The portrayal of bullying in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019)

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a pattern of negative behavior, not an occasional incident, which still occurs frequently in society. In most cases, bullying happens to children at school. As the issue has received much public attention, bullying is commonly featured in numerous literary works, one of which is in the children's film by Joe Cornish, *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). Through analysis under the framework of film theory by Bordwell and Thompson (2016) and Foucault's (1995) theoretical framework of power, the film portrayed bullying toward students in school through the film's cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. The imbalance of power between the bullies and the bullied is the main factor causing acts of bullying. It shows in the difference of individual aspects such as body sizes and social standings in school, which the bullies usually have the more advantageous aspect than the bullied. The advantageous aspect makes the bullies superior, giving them a chance to cause negative impacts on the bullied personalities intentionally. The negative impact of bullying can lower the bullied self-esteem, making them feel worthless as an individual. Since bullying is also a critical issue that needs to explore further, the researcher conducts a textual analysis study to provide references to readers about bullying in children's films and raise awareness about bullying against children in schools.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a common violent expression that frequently occurs in society. Anyone from various circles can experience this detrimental action. Starting from children to adults might be affected by this action. However, children are the group most likely to be affected by bullying. Indonesian National Commission for Child Protection or *Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia* (2020) conducted a survey that shows there are 2,473 reports related to cases of bullying that occur in children. The number is the total reporting recorded for nine years, from 2010 to 2019, with a total that continues to increase every year. The report pointed out that the issue is still happening, even today. Although it can happen anywhere, bullying mostly occurs in public places, mainly in schools. Recently, many online and offline news media have shown bullying cases among school children. The media shows how bullying affects children as victims, interfering with their school achievement, social skills, and psychological well-being. Bullying can also cause prolonged trauma for

children or those who experience it. So, it is a serious issue that people must be aware of.

American Psychological Association (n.d.) stated that bullying is an aggressive and repetitive act that intends to cause discomfort to others. Bullying, in most cases, happens due to power inherent in social groups under the difference of size, strength, age, socioeconomic status (SES), or social connectedness of individuals (Schumann et al., 2013). As it involves a dynamic interaction, bullying results in a power exchange; the bully gains power, and the victim loses power (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017). The exchange created an imbalance of power between the parties. According to Foucault (1998), power is not obtained, seized, shared, held onto, or allowed to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile interactions. The victim, individuals or groups with weaker power, find it difficult to cope with the problem, so they are easily intimidated by the stronger ones, the bully (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Consequently, bullying is considered power abuse. According to Smith (2014), bullying types can be divided into

physical behaviors (e.g., hitting, kicking, damaging the victim's property), verbal attacks (e.g., insults, threats), social aggression (e.g., social exclusion, rumor spreading), and cyberbullying, the most recent form of bullying through the use of the internet and new technologies.

Bullying issues are commonly featured in numerous literary works. Several studies have looked into the portrayal of bullying in literary works. Oppliger and Davis (2016) analyze how bullying is portrayed in preschoolers' picture books, focusing on discovering the type of bullying and which gender is more victimized. At the same time, Hughes and Laffier (2016) analyze three young adult novels which focus on discovering the parties, their role, and the bullying effect. Other studies in literary works focus on authors' characterization of bullying parties, bullying type, and the victims' coping strategies (De Wet, 2016); the role(s) of teachers and administrators in bullying situations (Lisanti, 2014); descriptive statistics and narrative accounts of bullying characteristics (Wiseman & Jones, 2018). Those studies deal with bullying without looking at the power relations between the bullies and the bullied, while it is also important to voice the bullied. To see another perspective, the researcher also uses children's films as the text since there is limited discussion about the bullying issue in children's films, especially *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019).

As the film media is the biggest in today's media industry, it has a significant societal role. The film's content may directly or indirectly influence or provide insight to its viewers. In the case of bullying, the film's content usually portrays the victim intimidated by the bullies in the scene or dialogue. Hence, this study attempts to discover the portrayal of bullying in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019) by Joe Cornish, a children's film that deals with the bullying issue. Through several scenes and dialogues, the film indicates that Alexander Elliot, the main character, and his friend, Bedders, are bullied by Lance and Kaye, his seniors at school. Those characters' lack of power is the cause of their being bullied. The main character's seniors in school, Lance and Kaye, have more advantageous positions since they have bigger body sizes and are famous students at school than Alex and Bedders, who are quiet students. In order to look into the portrayal of bullying, this study uses Foucault's (1995) theoretical framework of power. Based on discipline and subjectivity, Foucault (1995) stated that power dynamics control and change people's bodies, actions, attitudes, and regular patterns of behavior. Bullying is considered an exercise of power, so the theory suits for observing the dynamic power relations between the bully and the bullied. Meanwhile, the researcher uses Bordwell and Thompson's (2016) film framework to analyze the film elements. Bordwell and Thompson (2016) analyze film elements through aspects of narrative form and film style. Narrative form is in the form of plot and story, cause and effect, and time, while film style is in cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. By conducting this study, the researcher tries to provide references to readers about bullying in children's films and raise awareness about bullying against children in schools.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design to analyze a film as a text. With qualitative research design, the meaning associated with a social or human issue is explored and interpreted by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Hence, the design is considered suitable for this research as it explores the portrayal of social phenomena in a literary text. The corpus of this study is a children's film directed by Joe Cornish, *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). The film tells a story of a boy, Alexander Elliot, and his friend's journey to fight evil using the magic sword, Excalibur, to save the world. As a text, the film deals with children's bullying issues. To analyze the issue, the study was conducted with the textual-analysis method exploring the film style aspects, namely cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. Therefore, the data were collected from transcripts and cuts of film scenes, which are described, categorized, analyzed, and interpreted under the framework of film theory by Bordwell and Thompson (2016) and Foucault's (1995) theoretical framework of power. The film was analyzed under the following procedures: (1) The film was broken down into a list of sequences to investigate its structure and the patterns that emerged; (2) The sequences were categorized according to the scene that portrays the bullying issue through its film elements; (3) The bullying scenes were interpreted using literary criticism theory.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To be able to answer how bullying is portrayed in *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), the study categorizes aspects of film elements into cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. The study found that bullying is portrayed through the act of power exercised by the dominant students. Nevertheless, it is also found that there is resistance by the bullied. It means there is an interplay of Foucault's power relation. The analysis of the findings is as follows:

Act of bullying as an exercise of power

Volk et al. (2014) stated that power is not solely a relatively stable property, individual aspects such as a person's size and strength, but also includes situational, social, or environmental aspects that

consequence in a dynamic ecology that can shift the power dynamic. Similarly, Foucault (1982) suggests that in terms of the system of differentiations that empowers one to act upon the actions of others, power is exercised. Foucault (1982) argues that every power relationship draws on such differentiations while also contributing to reinforcing them. In *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), Foucault's notion of power is shown through the different sizes of bodies and social standings in school, in which the bullies are bigger and more popular than the bullied.

The first film aspect to analyze the bullying portrayal is the camera work. As the camera work is an essential element in filmmaking, it contributed to portraying a power relation in some bullying scenes *in The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019). The difference in shot, angle, or point of view of the camera can affect the audience's perspective on the bullying scenes.

The beginning of the film has already shown several scenes of bullying. The first scene is Bedders's bullying scene. Bedders is shown being bullied by two students, Kaye and Lance. The first shot in the scene is taken with a closeup shot with a slightly lower angle showing Bedders's terrified face. In the shot, it looks like a person is raising their hand. However, this shot is taken in the opposite direction: Bedders's actual position is upside down from the earth's surface. In contrast, the next shot shows an upside-down Lance in a closeup. Another shot from the bully afterward, Kaye, is taken using a lower angle which slightly indirectly shows that she has control and is controlling something at that moment. After these three shots, the moving camera, which is carried out in rotation from Bedders's shot, makes it clear that Bedders and Lance's positions are opposite each other. The shot also shows the actual situation where Kaye is on the edge of the stairs above, holding Bedders's legs, while Lance, on the other side of the bottom stairs, is bullying Bedders directly right in front of his face. In the scene, two school bullies try to get Bedders's money by holding him upside down, causing the money to fall out of his pocket. The scene portrays how the bullies physically abuse Bedders. It indicates that the bullied is vulnerable since he is unable to fight back when his body is positioned upside down, and the bullies control his body's movements.

The scene can also be analyzed through another film's aspect, film sound. The film's sound includes dialogue, special effects, and music/soundtrack. For this study, the researcher only focused on dialogue since it is the element that portrays bullying in the film.

From the scene, the bullied, Bedders, is verbally abused by the bullies, Lance and Kaye, through the dialogue. Lance and Kaye said that if Bedders wants to survive in the school, he has to give some money to the bullies. To get what they want and suppress Bedders's actions, the bullies even verbally threaten him.

Bedders	: Let go of me! Leave me alone! - (COINS CLINKING) Put me down!
Lance	: No, no, and no. **You wanna survive in this school, you gotta pay for the privilege.**
Bedders	: You're cutting off my circulation. I am going to pass out.
Kaye	: **Keep your voice down or I'll punch my PIN number into your legs.**
Bedders	: My head's filling up with blood. It's going to explode! I feel weird. Help! Somebody help me. *(The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), 00:04:32–00:04:55*)*

Through the dialogue, it can be seen that the bullies are considered more dominant than the bullied in terms of self-esteem because their intimidating threats have made the bullied even more fearful. Then, the bullies also keep doing his action even though Bedders keeps telling them to stop since it makes him uncomfortable. The bullies completely ignore Bedders' complaints regarding his discomfort position. They keep acting indifferent, as if they do not hear Bedders' voice, and remain busy collecting Bedders' money that falls on the ground.

In the next scene, Alex finally comes and witnesses the bullying. He tries to approach the two bullies and stop their actions against Bedders. When they are interrupted by Alex, they purposefully drop Bedders from a low height which does not cause him any injury. Lance and Kaye then turned their attention to Alex. When he comes, the shot is taken with a closeup of Alex's face, showing his courage to stop the bullying action. Then, the shot is moved behind Alex's back and focused on the two bullies standing side by side after stopping their actions. The shot emphasizes that the two bullies look very confident and not afraid at all, even defiantly countering Alex, who is irritated by the bullying act that has been done before. It is similar in the next scene, where there is a debate between Alex and Lance. Alex is pushed to the floor, and some of the schoolwork he has done is ruined. The shot taken when Alex fell is done in closeup, showing his facial expression clearly, and he looks quite surprised to get such treatment from Lance. The action causes Alex to be slightly mad at him. Then, Alex wakes up by Lance forcingly grabbing him and trying to turn him back to face each other, with the camera shot taken at a lower angle and closeup of Lance as if he is on top of Alex. The shot points out that Lance is more

dominant than Alex, who is intimidated by the domineering treatment at that time.

Another scene's dialogue also shows Alex, who at that time stopped the bullies' actions, is also bullied verbally. The bullies call Alex "Lego Minifigure" because of his smaller body size. The two bullies' bodies are said to be twice as big as the one they bullied. "Because there are two of you, he is half your size, and he is my friend" (*The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), 00:05:13–00:05:17). The difference in body size also makes bullies feel they have more capability to bully someone. Smaller bodies are considered more vulnerable than those with more significant bodies. Another dialogue also portrays how superior the bullies are when they say that they are the kings in their school. "Don't be a hero. It's not worth it. I'm the king around here" (*The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), 00:05:30–00:05:32). One of the bullies, Kaye, even calls the bullied 'girls,' even though both of the bullied are boys, considering that society deems girls to be weak and incapable sections.

Through another of the film's sound analyses in the next scene's dialogue, the canteen scene, Bedders tells Alex that they are both insignificant students at school and thinks he can not fight the bullies no matter what. "Lance and Kaye rule the school. There is nothing you can do. There is nothing either of us can do. This is not junior school anymore. We are nothing now. We are the most insignificant, powerless students in the school." (*The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), 00:06:51–00:07:07). The dialogue reveals how the bullying action can lower the bullied self-esteem causing them to think that they are incapable human beings and weaker than others.

The bullied feelings of helplessness correspond with Schott and Sondergaard's (2014) statement that contemporary studies and the resulting policies on bullying have generally neglected the impact of certain social structures of power. Children involved in bullying exercise these types of power based on how they are positioned and position themselves concerning broader societal standards about color, gender, sexual orientation, capability, height, body type, socioeconomic status, and other things (Horton, 2016).

Another film aspect to analyze the portrayal of bullying is the film's *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène* in films can be set locations, props, or costumes used. The first prop that portrays bullying is when Alex's phone displays a text message from Bedders asking him for help when Bedders is being bullied. "Alex! They're following me! Where are you? ALEX! WHERE R U????????? ALEX HELP!" (*The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), 00:03:58–00:03:58). The text indicates how helpless the bullied was when he experienced

bullying, as the bullied also felt scared and could not handle it by himself. The other portrayal of bullying is shown in the computer lab scene. One of the bullies, Lance, shows Alex his knuckles which he has written "UR DED" The word denotes the threatening act Lance took to Alex. Lance tries to use his capability to scare Alex since he is considered an insignificant student in the class.

All the bullying scenes indicate that the actions happen due to notable differences between the two groups of participants, the bullies and the bullied. The bullies, Lance and Kaye, have some advantageous aspects, such as body sizes and social standings in school, that facilitate their harmful actions. In terms of body size, the bullies are twice the bullied's body sizes, which gives them physical strength to handle their aggressive, controlling, and intimidating behavior toward the bullied. Furthermore, in terms of social standings in schools, the bullies benefit from their popularity which boosts their self-esteem to let them act like kings in school and feel superior to other insignificant students. While bullying reinforces the system of differentiations that allow it to happen, the ability of some students to bully others is formed by such differentiations. Furthermore, according to Foucault (1982), every relationship of power brings into operation differentiations that are both its prerequisites and its outcomes.

Another concern about the causes of bullying is the omission of actions from the surrounding environment, especially from other students who ignore it when the bullying occurs. The omission leads to bullying being normalized in schools. According to Foucault (1995), power operates through normalization and surveillance. Surveillance functions as a norm provider. Foucault (1995) also emphasizes surveillance as disciplinary power, a tool for positioning, ordering, and normalizing individuals, which comes to be routine, instilled and boosted by social organizations such as schools. Bullying is considered a violation of humanitarian norms as it negatively affects other humans' life. Due to the absence of surveillance, the bullying became unnoticeable at school, and students continued to violate the norms. Students are urged to feel they have to improve their behavior when they are aware of the possibility of being under surveillance (Hope, 2013). Surveillance of the student in the school environment is considered a tool to prevent norm violations and normalize harmful behavior. The more observed students are, the more they are expected to conform to norms.

Resistance to the act of bullying in school
Duncan (2013) stated that compulsion, compression, control, and competitiveness are the four main components of schooling, and each of these may be examined in terms of power and the

resistance of individuals subjected to its experience. Several power theorists have explored the interconnections between power and resistance. Foucault (1998), for example, equalized power and resistance as two sides of the same coin since '[w]here there is power, there is resistance.'

The resistance to the acts of bullying is shown in the revenge scene at the beginning of the film. The scene is taken with a medium shot from a side angle. After Lance and Kaye finally walk away proud and feel victorious, leaving Alex and Bedders behind, Lance is suddenly knocked down and punched by Alex repeatedly from behind. Then, the next shot is taken from the top angle with a long shot showing Alex on top of Lance while beating him, as witnessed by other students who suddenly clustered around the two. The scene taken indirectly indicates that Alex finally gains his capability back to do revenge on the bully, Lance.

In the middle of the film, there are other scenes of bullying resistance. In the chasing Alex scene, the bullies chase Alex through a park at night when he is walking home alone. The scene uses medium shots focusing on Alex, and two students can be seen running after him from a distance. The bullying scene continues in the building site scene where Lance and Kaye corner Alex at a building site. In the scene, Alex tries to defend himself since there are no other things to do. Unfortunately, as Alex tries to move backward away from them, he accidentally falls off a ledge. Then, the bullies try to check on Alex with a lower-angle shot before running away, leaving Alex alone and potentially injured and appearing unconscious. Alex comes a few seconds later and is perfectly fine. After the scene, Alex finds the sword of Excalibur, which he uses to fight back the bullies.

Alex gains self-assurance and gets things wrong, but he always retains his excellent personality; he is not hesitant to point out mistreatment and takes responsibility for his own mistakes. The emphasis on the "heroic code" is a perfect addition since it teaches the children that kindness and courage, not toughness and strength, which can sometimes lead to ego and selfishness, are what will ultimately rescue them. Giving someone a purpose and value will always triumph against a person's egotistical hunger for power, the lesson being conveyed here.

Bullying can be a very upsetting and frightening experience for any young person, and Alex is no exception. Even though suffering from bullying action, he still faces his problems. Alex overcomes the bullies with anything that he can do rather than wish they would go away. Hence, Alex's resistance to the acts of bullying against the bullies considers successful due to his resilient personality. Alex persists until he finally finds a way to deal with bullying.

CONCLUSION

The study has explored the extent to which a children's film, *The Kid Who Would Be King* (2019), portrayed bullying toward students in school through the film's cinematography, sound, and *mise-en-scène*. The data analysis reveals that, generally, power imbalance can provoke bullying by dominant students against insignificant students. The dominant students, the bullies, tend to do bullying since they have advantageous aspects, such as body size and strength, social status, and behavior, that back them up to carry out these violent actions. In contrast, the insignificant students, the bullied, get bullied due to their perception that they are positioned as vulnerable and incapable students. The perception impacts their struggles to cope with the bullies' actions. It is also considered one of the negative impacts of bullying, which causes the bullied's self-esteem to lower and creates a dissatisfactory image of himself as a person. However, the bullied resilient personality became the central aspect that helped him overcome bullying.

In addition, bullying portrayal in literary works, especially in films, is a fascinating topic to explore further. As this research drew only on several aspects of films to collect data, future research can analyze the same film with other film aspects in narrative form to gain a new perspective on the portrayal of bullying in school. Further research could also explore how bullying is portrayed in other recent children's films, so the study can see whether there is any change in how the recent film portrayed bullying issues toward students.

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