

Resilience Against School Bullying: A Study of Verbal and Physical Abuse in *Chang Can Dunk* (2023)

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of bullying as depicted in Jingyi Shao's film Chang Can Dunk (2023), with a specific focus on the experiences of the protagonist, Chang, within the context of the high school environment. The study investigates two primary forms of bullying—verbal and physical—highlighted as central challenges faced by the main character. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this research analyzes selected scenes and dialogue from the film to identify instances of verbal and physical bullying. The theoretical framework is grounded in Dan Olweus's (1993) bullying typology, which classifies bullying into distinct categories and emphasizes its psychological and social impacts on adolescents. The analysis reveals persistent bullying targeted at Chang based on his appearance, ethnicity, and perceived social standing. The bullying occurs both in overt physical confrontations and more subtle, yet damaging, verbal attacks. These experiences are portrayed as ongoing and influential in shaping the protagonist's development and self-concept. The film illustrates Chang's journey toward resilience, demonstrating how internal strength, mentorship, and self-empowerment enable him to confront and ultimately overcome the bullying he faces. This study contributes to the broader discourse on youth representation in media, shedding light on the psychological dynamics of bullying and the importance of supportive environments in fostering adolescent resilience.

Keywords: *bullying, school environment, resilience, youth representation, Olweus's theory*

A. Introduction

Bullying remains one of the most pervasive and damaging social phenomena affecting students in educational environments globally. Schools, while ideally functioning as inclusive spaces for intellectual and moral development, often become arenas where aggressive behaviors emerge, frequently unnoticed or normalized. Within this context, the film *Chang Can Dunk* (2023) by Jingyi Shao offers a poignant representation of verbal and physical bullying as experienced by the protagonist, Chang, within the American school environment. This cinematic narrative not only mirrors the widespread issues of bullying in contemporary

adolescence but also serves as an important cultural text for examining the psychological, social, and institutional implications of school-based aggression.

Bullying is typically characterized by intentional, repeated aggressive behavior involving a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993). The American Psychological Association (2022) further emphasizes that bullying undermines the self-esteem and confidence of victims, often manifesting as verbal, physical, relational, or cyber abuse. This study focuses exclusively on verbal and physical bullying, the two most overt and readily observable types. According to Coloroso (2014), verbal bullying entails name-calling, threats, or mockery intended to belittle the target. Meanwhile, physical bullying involves direct bodily harm such as hitting or pushing, which, as Rigby (2003) notes, is often rooted in attempts to maintain control or dominance.

A growing body of literature has explored bullying in various media, including literature and film. For example, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (2012) portrays a teenager suffering from psychological trauma and exclusion, ultimately overcoming these challenges through friendship and self-discovery. Likewise, the real-life case reported by *Kompas* (2024) of bullying at Binus High School in Indonesia illustrates both the severity of the issue and the potential for resilience. These accounts reflect not only the universality of bullying but also the importance of social support and individual agency in addressing it.

Despite numerous studies on bullying, gaps remain in understanding how fictional narratives, particularly in youth-centered films, depict and potentially influence perceptions of bullying. While much research has focused on the effects of bullying or on real-world interventions, fewer studies have critically examined the representation of bullying in contemporary film and how such depictions may offer models for resilience and resistance. *Chang Can Dunk* is a compelling case for such analysis, presenting a character whose determination to overcome social and physical limitations parallels his struggle against bullying.

The present study aims to analyze how verbal and physical bullying are portrayed in *Chang Can Dunk* and to explore the protagonist's strategies for dealing with these experiences. Using a qualitative descriptive approach and grounded in Olweus's (1993) theoretical framework on bullying, this study examines scenes and dialogues that illustrate instances of aggression and resistance. The analysis seeks to answer two central questions: (1) How are verbal and physical bullying depicted in the film? and (2) How does the protagonist navigate and respond to these instances?

This research contributes to both literary and media studies by offering insight into how films reflect and potentially shape understandings of adolescent bullying. From a practical perspective, the findings may help educators, parents, and policymakers recognize the significance of media narratives in shaping students' responses to bullying. Furthermore, this study highlights the necessity for media literacy in educational settings, encouraging critical engagement with film as a tool for social awareness and empathy building.

B. Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method to explore the portrayal of verbal and physical bullying in *Chang Can Dunk* (2023), directed by Jingyi Shao. As the film presents bullying within the context of a high school environment, it offers valuable material for

examining negative social phenomena affecting youth. The data analyzed in this study consist of scenes, dialogues, and cinematographic elements that depict instances of verbal and physical bullying experienced by the protagonist, Chang. These elements were chosen due to their narrative relevance and thematic consistency with the focus of the research.

The primary data source is the *Chang Can Dunk* movie, which was purposively selected for its central exploration of bullying within a contemporary school setting. The data were collected through a series of methodical steps. First, the film was watched multiple times to gain a deep understanding of its narrative and visual structure. Key scenes containing bullying behavior were identified and extracted using screenshots and transcription of dialogue. Specific attention was paid to recurring verbal abuse and physical aggression, as well as the protagonist's responses.

Data analysis was conducted by categorizing the identified bullying incidents in accordance with Dan Olweus's (1993) theory, which defines bullying as repeated aggressive behavior involving an imbalance of power. The data were interpreted to explore both the representation of bullying and the coping mechanisms employed by the protagonist. Through this analytical framework, the study reveals not only the forms and patterns of bullying portrayed in the film but also highlights the protagonist's resilience and transformation in response to these challenges.

C. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion based on the film *Chang Can Dunk* (2023), focusing on the depiction of verbal and physical bullying and the protagonist's response to these challenges. The analysis is grounded in Dan Olweus's (1993) bullying theory, which categorizes bullying into distinct forms and emphasizes the psychological and social consequences for the victim.

The protagonist, Chang, is a second-year high school student with a passion for basketball. Despite his enthusiasm, Chang is not taken seriously—largely due to his short stature and perceived lack of athleticism. His former friend, Matt, now a rival and a popular basketball player, becomes the main source of verbal and physical bullying. The rivalry intensifies when Chang develops a romantic interest in Kristy, a new bandmate, who also becomes a target of Matt's flirtations.

Motivated by a mix of personal ambition and the desire to impress Kristy, Chang impulsively challenges Matt to a bet: that he will be able to dunk a basketball. This challenge is met with ridicule, especially given Chang's physical limitations, and is the catalyst for repeated verbal taunts and humiliations by Matt and his entourage. These interactions exemplify verbal bullying, characterized by insults, mocking, and constant belittlement, consistent with Olweus's definition.

To overcome these challenges, Chang turns to self-development and resilience. He seeks out Deandre, a former basketball player turned YouTuber, who becomes an unlikely but supportive coach. With Deandre's guidance, Chang embarks on a rigorous training regimen while simultaneously managing his responsibilities in the school band. This dual commitment strains his relationships with both his friends and his mother, portraying the social pressures often experienced by bullied youth.

The bullying intensifies as Matt resorts to sabotage, attempting to demoralize Chang and prevent him from succeeding. These tactics reflect physical bullying, as Chang is repeatedly obstructed and physically intimidated. However, with Deandre's mentorship and consistent encouragement, Chang gradually regains his confidence.

The climax occurs during the school's Homecoming basketball event, where Chang is under immense pressure to prove himself. In front of the entire school, including his adversaries, Chang channels his training and internal growth. Despite Matt's final attempts to distract him, Chang recalls Deandre's advice about the importance of self-belief. With a combination of determination and skill, he successfully performs the dunk—defying expectations and silencing his critics.

This moment represents more than athletic achievement; it is a symbol of personal victory over bullying. Through hard work, mentorship, and emotional resilience, Chang gains the respect of his peers and achieves psychological empowerment. His journey illustrates how bullying can be overcome through support, self-confidence, and perseverance—key themes emphasized in the theoretical framework of Olweus.

Verbal and Physical Bullying Portrayed in *Chang Can Dunk*

The film *Chang Can Dunk* explores a range of adolescent struggles, including identity formation, self-worth, and the pervasive issue of bullying. Among these, the themes of verbal and physical bullying emerge as central, shaping the protagonist's journey and reflecting broader societal issues within school environments. This section presents selected data and analysis on how these two forms of bullying are depicted in the film, using a qualitative approach informed by Olweus's (1993) bullying typology.

Verbal bullying in the film is a recurring and impactful motif. It is presented as a daily reality for Chang, the protagonist, whose physical appearance and lack of athleticism make him an easy target among his peers. Chang is frequently ridiculed for his short stature, perceived awkwardness, and improbable dream of joining the school's basketball team. These taunts are not isolated incidents but rather part of a sustained pattern of psychological intimidation that erodes his self-esteem. The ridicule often comes in the form of sarcastic remarks, dismissive comments, and public humiliation—common tactics of verbal bullying as defined by Coloroso (2015) and Olweus (1993).

These instances of bullying are not only personal attacks but also reflect the toxic social dynamics of adolescent peer groups, where dominance is asserted through exclusion and mockery. Chang's experiences underscore how verbal bullying can lead to internalized doubt and emotional distress. The film also highlights how verbal aggression often escalates in intensity when the victim, like Chang, attempts to challenge social norms or expectations.

In addition to verbal bullying, the film presents physical bullying as a tangible manifestation of power and control, often used to intimidate or deter Chang from pursuing his goals. While less frequent than verbal attacks, physical acts such as shoving, blocking, or aggressive contact serve to reinforce Chang's outsider status. These behaviors are employed by antagonistic characters—particularly Matt and his social circle—to reassert social hierarchies and discourage Chang's participation in activities traditionally reserved for more dominant, physically capable students.

By portraying both verbal and physical bullying with emotional depth and narrative consistency, *Chang Can Dunk* does more than highlight the presence of bullying; it interrogates its effects on personal identity and ambition. Moreover, the film contrasts the cruelty of bullying with moments of mentorship, resilience, and personal growth, suggesting that overcoming such adversity is possible through determination and supportive relationships.

Picture 1

Chang was mocked by his team



Note: In the early part of the film, *Chang Can Dunk*, verbal bullying is explicitly portrayed in a scene where Chang is harassed by members of the basketball team during their free time. This occurs between [00:04:39–00:04:50], directed by Jingyi Shao (2023). In Picture 1, the bullying begins with a pointed comment: “*Hey, why you gotta swagger-jack Matt though?*”—an accusation that Chang is imitating Matt’s basketball style. The remark, delivered by Matt’s friends, reflects a mocking and dismissive attitude, suggesting that Chang lacks originality and is merely copying his former best friend.

This verbal exchange illustrates the tension between Chang and Matt, who are no longer close due to their growing rivalry on the court. The dynamic of former friendship turned competition serves as a backdrop for the verbal intimidation Chang receives. The taunt is delivered in front of others, amplifying its humiliating effect. As Olweus (1993) defines, verbal bullying involves the use of language to hurt, belittle, or threaten, often in the context of a power imbalance—which is clearly evident in this interaction.

The cinematographic elements of the scene further reinforce the power dynamics. The use of close-up framing captures Chang’s facial expression, emphasizing his discomfort and isolation. This framing—focused from the head to shoulders—allows viewers to closely observe his emotional reaction, thus enhancing the psychological impact of the bullying. The ambient lighting adds to the realism of the scene, as it simulates natural indoor conditions during daytime basketball practice, subtly reinforcing the setting’s everyday nature and, consequently, the normalization of such bullying behavior in school environments.

The diegetic sound, consisting of the characters’ actual dialogue, grounds the scene in narrative authenticity. The spoken taunt emerges from within the world of the story, making the bullying feel immediate and emotionally resonant. This particular moment in the film serves not only as a narrative turning point but also as a visual and thematic illustration of verbal bullying as a socially accepted form of exclusion and humiliation. It underscores the

necessity of cultivating inclusive school cultures where power imbalances are actively addressed, and students like Chang are supported rather than ridiculed.

Physical Bullying Portrayed in *Chang Can Dunk*

Physical bullying in film can be portrayed through various techniques that emphasize both the intensity of aggression and the emotional toll it takes on the victim. Such representations often highlight the fear, vulnerability, and isolation that accompany physical abuse, while also allowing space for stories of resilience and personal growth.

In *Chang Can Dunk* (2023), the main character, Chang, is not only subjected to verbal ridicule but also becomes the target of physical bullying, primarily at the hands of Matt's friends. These encounters serve to reinforce Chang's position as an outsider within the school's social and athletic hierarchies. The physical aggression, although not excessively graphic, is meaningful in how it contributes to Chang's feelings of marginalization and his struggle for self-worth.

The film uses body language, spatial dominance, and physical intimidation to convey the power imbalance between Chang and his aggressors. In key scenes, Matt's friends shove, block, or physically corner Chang during school and basketball-related activities, asserting dominance through non-verbal cues that carry as much weight as verbal assaults. This aligns with Olweus' (1993) definition of physical bullying as deliberate physical aggression intended to harm, intimidate, or exert control over another individual.

Cinematically, these moments are often captured with medium or wide shots to emphasize the physical disparity and the threatening environment Chang navigates. The choreography of physical interactions is deliberately staged to make Chang appear smaller, vulnerable, and encircled—visually reinforcing his social exclusion.

These depictions not only present physical bullying as a recurring obstacle for Chang but also illustrate how such aggression contributes to his personal transformation. Rather than retaliating with violence, Chang channels his frustration into focused self-improvement, training in basketball and developing inner resilience. Thus, the film not only portrays the damaging effects of physical bullying but also underscores agency, perseverance, and positive mentorship as tools for overcoming adversity.

Picture 2

Chang was pushed around



Note: During the party, Chang is forcibly locked in the basement by Matt's friends. (*Chang Can Dunk*, 00:14:43–00:14:58; Shao, 2023).

In Picture 2, Chang is visibly pushed by one of Matt's friends to prevent him from participating in the celebration. This act is not only exclusionary but also intended to humiliate and isolate him. Chang feels unjustly treated, particularly as he is wrongfully labeled a troublemaker and ultimately confined to the basement. As defined by Olweus (1993), this behavior constitutes physical bullying, characterized by intentional physical acts—such as pushing—with the aim of intimidating or harming the victim.

The image captures a moment of clear physical aggression and coercion. The push, followed by forced confinement, serves as a mechanism of social control and exclusion. The aggressor's goal is not only to physically dominate Chang but also to undermine his dignity and position among peers. This incident reflects the emotional and psychological toll such physical bullying can inflict, emphasizing the need to address the dynamics of peer violence and the environments that allow it to occur.

Cinematically, the scene is shot at night, using medium shots that frame the subjects from the head to waist, effectively focusing on the physical confrontation. A low-angle perspective is employed to emphasize the aggressor's dominance over Chang, visually reinforcing the power imbalance. The use of artificial lighting from indoor lamps heightens the dramatic tension of the moment. Additionally, the sound is diegetic, featuring real-time dialogue and conflict between Chang and Matt's friend, enhancing the realism and emotional intensity of the bullying encounter.

This scene powerfully illustrates the real-life implications of physical bullying and underscores the importance of fostering safe, inclusive environments where such behaviors are actively prevented and addressed.

The Main Character's Response to Bullying in *Chang Can Dunk*

Bullying can have profound and lasting negative effects on individuals, especially in social and educational settings. Addressing bullying requires a holistic and multifaceted approach—not only aimed at stopping the aggressive behavior but also at fostering psychological recovery and resilience in the victim. For individuals who have experienced bullying, the process of healing often begins with rebuilding self-esteem and is significantly supported by the involvement of empathetic adults.

Self-esteem, in this context, refers to the re-establishment of a healthy sense of self-worth, self-confidence, and self-acceptance after a period of emotional rejection, humiliation, or aggression. It serves as a psychological foundation for victims to redefine their identities and reclaim agency over their lives. The character of Chang, in *Chang Can Dunk*, demonstrates how self-esteem can be cultivated through determination, skill-building, and perseverance in the face of persistent bullying.

In addition to personal efforts, adult support plays a crucial role in helping victims navigate the psychological aftermath of bullying. Support from parents, teachers, or mentors provides emotional safety, guidance, and validation. In Chang's case, his relationship with adult figures—particularly Deandre, a former basketball player turned mentor—serves as a key

source of encouragement and motivation. These adult interventions create a protective space in which Chang can develop both emotionally and socially.

Rebuilding Self-Esteem through Self-Development

Self-development emerges as a vital strategy for Chang in responding to bullying. This includes conscious efforts to improve his physical abilities, emotional resilience, and social competence. By committing to rigorous basketball training, Chang not only seeks to prove his doubters wrong but also builds a renewed sense of purpose and self-belief.

Additionally, the enhancement of social skills—such as effective communication, collaboration, and relationship-building—strengthens Chang’s ability to integrate within his peer group. Success in these social interactions contributes to a growing sense of belonging and self-acceptance, which is crucial in combating the internalized effects of bullying.

Ultimately, Chang’s journey reflects the transformative power of personal growth and external support. Through resilience, self-discipline, and meaningful adult guidance, he is able to confront and overcome the verbal and physical bullying he faces, emerging with a stronger and more confident sense of identity.

Picture 3

Chang developed his skills



Note: The first step Chang took was to improve his skills, which in turn enhanced his confidence, strength, and overall ability. From *Chang Can Dunk* [00:04:39–00:40:43] by Jingyi Shao (Director), 2023.

As illustrated in the image above, Chang initiates his journey by directly confronting the bullying he experiences and dedicating himself to developing his fundamental basketball skills—with the encouragement and support of close friends. As the narrative progresses, Chang learns to face his fears and recover emotionally from previous negative experiences. He comes to understand that building the confidence to stand up to bullies is a crucial aspect of his personal growth and transformation.

This decision was self-motivated, driven by Chang’s desire to challenge Matt in a basketball game and reclaim his dignity. After researching techniques on YouTube and applying what he learned in his early training, Chang begins to believe in his potential to outperform Matt and to no longer be the target of ridicule. Throughout this journey, his friends stand by him, offering both emotional support and motivation.

The image exemplifies Chang's proactive response to bullying. Practicing diligently alongside a supportive friend symbolizes not only skill development but also emotional resilience. This moment encapsulates Chang's adoption of a growth mindset—an essential psychological tool in overcoming adversity. According to Olweus (1993), developing personal and social competencies is integral to rebuilding the self-esteem of bullying victims. Chang's commitment to self-improvement and his growing confidence mark pivotal steps in his emotional development and empowerment.

This scene takes place during the day, depicting Chang engaged in focused training. A full shot and low-angle perspective are employed to capture the entire body in action, emphasizing his physical effort and determination. Key lighting is used to highlight Chang's movements and create visual depth through shadows. The sound design includes both diegetic and non-diegetic elements: spoken dialogue between characters and background music that enhances the motivational tone of the scene. Together, these cinematographic choices effectively convey Chang's resolve to rise above bullying and pursue self-betterment.

Support by Adults

Support from adults plays a crucial role for individuals experiencing bullying. In this context, adult support means the presence, attention and positive interventions from authority figures such as parents, teachers or other professionals who can provide a safety and protection. In order to put the victim's development into context, it is important for individuals experiencing bullying to be actively supported by the adults closest to them, such as coaches or family members.

Picture 4

Chang asked for the coach's support



Note: An offer to train Chang in order to help him face challenging situations with greater confidence. From *Chang Can Dunk* [00:36:24–00:37:03] by Jingyi Shao (Director), 2023.

In this scene, Chang—feeling discouraged by his lack of progress and the absence of experienced guidance—takes the initiative to contact Deandre, a former basketball player turned content creator. Recognizing that personal determination alone might not be sufficient, Chang seeks the mentorship of someone with greater expertise. The image captures a pivotal moment in which Chang and his friend appeal to Deandre to become their coach. In an effort to persuade him, Chang's friend proposes a mutually beneficial arrangement: in exchange for coaching, Deandre will gain increased visibility through social media content created during the training sessions.

As part of their appeal, Chang's friend openly explains the bullying Chang has endured at school, specifically for his inability to dunk. This vulnerability elicits empathy from Deandre and prompts his consideration. The interaction underscores the crucial role of adult mentorship in building resilience and skill among bullying victims.

This moment reflects the theoretical perspective of Olweus (1993), who emphasizes the significance of adult involvement in the personal development of individuals affected by bullying. Adults—particularly those with experience and authority—can provide both psychological support and practical direction. By seeking mentorship, Chang is not only taking proactive steps toward self-improvement but also creating a framework for emotional recovery through structured guidance and skill acquisition.

The cinematographic choices further support the emotional tone of the scene. A medium close-up is used to capture facial expressions and nuanced emotional reactions, focusing on the characters from the chest up. The artificial lighting—provided by ambient indoor sources—creates a relaxed and intimate atmosphere appropriate for a persuasive and emotionally charged conversation. The scene employs diegetic sound, allowing the natural flow of dialogue to drive the interaction and immerse the viewer in the unfolding negotiation.

Ultimately, this scene highlights the transformative power of mentorship and peer advocacy, portraying how external support systems can significantly impact an individual's path toward overcoming bullying and achieving personal growth.

D. Conclusion

This study highlights the portrayal of verbal and physical bullying in *Chang Can Dunk* (2023), shedding light on the psychological and emotional toll such experiences inflict on the protagonist, Chang. Through the lens of Dan Olweus's (1993) bullying theory, the research identifies key scenes that illustrate both overt and subtle acts of aggression, including ridicule, insults, and physical intimidation. These forms of bullying are not merely background elements but serve as crucial catalysts in Chang's journey of personal growth and self-discovery.

The analysis reveals that Chang is frequently targeted due to his physical appearance and perceived inadequacies, particularly by the school's basketball players. These encounters with verbal and physical abuse significantly influence his character development, forcing him to confront social stereotypes and internalized limitations. Importantly, Chang's response is marked by resilience, determination, and the support of caring adults who nurture his self-confidence and encourage his aspirations. His ability to transform adversity into motivation underscores the potential of mentorship and self-belief in counteracting the damaging effects of bullying.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the importance of addressing bullying in youth-oriented narratives and educational contexts. *Chang Can Dunk* serves as a powerful representation of how persistent bullying can impact adolescent identity, while also offering a narrative of hope and resistance. The findings advocate for creating safe, empathetic, and inclusive school environments where all students, regardless of their differences, are empowered to thrive.

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