside from the bullies; such as dangerous substance usage, violent and mean demeanor towards peers, high risk of anxiety and depression, etc. (Abramson: 2022)

The usage of troubled youngster being put in a difficult situation by cyber-bullying is the main plot-point for the novel *Sweetfreak* by Sophie McKenzie. The protagonist of *Sweetfreak* is a young girl named Carey Logan who is struggling to come to terms with the cyber-bullying of her best friend Amelia. Throughout the novel, Carey was devastated as not only her best friend being bullied online, but she is also being framed as the perpetrator of said bullying. The novel depicts the story in a 4-part arcs, displaying the situation of Carey and Amelia's cyber-bullying, the downfall of their friendship, Carey's family's eventual fallout due to their daughter's connection to said cyber-bullying, all the way to Carey's final act to cleanse the problems herself since no one's going to help her for nobody trusts her anymore.

The reason of choosing this novel, is about how impressive is the author to depict the cyber-bullying issue, by showcasing the impact of said cyber-bullying not only affecting the main character alone but also her family and community at large. As for the reason for choosing this specific topic, is because that this particular topic of bullying—specifically cyberbullying is still a prevalent problem to this very day, and it can't be stressed out even more that the problem will only keep on going if there're no direct measures to deal with it.

METHODS

The researcher is using psychological approach towards the research's method to

help find and describe the context of cyber-bullying perpetrations and its many types that are showcased as well as its impact in the novel. Psychological approach or psychoanalysis, is used to analyze the perspective and way of thinking of a person both in real life and in fiction. Linda (2021) in her article entitled, *the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis: reflections on object relations theory, researcher's subjectivity, and transference in psychoanalytic literary criticism*, states that psychology and literary both utilize language as the main medium, that the messages and any underlying tone of any human emotions can only be felt or at least perceived after knowing the initial texts (i.e., human interactions in real life and fiction).

The method with which to gather as much data from the novel will be of descriptive-qualitative method, which according to Robert Elliot & Timulak Ladislav is picking the most relevant parts of the main research object, that being the literary text, and dissecting the meanings behind said part of the text. Be it from a books, journals, or articles (2021: p5). Focusing on the novel *SweetFreak*, this research's scope will be to look for the many instances of the cyber-bullying depiction within its story as its data. The researcher then continues with taking notes of the data from the novel to be analyzed for identification in the later step.

RESULTS

The results of this research shows that almost all perpetrations of cyber-bullying can be boiled down to three main aspects: the

causes, the types and the effects of cyber-bullying.

A. The Causes of Cyber-bullying

From the causes it gets more expanded upon with the three main category: the Motivated Offender, the Target Suitability and the Lack of Guardianship.

1. Motivated Offender

For the motivated offender category, it's revealed that the main catalyst of the cyber-bullying in the novel is of vengeance from the perpetrator. After a brief yet long-lasting schism between the main character and her older sister, the latter decides to take it upon herself and punish the main character for what she did to her prior to the story's opening.

2. Target Suitability

As for the target suitability, it's established that because of the main character's careless attitude when she was messing around with her older sister, it paints a target on her back for seemingly ruining the latter's relationship with her boyfriend.

3. Lack of Guardianship

For the lack of guardianship, it's because the many adults in the story almost never give a care about the circumstances of the main character, it's even stated that her father had left her and her family long before the story starts, leaving her helpless and without any guidance when she gets caught up in the cyber-bullying case.

B. Types of Cyber-bullying

As for the type of the cyber-bullying, this research shows that there are five types of cyber-bullying that were used throughout the story. Those five are: online harassment, flaming, denigration, photograph & video, fraping.

1. Online Harrasment

It's when a person being sent with bad message and very unhelpful remark to make them response to said trolling. "She's been getting these mean private messages on NatterSnap from someone calling themselves SweetFreak all week." (Mckenzie, 2017: p13). Even though it wasn't present in the novel, through the quote above it's implied that prior to the event, both Amelia and Carey had a run in with Sweetfreak beforehand, when they first got a bit of taste of what cyber-bullying looks like. By Carey's narration it also implied that it has been a recurring theme with SweetFreak that they kept sending all of those nasty private messages that makes Amelia slowly getting worrisome and even got insecure with herself.

2. Photograph & Video

The next one is when a cyber-bullying that features either pictures or any audio-visual images of something that was meant to be derogative towards the cyber-bullies' targets. In the narration, it is revealed that the last time Carey and Amelia heard from SweetFreak they were sent a video about saying that Amelia really is just a pig in human skin. "For instance, the last SweetFreak message Amelia got showed a huge (real) pig with her face perfectly superimposed on it

rootling around in mud, then falling onto a house which collapsed under the weight, sending neon letters sparking into the air that said: Amelia woz here. Which is crazy." (Mckenzie, 2017: p13)

This one could also be argued as the most commonly-used method of cyber-bullying throughout the novel. As the other cyber-bullying types also featured one or two forms of audio-visual images in their respective scenes.

3. Flaming

This type of cyber-bullying is also the precursor of the events in the novel. This is where Carey first saw in her class that Amelia was being surrounded by her friends, she realized that she was sent the death threat from SweetFreak who told her that she's hoping to see Amelia dead. "It's the same photo of Amelia as in the pig-face video, but in this film her eyes have been manipulated to look wide and terrified and a long, serrated knife is being drawn slowly along her throat. As the skin is slashed through, blood pours out. The post with the video says: SweetFreak 13m ago Can't wait til you're dead, Princess. Can't wait til I kill you." (Mckenzie, 2017: p21)

This happens around the time when Amelia and Carey were attending their school and suddenly this message pops out in the NatterSnap main feed. As it also described in the narration above, the way the cyber-bullying happened, it did include a photo of the previous cyber-bullying attempt only this time they were made gorier and more brutal; which in and of itself also makes it another proper instance of **Photograph & Video**.

4. Denigration

This is the kind of cyber-bullying that happened when someone, sends out a message to other people that are usually cruel or sometimes just plain annoying about the cyber-bullies' target. In this case, it's Carey right when she thought she might get help from her classmate Rose, to aid her solving the cyber-bullying case that has ruined her name previously. Not only is she being duped to meet her in a public restaurant all alone, she was also secretly being photographed and it was used to ridicule her sorry state at the time. "There's a photo of me from Nando's sitting alone at my table. It's been posted on the main feed by someone – presumably Rose – calling themselves CareyLFreako – which is not my NatterSnap handle. The caption underneath reads: Big Saturday night with da gang. #popular #freak" (Mckenzie, 2017: p89). As with the narration it also featured an image of the target, making it another proper example of **Photograph & Video**.

5. Fraping

The last type of cyber-bullying used in the novel's story. In this particular case, the culprit—Poppy—doesn't necessarily sabotage Carey's social media account through elaborate means. In the novel, she explained much like in the section for the Reason of the Cyber-bullying, that she simply makes use of her little sister's laptop while she was away to meet Amelia. "...So I went into your room, put on gloves so there'd be no fingerprints and sent the death threat from your laptop. I used the delay function to try and disguise the time it was sent and also so it would arrive when you were both at school the next morning..." (Mckenzie, 2017: p200)

This quote showed what exactly happened at the very beginning of the story, during the moment when Carey got called by Amelia to meet up in a recreational park in late night. At the time, when Carey was busy trying to find her way to meet Amelia, because she didn't realize the usual meetup place would change per season as Amelia would say later, it gave the chance to have her sister—Poppy to use her laptop when she hasn't returned home that night.

It may not look like a proper Fraping many might expect as they read the story, but it's still a legitimate depiction of Fraping nonetheless. For the activity in this specific context, the usage of a person's belonging in order to use that belonging to make a fool or even damaging the user's very own image in front of others, is still the main intention as to why Poppy done all of that to her sister. It was so that she could finally—and with full vindication—ruin her sister's friendship with Amelia after unknowingly destroying her love life before the start of the story.

C. The Impacts of Cyber-bullying

There are no such things as consequence-less actions. Any and all causes, both good and bad, will always have its own effect. The same could be said to the impact that Carey had to deal with regarding the framing of her being the cyber-bullying's culprit. Amongst many such effects, there are about three major effects that are the most impactful to her. That being: Academic, Social, and Emotional.

1. The Academic Impact

One of the most influential stages of any person is in their adolescence. And the most influential thing any adolescents had gone through is their school life. In this story, the cyber-bullying affected Carey's school life, as she gradually gets shunned and losing many kinds of trust from her peers. "The rumours about me are getting wilder and wilder... As far as I can make out everyone who's seen it believes that I not only sent the death threat but am seriously intent on carrying it out. I catch snippets of conversations as I walk along corridors and, on several occasions, when I'm in the loos on the second floor – the school's most popular indoor hideaway." (Mckenzie, 2017: p50)

This is when Carey's interaction with her peers began to broke as her reputation starts dwindling here on out. It's here also that the place where she's trying to study is gradually disrupted because of the constant rumors and gossips surrounding her friend's cyber-bullying that renders her very uncomfortable to engage in any academical activities, especially when it involves the classmates she's known for a long time. Which is unfortunate because prior to this event, she has led a very promising school life with no bad reputation whatsoever.

2. The Social Impact

It's worth noting that Carey's interaction outside of her school life, wasn't that glamorous in the slightest either. As even her daily life wasn't spared from her being framed of the cyber-bullying. One instance is when she was told by her mom, to start seeking a counseling session with a therapist, to help dealing her downing mood and rough demeanor anytime she's in

school. "The final straw is when I trudge home, more miserable than I'd have thought possible, and Mum greets me as I walk in with the words: 'I think you need to talk to someone, Carey. Get to the bottom of what's going on with you . . . so I've found you a therapist and booked an appointment for tomorrow evening. Her name's Sonia Greening and she's got a very good reputation.'" (Mckenzie: 2017, p57)

As it's shown, is that she's getting more and more demands from her peers as her credibility falls to the gutter because she can't prove with any known methods that she's innocent. It's even worse when said therapy is merely a front to make her say that she did the cyber-bullying.

3. The Emotional Impact

The other thing that will certainly be affected from the cyber-bullying will be the emotions of the victims. considering that teenagers aren't necessarily capable to handle the brunt of continuous negative experience on their own. As with Carey she had suffered a lot along the way. The development of her status being considered guilty, takes its toll when she can't even reach her friend in time of said incident. "My worst fear is that Amelia herself won't believe it. Why hasn't she replied to my call? Or responded to my texts? I told her the police had my mobile, but could she be calling it by mistake? And what has she said to everyone else? Has she told anyone else that the police traced the SweetFreak message to my laptop?" (Mckenzie, 2017: p36).

Another thing worth mentioning, is her dwindling trust between herself and her peers as a whole. "I still don't really

understand why she's so convinced of my innocence, when everyone else thinks I'm guilty. For a split second I wonder again if maybe she's responsible herself and simply sticking up for me out of guilt. Then I push the thought away. This is the worst thing about being blamed for something I didn't do: no one trusts me and I trust no one." (Mckenzie, 2017: p84). This happened when Carey and her sister Poppy had an exchange when the former was talking about her predicament being suspected of both the cyber-bullying and another case being a dead bird found in her friend's locker. By that point Carey had no more good idea as to how to convey the truth that she didn't do any of those crimes, but she's still unable to have solid evidence as to who could possibly do that. So, she had a talk with her sister and for a moment, she began to suspect that the goodwill that her sister had been showing since the cyber-bullying was a ruse as to her trying to stick up to her out of guilt. This is clear indication of her mental state being in disarray that she's having a hard time to trust anybody around her.

CONCLUSION

In this section, the researcher shall summarize the results of this article. It's clear that the novel *SweetFreak* showcased a troubled teenager in her adolescent years getting many awful things thanks to this experience. It is as mentioned before, that the reason for the main character's cyber bullying is thanks to three things: there is a motivated offender, suitable target and absence of guardianship.

The Motivated Offender, comes in the form of the main character's sister, Poppy Logan. In that she wanted to take revenge on her sister's meddling on the former's love life prior to the story.

The Target Suitability, came from Carey's previous mischief towards her sister, Poppy. During the weeks from the beginning of the story she was responsible of creating a mocking video of her sister, making out with a stranger even though it's established that she is already having a relationship with someone else.

The Absence of Guardianship, came in about after the cyber-bullying first happened, it's here where it revealed that Carey had lack any sort of adult supervision in her life. From the homeroom teacher to her reluctant mother and missing father, all of the adults give little to no attention towards her plight in the story.

The types of cyber-bullying depicted in the novel primarily are shown to be about five; they are, Flaming, Online Harassment, Denigration, Photograph & Video, and Fraping. All of them done sporadically throughout the novel. Most of them are done in separate scenes, with the exception of Photograph & Video, being the most frequently used type for the story. And that all of this cyber-bullying case becoming major issue starting from the Fraping type; even though the starting point was from the Flaming type, it wouldn't leave a much harder impact without the Fraping type.

Lastly the impact of cyber-bullying that was felt by the main character, Carey. From the result she had experienced the

Academic, Social and Emotional effects for the entire novel. By the look of her Academic effect, it's revealed that even though she hadn't suffered major difficulties on her education and overall grades, she still suffers the typical uncomfortable treatment from her peers during school time. Which only worsen into the middle to end parts, where her role as the main lead for the school drama, got revoked and she being given a penalty for seemingly having a particularly bad behavior throughout her school time.

The social effect comes into play, when Carey trying to reconnect with her social circle like it used to. Only this time they were merely interested in seeing the confession coming from her, instead of hearing and helping her out. The first came from her mother, who had lost her trust to Carey because she always unable to give full explanation of what happened and resulting in her showing more and more discrepancy which led to her mother unable to believe her words anymore.

Finally, the emotional effect where it shown that after repeatedly being accused of something she didn't do, Carey gradually became anxious and overwhelmed at the sheer pile of problems stacking on top of her. She's shown to be more anxious about her friend—Amelia's condition when she didn't give any info about her anymore, she tried to do any sort of things to occupy her mind from the trouble as she could so she won't be overwhelmed all the time.

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