Cyberbullying: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences and the Psychological Impact of Victimization among College Students

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

A dissertation presented

By

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Abstract

In this interpretive phenomenological analysis I explored the lived experiences and the psychological impact of victimization from cyberbullying among college students. Two theories, Bandura’s Theory of Triadic Reciprocal Determinism and the General Strain Theory, guided the primary research questions used for this exploration. Each of these frameworks posits that human behavior is influenced by an individual’s confrontation with various stimuli. Confrontation with negative stimuli, such as that involving cyber abuse, often results in a various psychological affects among victims that may be detrimental to their overall well-being. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among 4 community college students who reported abuse to school administration at the college selected as the site for this study. Six themes were generated from the analysis of data: 1) repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear; 2) distrust of technology and mistrust of people; 3) the value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem; 4) self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances; 5) feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment; 6) frustration leading to self-blame. Findings from this exploratory study may be used by college administrators, college counseling and medical staff, and faculty members to increase their awareness of cyber abuse and the detrimental psychological impact it has on student victims. Furthermore these findings support the creation of sensitivity training relating to cyber abuse, with required and recurrent participation among all elements of the higher educational community.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Electronic Bullying, Online Harassment, Cyber bullying, Internet harassment.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Existing empirical studies on the phenomenon of cyberbullying among elementary, middle, and high school students have identified and examined its prevalence, common methods of abuse, as well as the overall impact that victimization has on youngsters and early adolescents (Campbell, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Conclusions made by researchers from these studies indicate that cyberbullying is a serious and growing problem locally, nationally, and globally, due primarily to advances in technology and the widespread ownership of technological devices among youth, adolescents, and young adults (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011).

In schools, research shows that cyberbullying events do occur in elementary school, are predominant in the middle school years, and slightly decline during the high school grade levels. The impact among victims of this abuse manifests within students in the form of negative psychological, emotional, and social relationship problems (Blair, 2003; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Moreover, the abuse often results in poor academic performance by student victims (DeHue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Van der Kolb, 2003; Wong et al., 2007) and often leads some victims to become cyberbullies themselves (National Crime Prevention Council, 2010).

However, a gap in the literature exists pertaining to the study of this construct among college students. Stories in the national news, such as the student suicide at Rutgers University in 2010, offer a stark reality that cyberbullying does indeed exist within higher education (The New York Times, 2010). The lack of empirical research among this demographic means that existing
literature lacks scientific evidence of victim experiences, as well as an understanding of the meaning and interpretation student victims give of their experiences.

This research sought to gain a fundamental understanding of the impact that cyberbullying has on adolescents and adults in college by looking at the phenomenon from the participants’ unique personal perspective. Using Bandura’s theory of triadic reciprocal determinism and the general strain theory as a theoretical framework, this study identified how acts of cyberbullying affected the cognitive thought process of college student victims, and how victimization from this phenomenon influenced their response, as well as the interpretation and the meaning individuals gave to these experiences. The findings from this research project offered new information to the literature as it pertains to the consequences of cyberbullying among students within higher education. It also served as a launch point for subsequent empirical studies on cyberbullying among college students.

The organizational structure of this study began with an introduction to the problem of cyberbullying. Subsequent to the introduction, the organization shifted focus to the theoretical framework that was used to inform the research questions involved in this study. Following a discussion of the theoretical framework, the structure format consisted of a review of the literature on this construct, the methodology employed for this study, the study site and sample, data collection procedures, data analysis techniques, and a discussion on the validity and credibility as it relates to this project.

**Theoretical Framework**

Contemporary empirical research has identified that cyberbullying causes severe psychological, emotional, and social problems among many of its victims (Blair, 2003; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Researchers have offered varied theories as to the
cause of these problems (Anderson & Sturm, 2007; Bandura, 1989; Bandura 1990; Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). Two of these theories have provided the theoretical framework of this study, social cognitive theory and general strain theory.

**Social Cognitive Theory - Triadic Reciprocal Determinism**

Social cognitive theory is a human psychosocial behavior theory established by psychologist Albert Bandura that explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal determinism (Appendix A). The social cognitive model is different than other models of human psychosocial behavior because of the central theme of triadic reciprocal determinism (Motl, 2007). Whereas other models of psychosocial theory have explained human behavior as being affected by only one determining factor, social cognitive theory posits a combination of sources of influence that effect human psychosocial behavior (Bandura, 1990; Wood & Bandura, 1989).

According to Bandura (1989), human behavior has often been thought to be the result of a single source of influence, or determinant. For example, behavior is often thought to be the result of the environment, or some personal element such as personal beliefs, self-perceptions, and expectations (Anderson & Sturm, 2007; Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). However, Bandura disagrees with the concept of behavior being influenced solely by one source of influence. Instead, he argues that behavior is the result of a bidirectional interaction of environment, person, and behavior upon one another, forming a triadic among sources of influence, each affecting the other in a reciprocal manner. He further argued that the interaction between these sources of influence are of unequal strength and do not occur simultaneously (Bandura, 1989). From this bidirectional interaction, Wood and Bandura (1989) conclude that people are both products and producers of their environment.
Motl (2007) helps in defining the sources of influence by adding to Bandura’s theory the idea that environmental variables that influence behavior include elements of one’s physical and social surroundings. Personal variables that influence behavior include cognitive processes such as self-efficacy, outcome expectancies, enjoyment, self-regulation strategies, and that environmental variables include such things as social support.

A significant element of social cognitive theory in terms of victimization is the self-efficacy component. Self-efficacy is the belief that a person can successfully undertake a behavior or action required to produce a given outcome (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is thought to play a significant role in the activities people chose to take part in, the amount of effort they put into such activities, and the degree of persistence they exhibit when confronted with failure or adversity (Bandura, 1997). For example, people with a high sense of self-efficacy create positive and successful situations which bi-directionally strengthens their sense of self-efficacy, whereas people with a lesser sense of self-efficacy, when faced with threats and other difficulties, reduce their efforts to find a positive and successful solution, or abort their efforts early settling on mediocre solutions to the problem, thereby weakening self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989).

Bandura (1989) also suggests that people’s beliefs in their capabilities to deal with threatening or taxing situations affects how much stress and depression they experience in these types of situations. Those that believe they can control potential threats do not create within their mind apprehensive thoughts and, therefore, are not upset by such situations. However, those who believe they cannot effectively deal with potential threats experience high levels of stress and anxiety (Bandura, 1989). Furthermore, people with a low level of self-efficacy often experience an inability to fulfill desired goals that influence one’s self-worth and the inability to bring
satisfaction to one’s life can lead to incidences of depression (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986; Holahan & Holahan, 1987a, 1987b; Kafner & Zeiss, 1983). As such, social cognitive theory and its component element of self-efficacy provide a sound framework for the study of victimization from cyberbullying. Moreover, it also served as a guide that informed this study’s research questions.

Contemporary research as to the effects of cyberbullying indicates that victims of this phenomenon often experience symptoms such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, social exclusion, poor academic performance, and some experience suicidal thoughts (Campbell, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Scientific research has found that these types of symptoms are determined by the level of self-efficacy a person has (Bandura, 1997).

The application of social cognitive theory to cyberbully victimization would suggest that the mechanism that helps determine adolescent and adult response to cyberbullying activity is the level of self-efficacy present in the person. Adolescents and adults that maintain a high sense of self-efficacy believe that they can exercise control over such threats and correspondingly are not perturbed by them, whereas those that maintain a low sense of self-efficacy cannot effectively cope with the hurtful activities of cyberbullying. Victims with a low sense of self-efficacy believe that they cannot manage the potential threats associated with victimization, and they experience high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Bandura, 1989). Furthermore, adolescent victims with a low sense of self-efficacy “tend to dwell on their coping deficiencies and view many aspects of their environment as fraught with danger” (Bandura, 1989, p.1177). Through such thoughts they further distress themselves and in turn further impair their level of functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Evidence of such impairment can be identified in the
form of poor academic performance, social isolation as a result of viewing their environment as hazardous to their wellbeing.

**General Strain Theory**

The second theory on which this theoretical framework is based is the general strain theory. Through examination of each participant’s experiences, this study sought to identify whether the strain of cyberbullying activities led victims to become cyberbullies themselves.

Introduced into the pool of psychological theory in 1938 by Robert Merton, the original strain theory proposed only one source of strain: the failure to achieve a desired goal. Merton’s original theory focused on monetary gain as a source of strain. He further theorized that there exists a discrepancy between valued goals and the legitimate means to achieve those goals, and that the legitimate means to achieve such goals creates strain. As a means to alleviate such strain, Merton theorized that people in turn adapt in a variety of ways to achieve desired goals by circumventing legitimate ways to achieve them (Akins, Smith, & Mosher, 2010). Traditional strain theories, such as Merton’s, claim that some people are drawn to crime when they are prevented from achieving cultural goals such as monetary success through legitimate channels.

Froggio (2007) illustrates the traditional strain theory by utilizing an example that in the American society and culture, everyone is encouraged to pursue monetary success. However, not all individuals in the United States are able to pursue such goals. People in the lower socioeconomic class of American society usually are prevented from achieving such goals through legitimate channels due to the burdens and responsibilities of large families and a lack of education to name a few. Consequently, being prevented from achieving societal goals in a legitimate manner causes such people to achieve societal goals using illegal means.
Scholarly and empirical research on the general strain theory in recent times has had the effect of refocusing the sources for strain. Agnew (1992) considers alternative sources of strain such as the:

failure to achieve positively valued goals (which incorporates Merton’s measure of monetary strain), the removal of positively valued stimuli (e.g. the loss of a spouse or family member through death or divorce), and the confrontation of negative stimuli (e.g. repeated academic failure or the onset of emotional problems). According to the theory, negative emotions arise and become a source of strain between people (Agnew, 1992, p. 57; Akins, Smith, & Mosher, 2010, p. 324; Patchin & Hinduja, 2007).

As a result of different sources of strain, the individual’s response is different and guided by their focused attempt to prevent a loss, retrieve what was lost, or in the case of bullying/cyberbullying, seek revenge on those who have removed the positive stimuli (Agnew, 1992; Froggio, 2007). Agnew (2000) further argues that strain makes people feel angry, frustrated, depressed, anxious, and essentially creates pressure for corrective action on the part of the victim. In response to this pressure, victims react by wanting to take a corrective action as a means to alleviate the bad feelings. Consequently for some victims, cyberbullying is one corrective action that adolescents might take to mitigate the bad feelings (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

Contemporary research on cyberbullying indicates that such activity generates negatively valued stimuli in victims causing them strain that correspondingly leads to negative emotions within the victim (Hay, Meldrum, & Mann, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2007). In an almost self-preservation manner, victim responses are aimed at confronting the negative stimuli by
attempting to alleviate the strain, in some instances this is accomplished in an anti-normative manner such as cyberbullying others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2007).

Hay, Meldrum, and Mann (2010) argue that empirical testing of the general strain theory has found that research using this theoretical framework often finds individual reaction to strain manifested in acts and crimes committed against other people or their property. This is particularly true in regards to cyberbullying experiences in adolescents. According to Agnew (1992), negative adolescent relationships often lead to strong emotions such as anger and revenge. In terms of cyberbullying, the anger and revenge of continuous bullying leads some victims to alleviate the strain by entering into socially unacceptable behavior, or to seek revenge against the cyberbully. Whether as a way to mitigate strain or as a manner for revenge, strain leads some adolescents to in turn cyberbully others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2007). Franek (2005) too argues that students who have been bullied online are more likely to turn into cyberbullies themselves.

Cyberbullying, and its predecessor bullying, are not limited to just the educational domains, they are also prevalent in the professional work environment. Older adolescents and young adults are often victims of cyberbullying in the workplace (Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Privitera and Campbell (2009) argue that workplace bullying of all types is defined similarly to bullying in the academic domain. In addition, they argue that an imbalance of power exists between the victim and the bully/cyberbully, and that the negative psychological impact of such abuse among workers is similar to that of students. Moreover they argue that the imbalance of power significantly impairs the victimized workers’ ability to cope with the negative acts of bullying because they may perceive themselves to be in a position to ineffectively protect themselves or unable to remove themselves from the negative situation (Hinduja & Patchin,
2005; Privitera & Campbell, 2009). Consequently, stress and strain develop and in some instances victims lash out in retaliation against the perpetrators causing stress.

Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper (2009) suggest that workplace bullying, including acts of cyberbullying, impact victims mainly in a psychological manner. They further suggest that some victims experience difficulties as a result of bullying. For example, some may be unable to defend themselves in this environment, while others are able to cope with the abuse. Baillien et al., (2009) also argue that workplace antecedents such as tension and frustration among employees as a result of abusive circumstances in the workplace may set the stage for workplace bullying. In addition they argue that increased stress and strain within some adolescents and young adults may cause bullying and cyberbullying through a process individuals use to vent off negative emotions on others. The premise offered by these researchers indicates that victims of workplace bullying may be influenced by these antecedents and some may resort to cyberbullying activities as a means to vent off such troubling emotions.

Lastly, Hoobler, Rospenda, Lemmon, and Rosa (2010) suggest that many workplace experiences, such as negative actions from supervisors and coworkers, can lead to workplace related stress and strain. These types of actions can impact some victims in a manner which leads them to retaliate against the perpetrator. This is particularly the case when bullying activity is the result of a coworker. In some instances, retaliation might be in the form of cyberbullying (Hubler et al., 2010).

In summary, the social cognitive theory and the general strain theory informed this investigation of the construct of cyberbullying in these ways. First, social cognitive theory provide has provided this researcher with an understanding of how the environment, personal beliefs, and cognitive thought interact with each other and influence human psychosocial
behavior. Secondly, the general strain theory offered an explanation of how victimization from negative activities, such as cyberbullying, can create a strain within the victim that may negatively impact their psychological and social wellbeing.

Together, these theories have provided this researcher with an understanding of how people, particularly adolescents and young adults, psychologically receive and interpret the negative strain inducing activities inflicted upon them. In addition, these theories have helped this researcher to understand how different responses to strain are determined by an individual’s coping mechanism for dealing with such strain, as well as an interaction of several different interacting influences in their lives.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon resulting from technological advancement and the widespread use and acceptance of technology among people. Yardi and Bruckman (2011) indicate that on any given day in the United States, 23 million teenagers will get online “hanging out in chat rooms and social networking sites, and 18 million teens have their own cell phone” (p. 3237). Adolescents seem to have a natural inclination towards the use of electronic media and as research is beginning to show, they do not always use technology in positive ways (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

Several bodies of literature focusing on different aspects of cyberbullying were investigated for this project. The literature was queried for research pertaining to the prevalence of cyberbullying in elementary schools, secondary schools and in college. In addition, the literature was polled for studies involving victim turned cyberbully, cyberbullying in the workplace, and for studies involving interpretive phenomenological analysis.
Several broad questions that pertain to the goals of this study were used to interrogate the literature. The first question asked of the literature was: “How prevalent is cyberbullying in schools, colleges, and in the workplace?” From this question, this researcher looked to gain an understanding of the magnitude of this problem particularly among young and older adolescents. The second question asked of the literature was: “In what ways does being a victim of cyberbullying affect adolescents and young adults?” This question had as its purpose the exploration of the overall impact and affects that cyberbullying has on its victims, particularly in terms of psychological symptomology. The third question asked of the literature was: “Does being a victim of cyberbullying lead some people to in turn cyberbully others?” This question was designed to identify if victimization from cyberbullying led some victims to in turn become cyberbullies themselves. Lastly, the fourth question used to query the literature was: “How has interpretive phenomenological analysis been used in other empirical studies examining this phenomenon and other subject matters?” This question was designed to identify how contemporary studies have used interpretive phenomenological analysis to investigate and examine the meaning and interpretation of an experience among study participants. It is important to note that a majority of existing academic and scholarly research on the construct of cyberbullying involves adolescent populations ranging from early adolescence through older adolescence without distinction, this researcher was not able to organize domains representative of the different periods or timeframes that make up adolescence.

Before discussing the several bodies of literature defined for this review, it is important to discuss the accepted definition of cyberbullying derived from empirical research on this construct. Examination of the current literature on cyberbullying finds that pioneering researchers of this construct were interested in developing a workable definition of what
cyberbullying consisted of so that it could be used as a practical guideline for future research. Some of the most influential studies that played a key role in building such a definition are discussed here.

In developing a functional definition of cyberbullying, Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) argue that cyberbullying is an intentional and overt act of aggression toward another person online. Willard (2004) contributed to this discussion by identifying cyberbullying as acts that involve the sending or posting of harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communications devices.

Campbell (2005) enhanced the discussion of this topic by identifying specific devices used by bullies to harass their victims. She indicates that cyberbullying is electronic harassment involving the use of email, text, chat rooms, mobile phones, and mobile phone cameras. Patchin and Hinduja (2008) indicate that cyberbullying consists of “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p. 5).

Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) added to the formation of a definition of cyberbullying by suggesting that several criteria must be met for an act to be considered cyberbullying. The specific criteria consisted of the following: “actions should be intended to hurt the victim and be perceived as hurtful by the victim; be part of a repetitive pattern of offline or online actions; and be performed in a relationship characterized by a power imbalance” (p. 499). Collectively, the contributions from researchers such as those discussed above have given the literature an agreed upon working definition of the construct of cyberbullying that is still in widely accepted among researchers to this day.
Prevalence of Cyberbullying

Empirical research on the construct of cyberbullying began in the late 1990s and the start of the new millennium, and was largely in response to the growing use of technology among adolescents, as well as increased instances of cyber abuse among teenagers (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). Prior to this timeframe, the scientific study of traditional bullying was the focus of researchers interested in learning about the prevalence of traditional bullying, antecedents to bullying behavior, and its impact on victims (Farrington, 1993; Ma, 2001; Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1991; Salmon & Smith, 1998). Early works on traditional bullying have been significant in establishing baseline information as to the prevalence of bullying and the psychological impact of victimization from bullying. In so doing, early research has also provided a firm starting point, or foundational footing, for the study of cyberbullying because the causes and effects of each of these constructs are similar.

While it can be argued that advances in communications technology and communication devices have made life more comfortable and convenient for people, these same devices have also been used in negative ways to harm others. In developing an agreed upon working definition of cyberbullying, researchers have brought to light some of the negative issues associated with this phenomenon. One such issue involved the correlation between Internet usage and incidences of cyberbullying. What research has identified is that as Internet usage increased, so did the rate of cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2008). In fact, the popularity and use of the Internet was so widespread that in a 2002 survey conducted by Nua Internet Surveys, it was learned that Internet use alone had been increasing by 100% per year (Nua Internet Surveys 2002).

The ubiquitous ownership and use of the Internet and modern communications devices is supported by empirical research. For example, Lenhart and Madden (2007) argue that a survey
conducted in the United States around the year 2007 identified that 87% of youth send or receive e-mails, 68% send or receive instant messages, 55% use an online social networking site, 57% participate in video-sharing spaces, and 18% visit chat rooms. Yardi and Bruckman (2011) offer similar statistics indicating that “75% of the 12 through 17 year olds in the United States own a cell phone and 72% of them are text messagers” (p. 3237). They further indicate these same adoption patterns are seen in many countries around the world.

Beran and Li (2005) also support the argument that the Internet, cell phones, computers, and email have risen dramatically by adolescents. Referring to their 2005 study, these researchers argue that in Canada “98% of elementary and 99% of secondary students have computers with internet connections” (p. 18). What these statistics suggest is that a portion of the time adolescents and young adults spent on the Internet is used to harass others.

In terms of prevalence, early works on this construct support the hypothesis that increased technology is related to the increased incidence of cyberbullying abuse and victimization. For example, in 2004 a seminal work by Ybarra and Mitchell consisted of a survey of over 1500 youth aged 10-17 years old in the United States. The results of their research identified that roughly 24% of adolescents emailed materials that contained hurtful comments about another person. A 2007 study by Beran and Li among adolescents in grades 7-9 found similar results in that about one quarter of the sample population indicated being bullied through the use of technology.

Li (2006) conducted a study among Canadian students aimed at identifying the prevalence of cyberbullying among young adolescents. This study involved 264 junior high school students and had as its purpose the investigation of the nature and extent of cyberbullying experiences among this population. Findings from this study indicate that about one in four
students had been the victims of cyberbullying and over half of the participants reported knowing someone being cyberbullied. Furthermore, this study added to the literature by identifying that almost half of the cyberbullies used electronic bullying to harass their victims more than three times. Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, and Vega (2009) reported similar results in terms of the number of victims experiencing cyberbullying abuse.

Patchin and Hindjua in a 2006 study surveyed participants under age 18 who were victims of cyberbullying. Results of their study found that 30% of the respondents reported being victims of online harassment or bullying and that 47% had witnessed online bullying. Similarly, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) surveyed 84 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age regarding their personal instances with cyberbullying. Findings indicate that about 50% of the population sampled reported being a victim of cyberbullying. Moreover, 22% of the population surveyed reported cyberbullying others.

In 2007, Kowalski and Limber examined prevalence by surveying 3,767 middle school students in the southeastern and northwestern United States. Results of this survey indicate that 11% of the sample population had been bullied online at least during a several month period, 7% of the sample population experienced cyberbullying as both a bully and as a victim, and 4% had electronically bullied another person. In addition, it also illustrated the important role that parental involvement has on prevalence.

Juvonen and Gross (2008) also suggest that given the dramatic increase in Internet use of adolescents in the 12-17 year old age group, as well as the lack of adult supervision when online, significant reasons exist to be concerned that cyberbullying takes place within this demographic. Specifically, in terms of prevalence, this research added to the current literature by suggesting
that almost one fifth of 12-17 year old Internet users in this study reported repeated cyberbullying experiences during the previous year from this study.

Slonje and Smith (2008) conducted a study pertaining to the prevalence of cyberbullying among Swedish students. A survey of 360 adolescents’ age 12-20 years old was conducted with the intent of examining the nature and extent of cyberbullying. A unique aspect of this study was the examination of cyberbullying within four categories that included text messages, email, and phone call and picture/video. In terms of prevalence, this study contributed to the literature by identifying that there was a significant incidence of cyberbullying in lower secondary schools, and less in post-secondary schools. Interestingly, the results of this were attributed to the decline in cyberbullying incidence in post-secondary schools to the fact that students in college tend to be more interested in educational achievement (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Smith et al., (2008) conducted a study on prevalence involving secondary school students. Findings from this empirical study indicate that cyberbullying is less frequent among this age group than incidents of traditional bullying, but still significant in number. In addition, this study found that cell phone and text message bullying were most prevalent with volumes comparable to traditional bullying.

As technology continued to advance and ownership of devices such as cell phones and computers reached the hands of adolescents and young adults in the United States and around the globe, research pertaining to the prevalence of cyberbullying continued to evolve with different aspects being studied in addition to prevalence. The literature also contains studies pertaining to cyberbullying that involved different methodologies for examining this construct. For example, in 2008, Vandebosch and Van Cleemput conducted a study involving 279 male and female students age 10 to 18 years old established within 53 focus groups. This study suggested that a
problem exists in that students often inaccurately label many online activities as cyberbullying, when in reality not all negative actions are truly considered cyberbullying. The inaccuracy was based in the fact that no criteria existed to establish a definition of true cyberbullying. Thus, the goal of this study was to identify specific criterion to be used to determine true cyberbullying activity. Findings from this study identified that the following criteria must be met for an act to truly be considered cyberbullying: the perpetrator’s activity should be intended to hurt the victim; the activity must be perceived as hurtful by the victim; the activity must be part of a repetitive pattern of negative offline or online actions; and there must be a power imbalance among the perpetrator and the victim. Findings from this study helped to establish guidelines that could be used in subsequent research to better identify real acts of cyberbullying from other online activities such as cyber-teasing that are not intended to be hurtful to the victim. In addition, clear guidelines in defining cyberbullying also helped in establishing accuracy in determining prevalence.

Contemporary literature also contains trace amounts of empirical studies pertaining to the prevalence of cyberbullying among older adolescents in college. A study conducted by Dilmac (2009) surveyed a total of 666 male and female undergraduate participants from an education department at a college in Turkey. The survey consisted of self-reported occurrences of cyberbullying. Results of this study added to the literature by indicating that 22.5% of the respondents reported engaging in cyberbullying at least once. In addition, 55.3% of the respondents reported being victims of cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime (Dilmac, 2009). Aricak (2009) also examined Turkish undergraduate students in a study that had as its purpose the investigation of relationships between cyberbullying and psychiatric symptoms.
Findings from this study contributed to the literature in terms of the prevalence of cyberbullying among college students.

The database of literature also contains studies involving the prevalence of cyberbullying among older adolescents in the workplace. Privitera and Campbell (2009) argue that cases of workplace bullying are on the rise particularly in the form of e-mail bullying. Their survey of 103 male employees, age 20-60 years old at a manufacturing plant in Australia found that almost 90% of the respondents had experienced at least one negative act either by e-mail, or telephone over the previous six months of this study.

A similar study conducted in 2008 by McKay, Arnold, Fratzl, and Thomas had as its purpose the identification of workplace bullying among unionized faculty, lecturers, instructors, and librarians. Of the 820 members taking part in the survey, only 100 of those surveyed responded. The findings of this study indicated that 62% of the respondents had experienced workplace bullying.

Lastly, Keashly and Neuman (2010) lend support to the argument that acts of bullying, including cyberbullying, are prevalent within the workplace. In their analysis of bullying in academia among faculty members they identify that the rates of bullying in this environment seem higher than those within the non-academic environment. The significance of these studies of bullying and cyberbullying in the workplace offer strong evidence that supports the premise that bullying does occur in the workplace among young adults and adults.

**Psychological Impact of Cyberbullying Victimization**

As indicated earlier in this report, the scientific study of cyberbullying initially had as its focus the identification and examination of prevalence among victims within schools, colleges, and eventually within the workplace. As the phenomenon continued to grow, subsequent
research began to refocus the study objectives to ones aimed at the identification and examination of the overall psychological impact of victimization. A discussion of studies that examine and analyze the negative psychological, emotional, and social ramifications associated with cyberbullying follows.

The impact of cyberbullying among victims finds that the construct is a repeated behavior that offends, causes embarrassment, lowers self-esteem, sabotages, intimidates, and negatively affects an individual’s academic, professional, personal and social life (Mesch, 2009). Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, and Storch (2009) argue that preliminary data shows a significant relationship between cyber victimization and problems with psychosocial adjustment.

A significant element defining cyberbullying is the negative differential that exists between the cyberbully and the victim in that the cyberbully holds a position of dominance within the relationship (Campbell, 2005; Froeschle, Mayorga, Castillo, & Hargrave, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2009; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). Mason (2008) argues that “like other forms of bullying, cyberbullying is centered on the systematic abuse of power and control over another individual who is perceived to be vulnerable and weaker, and that this power imbalance makes it difficult for some victims to defend themselves” (p.323). In some instances, the impact of cyberbullying is so strong that it causes many youngsters and adolescents to avoid school, school functions, and refrain from normal activities they usually enjoy (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Mesch, 2009). The same holds true for older adolescents and young adults in that the impact of cyberbullying can be so powerful that they avoid attending classes or going to work. In some extreme cases the cyber abuse can be so relentless and tormenting that victims turn to suicide as a means of escaping the torment (Hirst, 2010; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010).
One contributing factor relating to the sharp increase in cyberbullying activity among adolescents and young adults has to do with the number of people engaged in social network use. According to The New York Times in July 2010, Facebook membership achieved the 500 million mark. In addition, the New York Times reports that according to Facebook “each month, more than 30 billion photographs, links to Web sites and news articles are shared through the site, and its members spend roughly 700 billion minutes there” (The New York Times, 2010, p. B8).

The Pew Internet Project conducted in 2007 by the nonprofit Pew Internet Project organization, indicates that one third of US teenagers have been victims of cyberbullying. In addition, the results of the survey found that 39% of social network users had been cyberbullied in some way, compared to 22% of online teens who do not use social networks (Pew Internet Project, 2007). This information is important because it supports the premise that the more time adolescents and young adults spend on the Internet or using social networking sites, the greater the possibility to cyberbullying activity to occur (Mesch, 2009).

Response to this research project’s second literature review question began with an examination of a pioneering work by Campbell (2005). This study investigated several aspects associated with cyberbullying, with one of those aspects being the potential aspects of cyberbullying. Campbell’s work added to the conversation by indicating that the consequences of cyberbullying may be more severe than those of traditional bullying. The reasons for the possible increase in severity lies in the belief that verbal and psychological bullying may have more negative long-term effects (Campbell, 2005). Campbell (2005) further argues that the basis for this severity seems to be related to the potential for a wide-scale audience that may have access to incidences of cyberbullying and the power of the written word. Because negative
comments, threats, and accusations written on web sites, emails, chat rooms, and other forms of media are permanent and visible to many, they may be looked at repeatedly by the victim and their peers causing victims to feel that there is no escape from the abuse.

Strom and Strom (2005) lend support to the findings of Campbell in terms of the uniqueness of cyberbullying and its impact upon victims. However, their work adds value to the overall conversation by discussing a significant aspect of cyberbullying, the element of anonymity. They argue that cyberbullies often hide behind a cloak of anonymity inherently provided by the Internet. Using fake screen names cyberbullies are able to post hurtful and harmful messages intended to embarrass the victim and undermine their reputation by making the matter public and viewable by many. Consequently, such actions create a great deal of anxiety among victims and negatively impact their psychological state (Beale & Hall, 2007; DeHue, Bolman, & Vollink; Spear, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009; Strom & Strom, 2005). The anonymity associated with cyberbullying and the protection it provides to bullies may be one factor that causes victims of cyberbullying to in turn cyberbully others. Thus, anonymity is one aspect that may lend support to the general strain theory as it relates to cyberbullying.

Patchin and Hinduja (2006) also support the finding that anonymity is one of the important elements that makes cyberbullying attractive to cyberbullies. Because they do not have to face their victims, cyberbullying has a great appeal as a mechanism to harass others. Moreover, their 2006 study identified specific psychological effects experienced by victims from online bullying. For example, the negative impact was manifested in feelings of frustration, anger, and sadness that had a detrimental impact on the victim’s psychological wellbeing (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Among adolescents taking part in this study, about one third of them indicated having been harassed by online bullying and as a result they had experienced being
ignored by friends, disrespected, called names, threatened, pick on, and have had rumors spread
about them (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Ybarra (2004) and Ybarra and Mitchell (2004a) suggest that victims of cyber abuse
experience depressive symptoms, behavior problems, drug use, and negative attitudes toward
school. Mason (2008) also suggests that adolescents who have experienced incidents of
cyberbullying when examined are likely to report behavioral issues, drinking alcohol, smoking,
and depressive symptoms.

Juvonen and Gross (2008) surveyed a combined population of 1,454 male and female
adolescents ranging in age from 12 to 17 years old in a study partially undertaken to identify the
psychological impact of online victimization. The results of their study found that experiences
involving online harassment are directly related to increased levels of distress among victims
(Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

In a study among Spanish adolescents as to the emotional impact of victimization
between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, Ortega et al., (2009) found the most common
emotional response to be anger by victims. In addition, others symptoms reported as a result of
cyberbully victimization include stress, being upset, depression, and loneliness. An interesting
finding from this research, which refutes that of some other works, is the finding that
embarrassment was not identified by respondents as a significant aspect related to cyberbullying
victimization.

Sourander et al., (2010) studied a sample consisting of 2,215 Finnish adolescents aged 13
to 16 years old with the objective of identifying associations between cyberbullying and
psychiatric and psychosomatic problems among adolescents. Their findings indicate that a
quarter of the respondents reported fear for their safety to be a primary emotional symptom
associated with cyberbullying. In addition, the sampled population of this study reported other psychosomatic issues such as sleeping problems, bed-wetting, headaches, and stomachaches. These physical reactions are possibly manifestations of the strain as a result of victimization and support the premise of the association of cyberbully victimization to the general strain theory.

Contemporary research pertaining to the victimization of cyberbullying has found that this construct has a detrimental impact on the self-esteem of its victims (Peterson, 1993). A study conducted by Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, and Lagerspetz (1999) examined adolescent self-esteem seeking to identify how traditional bullying impacts self-esteem. Findings from this study indicated that victims of traditional bullying had low levels of self-esteem, while individuals with higher levels of self-esteem were better able to deal with the effects of traditional bullying. This particular study supports the premise of the general strain theory that strain leads some individuals to take part in negative actions against others.

According to Patchin and Hinduja (2010), adolescence is a timeframe of significant development for adolescents, particularly relating to their development of self-identification. As such, young people seek positive events in their lives that will add positive value to their self-worth, and they seek to avoid negative events that would diminish their self-worth.

Cyberbullying is considered to be a negative event that harms an individual’s self-esteem and the literature contains limited amounts of information on this correlation. In an early study on the relationship between cyberbullying and self-esteem, Patchin and Hinduja (2007), conducted an empirical examination among 1,963 middle school students in the United States, found a direct correlation between cyberbullying victimization and self-esteem and between cyber offending and victimization. Specifically, this study identified that both cyberbullies and victims of cyberbullying have lower levels of self-esteem compared to those who have not been
either offenders or victims. Interestingly, these levels remained the same even though the researchers controlled for age, gender, and race (Patchin & Hinduja, 2007).

Studies on the element of self-esteem by Patchin and Hinduja (2007) and Salmivalli et al., (1999), strengthen the applicability of the general strain theory to the exploration of cyberbullying and to the theoretical framework guiding this research.

A horrific element associated with cyberbullying victimization is suicide ideation however current literature contains small amounts of research on this aspect of cyberbullying. Kim, Koh, and Leventhal (2005) conducted a study among Korean middle school students specifically aimed at identifying the prevalence of suicidal ideation as a result of bullying among victims, bullies, and victim-bullies. A sample of over 1,700 students were surveyed and those involved with bullying, as a victim, as a bully, or victim-bully, were compared against other students who were not involved in bullying. Findings from this study indicate that suicide ideation is higher among respondents involved in bullying in some way. The incidence of suicide ideation was highest among the victim/bully category used in this study.

Similarly, Patchin and Hinduja (2007) survey 1,963 adolescents in a large school district in the United States. Their findings suggest that individuals who had experienced bullying or cyberbullying, as a victim or as a perpetrator, had higher rates of suicidal thoughts and were more likely to attempt suicide than those that peers that did not experience such bullying. Klomek, Sourander, and Gould (2010) further support the finding that adolescents involved in bullying and cyberbullying, as victim or bully, experience higher levels of attempted suicide and suicide, as compared to adolescents not involved in bulling.

Bullying of all types, including cyberbullying, occurs frequently in colleges and throughout the workplace (Bond, Tuckey, & Dollard, 2010; Chapell et al., 2004; De Cuypers,
Baillien, De Witte, 2009; Keashly & Neuman, 2010; Lester, 2009). Workplace bullying may concern personal issues, work related issues or social exclusion (Cowie, Naylor, Smith, Rivers, & Pereira, 2002). However, scientific research on bullying and cyberbullying among older adolescents and adults within both college and the workplace is in its infancy with less than significant literature on the topic (Lester, 2009).

According to Privitera and Campbell (2009), workplace bullying is defined as “repeated behavior that offends, causes humiliation, sabotages, intimidates, or negatively affects someone’s when there is an imbalance of power” (p. 395). In addition, they further suggest that the negative consequences of college and workplace bullying are similar to those experienced by youngsters and younger adolescents within schools. For example, Privitera and Campbell (2009) argue that the experiences of workplace bullying have a negative direct impact upon a victim’s physical health and emotional wellbeing, and such consequences can extend into the victim’s family and social relationships.

Baillien, Neyens, Witte, & De Cuyper (2009) support the premise that the negative acts associated with workplace bullying are mainly psychological in nature, but they also indicate that some cases of physical and sexual abuse have been reported. In addition, they also suggest that bullying in this environment develops as a result of multiple causes associated with both the victim personality and coping mechanism, as well as work related aspects of the organization.

Bond, Tuckey, and Dollard (2010) argue that workplace bullying negatively affects both the individual and the organization. In addition, they add to the conversation by suggesting that workplace bullying can result in “adverse psychological and psychosomatic effects such as depression, anxiety, irritability, symptoms of trauma, impaired interpersonal functioning, and diminished productivity and work quality” (p. 37).
Recent research on bullying in the workplace has found that victims of this abuse may actually suffer from posttraumatic stress and suffer symptoms such as distressing intrusive thoughts, dreams, and flashbacks, hyper-arousal, and shattered core beliefs (Bond, Tuckey, & Dollard, 2010; Leyman & Gustafsson, 1996; Wilson, 1991).

Mikkelsen and Einarsen (2002) indicate that the psychological impact from bullying of all types in the workplace can be so severe among victims that the posttraumatic stress symptoms experienced can be statistically equivalent to the posttraumatic stress symptoms experienced by victims of rape.

Lastly, Hoobler, Rospenda, Lemmon, and Rosa (2010) argue that negative experiences such as those experienced by victims of workplace bullying can undermine mental health and lower self-esteem. In addition, they further argue that negative events experienced in the workplace generate intense emotional, physiological, and psychological reactions among victims of such abuse.

Cybervictims Turned Cyberbully

The next body of literature discussed in this review corresponds to the question: Do victims of cyberbullying in turn cyberbully others? The general strain theory used as a theoretical framework for this study indicates that negative events in a persons’ life generates strain. In response to such strain, some people resort to socially unacceptable responses for dealing with the strain. This study suggests that cyberbullying is one such response to the strain associated with bullying.

Empirical studies on the constructs of bullying and cyberbullying seem to support this association. A study by Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that most cyberbullies were also cybervictims. However, they also offer a different perspective by suggesting that not all
cyberbullies were victims of cyberbullying. Instead, they argue that some cyberbullies simply use the technology and the Internet as a way to compensate for their own person physical weakness, without retaliation or revenge being the motive for such activity.

Berthold and Hoover (2000) in a study of bullying behaviors and responses surveyed over 2,200 middle school students in the Midwestern United States. Response from this survey showed that bullied students were more than three times as likely to report bullying others when compared to students who had not been bullied.

Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Belschak (2009) conducted a study on cyberbullying comparing victimization in internet chatrooms to victimization in schools. A sample consisting of 1,700 adolescents in grades 5 through 10 within German secondary schools were surveyed. In terms of victim turned cyberbully, this study found that victims who were cyberbullied in chatrooms did subsequently cyberbully others in this forum. The researchers suggest from this that in this context, the victim turned bully occurrence may be “a consequence of previous victimization experiences and could be interpreted as fighting back or blowing off steam” (p. 32). This particular research finding lends support to the premise made within the general strain theory.

Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, and Vega (2009) suggest that fear alone as a result of bullying or cyberbullying may accompany a victim’s feeling of defenseless, while fear coupled with a feeling of anger may correspond to a stress reaction within a victim. They further suggest that stress alone, with reactive emotions such as anger, may support an attitude of confrontation. Results from this study also support the premise of the general strain theory that some victims respond to strain by acting out in the same manner as that which caused their victimization.
The current literature contains studies pertaining to bullying and cyberbullying in the workplace. In some works, the general strain theory framework has been used to examine the constructs. Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper (2009) suggest that response to victimization from bullying and cyberbullying within the workplace is somewhat dependent upon the personality characteristics of the victim. For example, they suggest that individual characteristics and indicators of weakness play a significant role in determining victimization and response to such victimization. Individual characteristics of a person such as shyness, being dependable, quiet and sensitive seem to have problems in effectively coping with stressful situations such as cyberbullying. In contrast, characteristics such as an abrasive or authoritarian personality may, in conjunction with other factors such as workplace stress such as a climate of rumors and rivalry, may cause strain that provokes aggressive behavior within an individual in the workplace (Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2009).

De Cuyper, Baillien, and De Witte (2009) point to another possible antecedent to workplace bullying, that being job insecurity. According to these researchers, job insecurity may lead would be perpetrators of bullying to lash out at others in the workplace in an effort to reduce their frustration caused by the insecurity at work. Thus, this finding offers a possible explanation as to why adolescent and young adult victims of bullying and cyberbullying may subsequently bully others in the workplace.

In a 2010 study by Konig, Gollwitzer, and Steffgen 473 students were surveyed to determine if the role of revenge and retaliation serve as a motive to engage in acts of cyberbullying. In addition, this study sought to identify whether traditional bully victims who subsequently became cyberbullies, choose their former traditional bullies as targets of their
cyberbullying activity. Results from this study indicate traditional bullied students do choose their former bully as a target.

**Literature Involving Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

The literature holds examples of the use of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a qualitative methodological approach in studies involving both medical and non-medical subject matters (Aymar, 2010; Brian, 2011; Hirst, 2010; Ketterer, 2010; Paulson, 2008). Because IPA is concerned with how human beings make sense of their important and particular life experiences, it offers a degree of flexibility and versatility to researchers spanning across a wide range of topics (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). A few studies describing the range of IPA can be found below.

Aymar (2010) conducted an IPA based study in Canada that explored the psychological response to chronic low back pain. In this study, eleven (11) people afflicted with chronic low back pain were interviewed in a semi-structured manner with the objective being to gain an understanding from the participant’s perspective the meaning of the lived experience of chronic lower back pain. Results from this study found that IPA was valuable to this specific research because the findings added new emerged themes, such as patient permanent pain consciousness, frustration, and isolation to the literature on this topic (Aymar, 2010).

Brian (2011) utilized the IPA approach to conduct a study exploring the day-to-day experiences of adolescents living with excessive weight gain. This study sampled twenty-one adolescents and young adults between the ages of thirteen and twenty-one years of age, who are living with, or have lived with, obesity as adolescents. Through the use of in-depth interviews, and rich quality descriptions of the personal and social implications of adolescents living daily with obesity were identified.
Brian’s (2011) research identified that several of her study participants had been victimized by incidences of cyberbullying because of their obesity. Furthermore, her study found that while cyberbullying incidences were hurtful to all participants, the study subjects interpreted the meaning of these actions in varied ways.

Ketterer (2010) performed an interpretive phenomenological study exploring the psychological change involving Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers. Ten (10) trail-hikers were interviewed in a semi-structured approach along the trail hike. Interpretive phenomenological analysis was used to interpret the interviews and capture the meaning of each hiker’s experience and to identify common themes across each subject taking part in the study. Through the use of IPA, Ketterer (2010) identified three common themes that had emerged from this study: all hikers experienced psychological change, hikers in general found their relationships to other hikers as the most important aspect of the journey, and the hike had influence in a positive manner how they viewed humanity.

Paulson (2009) made use of interpretive phenomenological analysis in conducting a study pertaining to faculty teaching experiences in a nursing curriculum. In this study, seven full-time traditional curriculum nursing professors were interviewed with the objective of identifying their lived experiences in response to a change in the traditional curriculum. The change involved withholding clinical training until a student’s senior year in the school and upon completion of all theoretical coursework. In addition, this study had as a second objective the exploration of the effect of a new innovative curriculum on teaching practices. Results from this study included several themes which had emerged across participants. Themes such as the perception of innovating teaching, which involved participant’s characterization of the professional challenges
caused by the new curriculum, and valuing, or the perception of value the new curriculum has on job satisfaction emerged from this exploration.

Hirst (2010) used interpretive phenomenological analysis in a study she conducted to explore the experience of attempting and surviving a suicide attempt. The sample for this study consisted of five female participants ranging in age from 33 - 66 years old. Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted that investigated the circumstances prior to and leading up to the suicide attempt, the experiences of the attempt, and the meaning these attempts have had on the participant over time.

Results of this study identified eight themes from among the participants which included suicide attempts as a result of chronic pain, as a result of stressful situations in their lives, and as a result of chronic emotional pain. The study also revealed the theme that participants attempted suicide as a means of escaping unbearable feelings, and to escape a situation which they found intolerable.

What these individual studies have in common is that they represent the first hand accounts of the lived experiences of participants regarding a particular event of importance in their lives. Each individual story within these studies not only describes the personal lived experiences of an event, but it also represents an account of the interpretation made by the individual of their experience. Thus, the IPA research approach is an effective tool for the comprehensive exploration of how human beings make sense of, interpret, and react to significant events in their lives. This model seems most appropriate for the exploration of the lived experiences and impact of cyberbullying among college students.

Interrogation of the literature on the construct of cyberbullying has identified several gaps or limitations that offer avenues for new research. One such limitation identified is the fact that
there is a trace amount of empirical research on cyberbullying among college students. Substantial studies already exist on various aspects of this subject matter among middle school and high school student victims, and there is even a small amount of studies on this topic among young adults and adults in the workplace. However, existing literature seems to be less representative of this problem of practice among students in higher education.

A second limitation found from interrogation of the literature is that essentially no studies exist at this time that focus on the lived experiences or the psychological impact of cyberbullying among the higher education demographic. As with the first limitation, the current literature contains studies that examine cyberbullying in different manners, such as its prevalence and psychological impact, among middle and high school students, but there does not seem to be studies of this sort involving college students.

This study then attempted to fill the voids described above by offering new evidence as to how college students victimized by cyberbullying make sense of their abuse, how they interpret their abuse, and how they react to their abuse. In addition, this study did lend support to the idea that further research in cyberbullying is warranted among students in higher education.

Chapter 3

Research Questions

Research questions for studies involving interpretive phenomenological analysis should have as their focus an attempt to explore and capture the meaning that participants assign to a particular experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To explore such meaning, Creswell (2009) argues that researchers conducting a phenomenological study should use the words ‘how’ and ‘what’ in the research questions because the nature of these words conveys an “open and emerging design that is reflective of qualitative research” (p. 130). Creswell (2009) further points
out that research questions in phenomenological based qualitative research “might be broadly stated without specific reference to the existing literature or a typology of questions” (p. 130).

Interviewers must design research questions that explore participant experiences, understanding, perceptions, and views of a phenomena or phenomenological materials (Creswell, 2009). As such, this study had two research questions that were designed to explore participants’ experiences and understanding of their experiences as a result of victimization from cyberbullying. The questions this study sought to answer are:

1. What are the lived experiences of community college students with cyberbullying?
2. What meaning do participants give to these experiences?

Methods

The method used for this study is qualitative in nature using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a research approach to explore how college students make sense of their lived experiences as a result of their victimization from cyberbullying.

According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), “interpretive phenomenological analysis is an approach to qualitative, experiential and psychological research which has been informed by concepts and debates from three key areas of the philosophy of knowledge: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography” (p.11).

IPA is thought to be phenomenological because it involves people turning their thought processes back to the detailed events of a unique, lived experience, from which subsequent examination and analysis of that experience can take place by the individual. Furthermore, it is an attempt to get as close as possible to the personal experience of an individual, identifying the essence of human experiences, while recognizing that such an action inevitably becomes an hermeneutic or interpretive endeavor for both the participant and the researcher (Crewell, 2009;
Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) offer the argument that a researcher performing a phenomenological study explores various reactions to, and perceptions of, a particular phenomenon. In so doing, the researcher gains insight into the world of the participant and is thereby able to describe the participant’s perceptions and reactions to such phenomenon. They further suggest that researchers conducting a phenomenological study assume that a commonality exists between human beings and their perceptions and reactions to various phenomena. They refer to this commonality of perception as the essence of the experience, and it is this commonality that researchers seek to identify in developing themes in the later data analysis process of such a study (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009).

IPA is an interpretive activity that is informed by hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Hermeneutics is also considered the ‘science of interpretation’ having roots in, and stemming from the study of the interpretation of religious texts (Allen & Jensen 1990; Kvale, 1983). According to Backstrom and Sundin (2007), hermeneutics functions as that which interprets the meaning identified by phenomenology. IPA seeks to “know in detail what the experience for an individual is like, and what sense this particular individual is making of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 3).

Similarly Fraenkel et al., (2009) indicate that researchers conducting a phenomenological study investigate various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon. In this sense IPA is idiographic meaning that it focuses on the particular, a particular event, process, or relationship (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This is accomplished through observation,
documentation, and through the use of interviews. Through the IPA research paradigm, the researcher attempts to gain a unique insight into the world of the participant, and then he or she attempts to identify and describe the reactions and perceptions of each participant in detail (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Smith et al., (2009) indicate that there is a hierarchy in what constitutes “an experience” versus experiences in general. They argue that at the most elementary level, people are caught up, albeit not consciously, in the everyday flow of experience, meaning that experiences or events happen throughout each day to each human being. However, the distinction of an experience from all other experiences occurs when a person becomes aware of what is happening. They further suggest that it is at this moment that the beginning of an experience occurs, as opposed to just experience in general.

Lastly, when conducting an IPA research study, it is important for the researcher to bracket or set aside his or her own experiences, preconceived ideas, and prejudices about the phenomenon of interest in order to see the phenomenon as clearly as possible. When bracketing, the researcher does not influence the participants’ understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, each participant can present the researcher with a fresh perspective of the essence of the phenomenon through their own reality, thereby allowing essences to lead to the development of common themes between the participants (Creswell, 2009; Parahoo, 2006).

**Study Site**

The study site for this research was a community college located in upstate New York. As a community college, the student body consists of older adolescent students as well as adult students. Each of the voluntary participants taking part in this study is currently, or has been, a student at this institution at the time they experienced incidence(s) of cyberbullying.
This particular location was selected as the study site because of the researcher’s written and personal contact with the Vice President of Student Affairs at this institution. At this community college, the Office of Student Affairs is the on campus department that deals directly with student incidences of cyberbullying and other similar matters. As department head, the Vice President of Student Affairs has direct knowledge of this type of activity through student reporting.

The goals, objectives, and methodology for this study have been discussed with the Vice President. Her assistance in obtaining participants for this study had also been requested to which the Vice President agreed to make initial contact with student victims inviting their participation in this project. The Vice President did make initial contact with potential participants via email since she has knowledge of students within this college community that have experienced instances of cyberbullying and have subsequently reported such incidences to her office. In this manner, the participants were contacted via referral from some kind of gatekeeper, in this case, the Vice President of Student Affairs which can aid in student response (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009)

This institution was also selected because of its proximity to the researcher’s location, thereby providing an element of convenience for conducting this study. Furthermore, it was determined before the research actually began that none of the voluntary participants were students in the classes that the researcher instructs. Therefore, there existed no pre-existing acquaintance or knowledge of these students.

**Study Sample**

Maxwell (2005) indicates that as a general guideline, qualitative researchers “typically study a relatively small number of individuals or situations, and preserve the individuality of
each of these in their analyses, rather than collecting data from large samples” (p. 22). In so
doing, researchers are better able to understand how events, actions, and meanings are influenced
by the circumstances in which they occur (Maxwell, 2005). Furthermore, because IPA research
relies on the lived experiences of people, and the subsequent meaning of these experiences,
samples for such studies should be selected using a purposeful sample of participants who have
experienced a particular phenomenon, rather than through other sample types which use
probability methods (Creswell, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Smith and Osborn (2003) also suggest that IPA research projects are usually conducted
on small sample sizes. They indicate that the reason for this lies in the fact that detailed analysis
on a case by case basis is very time consuming. Thus, a small sample size seems more
appropriate for such activity. They further suggest that projects for first time IPA researchers
should consist of three (3) participants because this size allows for an “in-depth engagement with
each participant, and also allows for a detailed examination of similarity and difference,
convergence and divergence” (p. 57).

Similarly Smith et al., (2009) argue that IPA is primarily concerned with obtaining a
detailed account of individual experience. They argue that “the issue is quality, not quantity, and
given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a
concentrated on a small number of cases” (p. 51). As a general guide, they suggest that between
three and six participants be a reasonable sample size for student IPA research.

Lastly, Seidman (2006) offers the suggestion that a small number of participants are
enough for IPA research. However, he is reluctant to indicate a specific number to be used in a
sample. Instead, he argues that “the method of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing applied
to a sample of participants who all experience similar structural and social conditions gives
enormous power to the stories of a relatively few participants” (p. 55). Smith and Osborn (2003) also suggest that IPA researchers find a fairly homogeneous sample because such a sample will be better suited to answering the research questions being posed.

This study used purposeful sampling to select voluntary student participants with personal knowledge and experience as a result of victimization from cyberbullying. In addition, the sample consisted of four students enrolled in, or having been enrolled in, higher education curriculums at the study site previously mentioned in this methodology. No other criteria such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, etc were used in the selection process of this purposive sample, thereby giving it the homogeneous attribute needed for this IPA study. The only commonality between the participants was their status as community college students at the community college site selected for this project, and their victimization from cyberbullying.

**Data Collection**

The use of in-depth interviews for IPA research is the data collection technique preferred by IPA researchers (Creswell, 2009; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In-depth interviews are often described as “conversations with a purpose, and for the most part, the participant talks, while the researcher listens” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.). The value of this technique lies in the fact that in-depth interviewing allows the researcher and the participant to develop and take part in a dialogue whereby the participant is allowed an “opportunity to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively, and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Fraenkel et al., (2009) indicate that researchers undertaking phenomenological studies usually make use of in-depth interviews as their data collection technique because it allows the
researcher to obtain unique sets of data from each interviewee in an effort to obtain the essence of the experience for each participant.

Similarly Smith et al., (2009) offer the idea that IPA research tends to be best suited to a data collection method that provides participants with the opportunity to “offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences, and that in-depth interviews and diaries may be the best means of accessing these accounts” (p. 56).

Seidman (2006) also supports in-depth interviewing as the most appropriate technique for interpretive phenomenological research. He offers guidelines for what he refers to as “in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing” (p. 15), and he refers to this type of interviewing as a method which “combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (p. 15). Seidman (2006) clearly defines his in-depth interviewing technique by indicating that when conducting in-depth, phenomenological based interviews, the researcher should primarily make use of open-ended questions. He argues that the use of this type of questioning allows the participants to “build upon and explore their responses to those questions, with the goal being to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (p. 15).

The most notable feature of Seidman’s in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing technique is its three separate interview approach with each participant of the study. Three separate interviews are required because each interview contributes to the totality of the experience and gives meaning and understanding to people’s behavior (Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). According to Seidman (2006), each of the three interviews has a specific purpose. The first interview is focused around the interviewer learning as much as possible of the participant’s life background such as their family experiences, school
experiences, work experiences and experiences with friends. The aim of this first interview is to establish for the interviewer the participant’s life in context (Seidman, 2006).

The second interview has as its objective “to concentrate on the concrete details of the participant’s present lived experience in the topic area of the study” (p. 18). In the second interview the researcher attempts to obtain the details of a participant’s lived experience. During this interview, the researcher is not interested in the participant’s opinion, but rather the explicit details of the experience (Seidman, 2006).

In the third interview, researchers ask the participants to “reflect on the meaning of their experience” (p. 18). It is here that researchers focus on getting the participants to understand the meaning of their experience looking at it from the perspective that various influences, both past and present, have interacted and have brought them to this particular situation (Seidman, 2006).

According to Smith et al., (2009), IPA researchers usually make use of an interview schedule and semi-structured interviews as ways of helping them prepare for the content of the interview. The use of an interview schedule and a semi-structured interview approach allows the IPA researcher to put in place a loose agenda or structure for questioning of the participant. While it is possible that the questioning structure may change as the interview progresses, the interview schedule, in conjunction with the semi-structured approach, allows for a sort of framework for the interviews to take place in (Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Smith et al., (2009) further argue that the “aim of developing a schedule is to facilitate a comfortable interaction with the participant which will, in turn, enable them to provide a detailed account of the experience under investigation” (p. 59). When using an interview schedule, researchers should make use of open-ended, expansive questions, and the participant should be encouraged to speak at length.
This research made use of in-depth, open-ended questioning, using a semi-structured interview approach during the data collection phase of this project. The interview questions asked of each participant were developed using social cognitive theory and the general strain theoretical frameworks as a guide. While this research did follow the IPA methodology of not attempting to fit its findings into existing theories the formation of the interview questions are grounded in such theories.

All interviews were audio recorded for subsequent use during the data analysis phase of this study and these recordings were destroyed at the completion of this study (Seidman, 2006). Once email information of each potential participant was given to this researcher by the Vice President of Student Affairs, an email was sent to each of them explaining this study and their role in it (Appendix B). Prior to the interviews, each participant agreeing to take part in this study was given a copy of the unsigned consent (Appendix C) form that this researcher obtained from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board office. This researcher also explained each of the items on the form to each participant, as well as answered any questions they may have had on their voluntary involvement. Because of the intimate personal and psychological nature of this study, each participant was given a list of psychological counseling centers and services available in Schenectady county should they wish to subsequently seek assistance as a result of reflection on their experiences (Appendix D). In addition, each participant was given a $15.00 gift card to Dunkin Donuts coffee shop as a token of appreciation for taking part in this study.

Initially each participant was asked between six and ten open-ended questions (Appendix D) for each interview. Participant responses did also lead to other open-ended questions for clarification purposes. However, a list of questions to be used for clarification purposes was not
able to be drafted for this study because their use was dependant upon participant’s responses to the interview questions. Participants were also asked to reconstruct their experiences instead of recalling them and to tell them as a story. By reconstructing the event instead of simply recalling it, the respondent was be able reconstruct the experience basing it upon what they sense is important now about the event (Seidman, 2006).

Each participant was interviewed a minimum of two times to a maximum of three times, with the interviews spaced about one week apart for each participant, following Seidman’s three interview series technique (Seidman, 2006). Because the participants for this study are college students, and have the accompanying academic responsibilities of being students, in addition to other personal and familial responsibilities, the actual number of interviews for each depended upon the convenience of the student participants. However, in general, guidelines mentioned above were followed.

This study made use of an interview schedule as a guideline for interviewing participants. Participants were given a copy of the interview schedule before the first set of interviews took place. By providing a schedule, participants were informed as to what to expect during the interviews, thereby providing for a more comfortable participant experience. In addition, use of an interview structure provided this novice researcher with a general guideline to monitor the interviews progress at the rate and quality anticipated.

In addition to being asked to tell the story of their experience as victims of cyberbullying, as well as any meaning they derived from their experience, it was requested that each participant share any digital, audio, or written samples that were involved in their victimization. If agreeable to sharing such documentation, each participant was asked to collect and save any and all computer logs, cell phone text messages, emails, any written documentation, audio recordings, or
video recordings of their experience(s). Use of a variety of sources of data, or triangulation, did allow for the assessment of specific materials used in the victimization of each participant. Triangulation also added validity to the study and did provide this researcher with a better understanding of the issue being studied (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis for IPA studies is unique when compared to other qualitative research approaches because the analysis being conducted does not attempt to fit research findings into existing theoretical frameworks. According to Smith et al., (2009), “IPA is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. Its aim is to conduct human lived experience examination in a way that enables the experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (p. 33). Thus, the data analysis is different because its goal is a “commitment to an understanding of the participant’s point of view, and a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 79).

Smith et al., (2009) spell out a roadmap for conducting IPA data analysis. In their model, they indicate that the first step of the process begins with the researcher focusing diligently on the original data, transcribing the interviews and organizing the data for further analysis. Furthermore, they suggest that repeated re-reading of the transcript, and if applicable, re-listening of the audio-tape helps the researcher to better understand the interviews and how the various narratives can relate various sections of the data together (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The second element of this analysis roadmap involves making notes of anything within the transcript, or audio-tape, that seems of interest to the researcher (Maxwell, 2005; Seidman,
The purpose of this step to assist the researcher in creating a comprehensive and detailed set of notes on the data, as well as to allow the researcher to establish an idea of how a participant talks about and understands an issue. Also during this step, researchers should start to identify and make note of any similarities, differences, and contradictions from the participant’s dialogue (Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). At the completion of this step, the detailed notes will assist in providing the analyst with a clear phenomenological focus on the topic being studied, as well as a documented account which is very close to the participant’s meaning and understanding of the topic (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The third stage of the process as defined by Smith et al., (2009) involves the development of emerging themes from the data being analyzed. During this phase of IPA data analysis, the focus shifts from working with the written transcript or audio-tape, to working primarily off of initial notes, with the main objective being an attempt to produce a concise statement of the elements of importance from the notes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The final phase of the Smith et al. (2009) data analysis model involves the objective of searching for connections across emergent themes and perceptions. Seidman (2006) supports this same objective, and indicates that a conventional way of analyzing interview data for thematic connections is for researchers to “organize excerpts from the transcripts into categories” (p. 125). Once this task is complete, the researcher than searches for connections between the categories or themes. The techniques discussed above are the ones that were used in conducting an analysis of data for this research project. It is important to note that each of the steps listed below were conducted for each of the participant’s in this study.
At the completion of the in-depth interviews, the interviews were transcribed from audio-taped data to a written form. Subsequently, the next step involved re-reading the transcript produced in the first step, and also to re-listen to the audio-taped interview of each participant. This step is a necessary component of IPA data analysis because as Smith et al. (2009) point out, repeated reading allows the researcher to “enter a phase of active engagement with the data. It also allows a model of the overall interview structure to develop, and permits the analyst to gain an understanding of how narratives can bind certain sections of the interview together (p. 82).

After transcribing, re-reading and re-listening to the originally collected data, the next step included initial note taking. Note taking did involve looking for such things as victim backgrounds, their relationship with their families, friends, other students, and coworkers. In addition, during this step the transcript was reviewed with the goal of identifying how each participant was bullied, how they reacted to such experiences, their self perceived psychological impact of these experiences, and what meaning and interpretation these instances have had on the victims. Furthermore, the review of the transcript did involve the identification and noting of similarities, differences, and contradictions within the data and the participant experiences. The aim was to create a comprehensive set of notes and comments that were used later in the process in establishing common themes (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Seidman, 2006; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

After completing the note taking process the notes were used to develop emergent themes from each individual participant. It is important to note here that during this step, the notes were used to produce emergent themes instead of the transcript itself. The result was a detailed statement of chronologically ordered themes that set the stage for the next step of the data analysis process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Once the emergent themes for a participant were noted, the connections between the emerged themes were identified. The objective in this step of the process was to bring together the emerged themes and to end up with a product which points out the most important and interesting elements of each participant’s account (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The final step in the data analysis structure involved looking for patterns and common themes across each individual participant account. Since the steps described above were used for the analysis of each individual participant, the final step in my analysis was to identify what each participant experience has in common, what perceptions are common among all participants, and what commonalities exist in terms of their understanding and meaning of the phenomenological experiences (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Once the data analysis function was complete, the analysis or results of this project as a whole were written.

**Validity and Credibility**

Because IPA, as a qualitative research approach, involves the human being as the instrument used to gather data, member check measures must be put in place to insure credibility and validity in the final product of the research project. Creswell and Miller (2000) suggest that the validity in qualitative studies is affected by the researcher’s perception of validity and the particular research paradigm. As such, many researchers have developed their own concepts of validity and have adopted terms they consider more appropriate to qualitative research as trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999). For the purpose of this proposal, I am using credibility and validity as comparable to trustworthiness.

One technique that was used for credibility and validity purposes is the Seidman’s three-interview process described in the data collection section of this study. Seidman (2006) makes
the suggestion that “the three-interview structure incorporates features that enhances IPA study validity” (p. 24). By interviewing participants over the course of one (1) to three (3) weeks, the interviewer can check for internal consistency in what the participants say. Furthermore, by interviewing several participants during this timeframe, the researcher can connect their experiences and check comments of each participant against those of others helping to insure internal consistency. Internal consistency over a period of time strengthens trust in what a participant is saying (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) also argues that in IPA research, “because the researcher is concerned with the participant’s understanding of his or her experiences, the authenticity of what he or she is saying makes it reasonable to have confidence in its validity” (p. 26).

Another strategy to insure validity and credibility in this study was the use of triangulation. When a researcher triangulates, he or she examines different data sources and uses them to build a coherent justification for themes (Creswell, 2009). In this study, varying data sources such as text messages, emails, instant messages, printed documents, and other computer mediated communication obtained from the participants was used to determine a theme or themes from such data. Triangulating several sources of data to establish themes establishes or adds validity to the study (Creswell, 2009).

Lastly, member checking was used to insure validity and credibility of this study. A member check is the process of verifying information with the targeted group. It allows the participant the chance to review identified themes for accuracy, as well as correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation. Member checks add to the validity of the observer's interpretation of qualitative observations (Creswell, 2009).
Protection of Human Subjects

This project was confronted with the primary ethical challenge of confidentiality because it examined the lived experiences and psychological impact of victimization from cyberbullying. In terms of victimization, the ethical challenge is found in issues relating to personal privacy. Victims of cyber-abuse often feel violated and insecure even in the sanctity of their own homes.

With this in mind, a study such as this, which examines the psychological and emotional impact of victimization, and response to such abuse, must be done cautiously and with a high degree of confidentiality. This is particularly true in a world where personal privacy seems to be exploited easily and on a widespread scale through the use of various technologies.

To safeguard the confidentiality of the respondents, the following measures were included in this study. First, the participants purposefully selected for this study are individuals whom have made initial contact with a senior administration person, the Vice President of Student Affairs, at the community college selected for this study. By using this person as a gatekeeper or source from which to obtain my sample, a degree of confidentiality and professionalism exists in the identification of possible participants thereby protecting the human subjects for this study.

Second, all interviews were conducted at a location which the participant found to be most comfortable and secure. In addition to a comfortable and secure location, other techniques that were used to protect human subjects involved in this study included not listing the last name or date of birth of the participants in this study; destruction of all audio-tapes at the completion of this study; all transcripts were kept confidential in a safe location designated by the researcher and kept only as long as required by academic and institutional review board requirements.
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this research project was to explore the lived experiences and the psychological impact of cyberbullying victimization among college students. The participants taking part in this study each provided rich, detailed accounts of their individual experiences with cyberbullying, as well as detailed accounts as to the meaning those experiences have had to them.

A total of 4 undergraduate students, 3 females and 1 male, took part in this study. All participants were over 18 years of age. Student participants were interviewed on two separate dates spaced one week apart. While the Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) IPA model suggests a protocol whereby participants be interviewed on three separate occasions, this study involved two interviews per participant due to the limited availability of the participants. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and all interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by this researcher.

All interviews took place in a library conference room at the community college campus selected as the site for this study. The library conference room served as an ideal location for the interviews because it was quiet and only the researcher and participant were in the room during all interviews. For the confidentiality of the human subjects involved in this research project, pseudonyms were used in place of the real names of the participants.

To insure validity in this study, emails were sent to each of the participants at the conclusion of the data analysis process. Participants were asked to review the accuracy of the themes this researcher derived from their interviews. Email responses from each of the participants were received indicating that the themes identified by this researcher resulting from
their interviews were indeed accurate. Furthermore, a 100% response rate from the participants attests to the validity of the findings for this study as a whole.

Profile of the Participants

_Alice_ is a 36 year old female, military veteran and full-time undergraduate student majoring in social work. She is married and has 2 children, a pre-teen daughter and a teenage son. While in college she has experienced several instances of cyberbullying against her involving cell phone pictures and a popular social networking site.

_Jane_ is a 50 year old female full-time undergraduate student and recent graduate of the community college selected as the site for this study. She has an Associate’s degree in social work from this college and she is currently pursuing her Bachelor’s degree at a college in the New York capital district area. She is divorced and has one adult son. This participant has had several experiences with cyberbullying as a college student involving a popular social networking site.

_Robert_ is a 47 year old male, full-time undergraduate student at this community college. He is divorced and has one daughter. This participant has experienced several incidences of cyberbulling in the form of cell phone text messages and several instances of cyberbullying victimization on a popular social networking site.

_Cindy_ is a 47 year old female, full-time undergraduate student at the community college used in this study as a data collection site. She is divorced and has three adult children. This participant has experienced multiple incidences of cyberbullying in the form of cell phone text messages.
Themes

This study followed the data analysis protocol established by Smith et al., (2009). According to their model of analysis, researchers should re-read each individual transcript and re-listen to each audio-taped interview several times in a process to produce initial comments or notes that in turn develop into themes identified from an individual participant’s interviews. Smith et al., (2009) argue that by using this process, the researcher is “effectively looking for a means of drawing together the emergent themes and producing a structure which allows you to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of your participants account” (p. 96).

Smith et al., (2009) further argue that subsequent to the development of individual themes for each participant, the researcher then looks for patterns across all of the cases in a process that produces super-ordinate themes. Super-ordinate themes represent a commonality of findings among the participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

In writing up the findings of a study using the Smith et al., (2009) model, the protocol suggests that the researcher begin by “taking the first super-ordinate theme, give a short statement outlining what it is. Then the most orderly sequence is to take each theme in turn and present evidence from each participant to support each theme” (p. 109).

Smith et al., (2009) indicate two approaches for writing up results and discussion sections for an IPA study. In one approach the sections are kept separate while in the second the sections are merged. According to Smith et al., (2009), by merging the two sections the researcher is able to “relate themes to the extant literature as you are going along” (p.113). The results and discussion sections of this study were merged. By merging sections in this manner, this researcher can better relate the super-ordinate themes that emerged from the interviews to the existing literature in one narrative (Smith, 2003; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith &
Obsborne, 2003). Furthermore, the merging of these sections offers the reader a convenient format for review since the super-ordinate themes, existing literature, interview excerpts interspersed throughout the narrative, and interpretive analysis are all in one location for each theme.

Following the protocol discussed above, analysis of the collected data led to the generation of 6 common super-ordinate themes among participants. The derived themes were then organized into categories using the theoretical frameworks for this study as a guide. The emerged themes represent the participants lived experiences, the psychological impact of their abuse, and the derived meanings that participants gave of their cyberbullying experiences. Table 1 represents the super-ordinate themes and the number of participants expressing this theme as identified from the analysis of the collected data. Verbatim comments and excerpts were extracted from the interviews of each participant to support the various themes compiled for this study. Super-ordinate themes are presented in boldface and only themes that were identified by at least 3 participants are discussed in this research project.

In organizing the various themes that emerged this researcher used a framework that incorporated the two theories used in this study, Bandura’s theory of triadic reciprocal determinism and the general strain theory. This researcher subjectively aligned themes with various elements of each theory and categorized the themes based upon what was considered the best fit. For example, themes that contained elements such as the environment, or the person, or by the interaction among human beings, or combination thereof, were listed under the category of ‘aligned with Bandura’s theory’. Those themes that contained elements that best fit the general strain theory such as a failure to achieve positive goals, or the removal of positive goals,
or involved a confrontation with negative stimuli, were listed under the category of ‘aligned with the General Strain Theory’ category.

Table 1 – Broad Categories and Themes Generated from Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category and Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aligned with Bandura’s triadic reciprocal determinism theory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Distrust of technology and mistrust of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aligned with the General strain theory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Frustration leading to self-blame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ubiquitous ownership and use of various technological devices and software have fostered an environment where an interaction among people may take place at anytime and from anywhere (Yardi & Bruckman, 2011). However, this environment has led to an interaction among some people that involves the deviant use of technology (Patchin & Hinduja, 2008). With regard to cyberbullying, the interplay between the environment and the interaction between people, often manifest in the form of repeated instances of abuse among student victims (Bandura, 1989; Campbell, 2005).

Patchin and Hinduja (2008), as well as Vandebosch and van Cleemput (2008), argue that repeated instances are an important element in defining and identifying acts of cyberbullying. Common devices used by pre-college adolescents to repeatedly cyberbully victims include cell phones, email, and social networking sites (Campbell, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2008).
Findings from this IPA study support those of previous researchers, such as Campbell (2005) and Patchin and Hinduja (2008), with regard to repeated instances of abuse and the methods used to abuse victims. They indicate that repeated abuse from cyberbullying among college students does indeed occur and frequently stems from the deviant use of cell phones, email, and social networking sites. Furthermore, they have identified that repeated instances of abuse may take place on a single medium as indicated in Alice’s comments when she was asked the manner in which she was cyberbullied and the number of times that she experienced repeated abuse.

One would be the picture posted to Facebook of a classmate of mine sucking his thumb and twirling my hair. Another student took a cell phone picture of this and posted it to Facebook. A second time would be again on Facebook and this involved a guy who sent me texts and sent to me through my cell phone a picture of himself naked.

Cindy also experienced instances of cyber abuse via a single medium, the cell phone. She recounts her experiences in this way.

I met a gentleman online and we started dating. A bad experience with him caused me to break it off with him. He then literally texted to me 500 messages in one week where he called me obscene names in the texts.

The findings further suggest that cyber abuse may start on one medium and then change at the will of the cyberbully, in the bully’s attempt to remain in contact with the victim and to continue the harassment. Jane described her experience as one where she met a man online and she began communicating with him initially via Yahoo instant messenger and later through cell phone conversations. Jane further indicated that after a brief relationship with this man the
courtship ended. It was at this point that this man began his abuse toward her via cell phone, and later by email. Jane described her experiences in this manner.

I was dating a fellow student while in college. At one point, the relationship just went south and I told him I didn’t want to date him anymore. That summer, I started receiving a series of annoying cell phone calls from this person. Shortly thereafter, I started receiving strange emails to my Facebook account from him.

Similarly, Robert experienced instances of cyberbullying that transcended various media. Initially his abuse began via the college email system and this was subsequently followed by a shift in medium to cell phone text messages and Facebook abuse. He discussed his abuse in this manner.

There was a girl who liked me and wanted me to ask her out but she got upset cause I told her that I don’t want to go out with her. In response to this, she signed into the Angel email system at school using my username and password and she sent a nasty message to all the students in the class. She also posted stuff on Facebook about me to other girls and she sent cell phone text messages to me about my involvement with other girls.

Repeated instances of abuse often lead to the feeling of vulnerability and of being afraid. These feelings have been identified among pre-college level students in studies involving cyberbullying (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Sourander et al., 2010). Exploratory studies such as these have identified a direct correlation between feelings of vulnerability and fear various elements of elements of cyberbullying.

In this study, students commonly felt vulnerable and afraid as a result of their abuse. Alice explained that she felt vulnerable particularly when her photo was posted on Facebook.
She felt afraid because she was concerned as to how potential employers would perceive of her and she became afraid to in turn post any photos on social networking sites.

I felt really vulnerable especially when I couldn’t remove that entire picture from Facebook. I was concerned if this picture ever popped up to any potential employers, what would they think of me. I am afraid to post even a picture of my child or anything like that on Facebook. It disgusts me that people prey on this kind of stuff on Facebook.

Jane also felt vulnerable as a result of her abuse but she also indicated in her interviews that she was afraid for her personal and psychological safety as a result of her cyber abuse.

Really vulnerable umm, it (cyberbullying) brought back some of the abuse that I had been through (previous domestic abuse). It brought back fear and I wondered if I was going to be hurt (physically and psychologically) in anyway because of it.

Robert expressed his vulnerability and fear by saying “umm, well I am afraid to even say hello to people, and other people are afraid to talk to me. They are afraid of what she (cyberbully) will do”.

Cindy also expressed feelings of being vulnerable and of being very scared. Her excerpts also supported this researcher’s finding that her fear extended into her home and that in turn further fueled her feeling of vulnerability.

Very insecure umm I’m not afraid of anything that’s just the way I am, but he (cyberbully) scared me. I was afraid to go home because he knew where I lived and he could reach me anytime via cell phone, email, or instant messenger and umm, yeah, I was really scared.
Distrust of technology and the mistrust of people

The Internet, various communications devices and software, as well as social networking sites exist within an environment that inherently provides an ease of access among individuals (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). However, this atmosphere is ripe for the deviant abuse of technology, whereby one person may launch a series of cyber attacks against another person or many other people (Li, 2006). Consequently, an environment such as this leads to feelings of a distrust of technology and a corresponding mistrust of other people among cyber abuse victims (Oliker, 2011).

Current literature contains examples that illustrate the distrust of technology that younger adolescents’ experience as a result of victimization from cyberbullying. Distrust of technology as a by-product of cyber victimization often prevents victims from engaging in activities that they normally enjoy (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Mesch, 2009). One example would include a younger adolescent who may normally enjoy recreational activities involving a computer, such as interacting with peers on social networking sites, who all of a sudden refrains from such an activity.

This IPA study has found similar outcomes among college students in that abuse often leads to a change in how students use and interact with technology. Initially some college students engage in the use of technology in an innocent and unsuspecting manner. They download software applications, correspond with others via email, they make use of various instant messaging protocols, and interact frequently on social networking sites. Essentially they are using various forms of technology in an appropriate and acceptable manner. However, some students are naïve to the real threats and dangers that exist on the Internet and in cyberspace. Alice described a sense of fear or distrust of technology as a result of her experiences with
cyberbullying. She expressed her feelings by saying “I’m more cautious now, afraid of technology, I’m very cautious of what I do now on a computer from now on”.

Robert identified feelings that support this theme by indicating that initially he used technology in an unsuspecting and carefree manner. However, he developed a distrust of technology after his abuse. Here is what he had to say on this topic.

I think I took it (technology abuse) a little less seriously because I umm see it happen so much that it seems like a given kind of thing. Then after awhile I realized that it was really happening to me and it began affecting other areas of my life, that’s when I began to distrust technology.

Cindy offered a different perspective in terms of how her distrust of technology had developed and the impact it had on her. Cindy’s account suggested that victims feel as if they cannot escape the cyberbully and this led to their distrust of technology. Cindy’s point was made clear when she said “since this experience (cyber abuse), my home isn’t my sanctuary anymore. Because he can reach me by cell phone, email, or computer, I don’t feel safe in my own home”.

The findings in this study further identified that it is only after a negative, personally abuse experience with technology that college students become more aware and cautious of its use. In essence, they become distrusting of technology and they become aware of the need to be more cautious with its use.

According to Oliker (2011), a distrust of technology and the hurtful, negative actions of people often lead to a corresponding mistrust of people. Oliker (2011) further argues that modern day technologies have created an environment where websites are the online version of the bathroom wall, a reference to students writing messages on the bathroom walls in schools. Her argument further suggests that these types of websites are used to disseminate hurtful gossip to a
wide scale audience, and that these types of actions among young adolescents, at times, lead to feelings of mistrust against others (Oliker, 2011).

Findings from this IPA study indicate that victimization from cyberbullying among college students is similar to that of young adolescents. Participants taking part in this study indicated that cyber abuse does indeed generate similar feelings of mistrust against others within the collegiate population. Alice offered her perspective as to how she viewed people subsequent to her victimization. Her mistrust and suspicion of people were made evident when she made the following comments during the interviews “I don’t know what kind of pervert is around me so it (cyberbullying experiences) made me wonder about people. I find myself looking at people and wondering about what sick thing this person might be doing”.

This study has also found that some participants spoke of a dual sense of mistrust and anxiety as a result of their victimization. Jane indicated in her interviews that she became suspicious of other people as a result of her victimization from cyberbullying. She became particularly suspicious of those in her class at school. Furthermore, her suspicion was fueled in part by feelings of distrust of people and feelings of anxiety over the situation that took place against her.

Anxiety, you feel like you have to watch your back. Umm, a lot of anxiety and a lot of distrust is what I felt. I also started thinking who in this program, the one I’m in at school, is the person doing this (cyberbullying) to me and why.

Robert also discussed his feelings of mistrust and anxiety resulting from his cyberbullying victimization. Robert’s mistrust stemmed from earlier trust issues he had when he was younger. His feelings of anxiety result from his mistrust in how his cyberbully would interfere with his relationships with other women.
Umm, well I have always have had trust issues, particularly with females, and that (cyberbullying instances) just like made that 10 times worse. It just sits with me today in that I am afraid to even say hello to people, and other people are afraid to talk to me because they are afraid of what she (cyberbully) might do.

The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem

Several studies indicate that among adolescents, friends often cyberbully friends (Haber & Daley, 2011; National Crime Prevention Council, 2010). Lenhart (2010) offers statistics on cyberbullying which indicate that over 70% of the cyberbullying victims knew their attacker, offering the possibility that some cyberbullies may have actually been friends with their victims. Burgess-Proctor, Hinduja, and Patchin (2010) also suggest that younger adolescent female victims of cyberbullying often know the person cyberbullying them. Their information is based upon a study they performed involving 1,203 girls who reported being victims of online bullying.

A separate factor associated with this type of abuse pertains to how acts such as these are perceived by adolescents. For example, the National Crime Prevention Council (2010) has indicated that often times among younger adolescents acts of cyberbullying are performed against friends because the cyberbully finds such abuse to be funny.

In contrast these studies, this IPA study identified friendship, or friends, to be held in high regard among college student victims of cyberbullying. Findings from this study indicate that friendship is something of absolute value and an effective tool in helping victims cope with instances of cyberbullying. When asked how friends had influenced them during the periods that they experienced repeated cyberbullying, all of the participants taking part in this study spoke highly of the various ways in which friendships helped them in coping with their abuse. All indicated that they turned to friends for emotional support. Alice pointed out that friends made
her feel less isolated as a victim. During her interviews with this researcher, Alice illustrated her point by saying “it kind of made me feel that I am not alone in this (cyberbully victimization). Also their influence made me realize that this is not as a result of something I did.”

Jane reported that friends made her feel that she could share her experiences with them as they occurred, thereby helping her emotionally. In describing her experiences during her interviews, Jane indicated of her abuse “it really strengthened my bonds with my friends, because I didn’t realize just how many good friends I really had. I was able to share all of what was happening to me with my friends”.

Robert explained that friendship was significant to him while he was undergoing abuse because friends not only strengthen him emotionally, but they helped him in identifying who his friends were. He also indicated that he took comfort in his friends concern for him making him feel cared for.

It really strengthened me because I didn’t realize just how many good friends I had until the cyberbullying experiences occurred. I was able to share all of this (cyberbullying experiences) with my friends. The cyberbullying, well it helped me in defining the relationships I had with some of my friends. What I mean is that if someone is a true friend they are going to really have your back and take general concern for your situation.

One participant, Cindy, expressed trust issues in what she felt with regards to the value of her friends during her abusive experiences.

I trust them a lot more because they were there for me. Yeah, I put more trust into my friendships. They were actually the ones that pointed it out that this behavior (behavior involving being tied up and physically abused during sex) was not normal behavior.
Within this IPA study, friendship helped to insulate and support the self-esteem of the students experiencing cyberbullying. This is significant because early research on cyberbullying among young adolescents has found that this problem of practice has a detrimental impact on self-esteem among young people (Peterson, 1993). In more contemporary times, researchers are finding results that are similar to those of earlier studies. For example, Patchin and Hinduja (2007) conducted a study which involved 1,963 middle school students in the United States, and they found a direct correlation between cyberbullying victimization and self-esteem.

This study has found that abuse from cyberbullying does not seem to have a negative or detrimental impact among collegiate victims. All of the participants taking part in this research had characterized their self-esteem to be good or secure.

Alice indicated that although she evaluates her self-esteem as strong now, she felt that it was impacted in a negative manner during her cyber abuse. According to Alice, during her abuse her self-esteem was impacted for a short period of time and then resumed to normal. Here is how she described her self-esteem as a result of victimization.

My self-esteem is pretty good. Regarding the instances of cyberbullying, there seemed to always be someone talking about that picture when I entered class. So yeah, for awhile it did affect it (self-esteem), maybe to the point of almost being paranoid.

Jane indicated that she would currently characterize her self-esteem as strong. She further indicated that at the time of her abuse her self-esteem remained strong. During the interviews Jane described her self-esteem and the impact that abuse had on it in this way “I think my self-esteem is umm strong. Regarding how the cyberbullying affected my self-esteem, I would say that it hasn’t affected it”.
Robert described his self-esteem to be good at this time but in a continual state of growing. He discussed early childhood issues with self-esteem but those issues have subsided as a result of his success in school and through his relationship with friends. However, he admitted that the cyberbullying acts taken against him did temporarily have a negative impact on his self-esteem, but when the abuse subsided his self-esteem became more normal and grew.

Umm, right now my self-esteem is relatively good, but it grows everyday. I always have had issues with that (self-esteem) all of my life. The cyberbullying, umm, it had a dramatic temporary affect on my self-esteem but it is better now and growing.

Cindy also indicated that she feels that her self-esteem is strong. While interviewing with this researcher she said of her self-esteem “I have very good self-esteem. The cyberbullying incidences definitely affected my self-esteem. Now though, I’d like to think it is back to normal”.

The following themes were subjectively placed by this researcher into the category of ‘aligned with the general strain theory’. Aspects of these themes seem to be in alignment with the defining elements of the general strain theory, and are therefore categorized accordingly.

**Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances**

The general strain theory purports that strain is a by-product resulting from an individual’s confrontation with a negative stimuli (Agnew, 1992; Akins, Smith, & Mosher, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2007). However, individual reactions to such strain vary among victims.

A significant portion of the extant literature on self-control in response to cyberbullying at the middle and high school levels has found that many students who experience cyberbullying in turn cyberbully others in response to their victimization (Berthold & Hoover, 2000; Katzer,
Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This point suggests a lack of self-control on the part of the victim in response to this behavior.

Findings from this IPA study challenge these findings and offer a contrasting result, at least among participants in this IPA study. None of the participants taking part in this IPA study indicated that they responded to their cyberbullying victimization by in turn cyberbullying another person. This finding contradicts existing literature among pre-collegiate students because such literature indicates that young adolescent students at times respond to their instances of cyberbullying by in turn cyberbullying another person (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).

This finding is significant also because it points to a level of self-control among adult college students when compared to that of younger adolescents in middle and high schools. Existing empirical literature among younger adolescents finds that most cyberbullies were also victims of cyber abuse themselves (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). However, in contrast, research among adult victims of cyberbullying indicates that a considerable number of adults victimized did nothing in response to their cyber abuse (Akbulut & Cuhadar, 2011). Instead of responding to their abuse by in turn cyberbullying another person, they simply waited for the instances of abuse to stop.

In this study, all four participants demonstrated a socially acceptable level of self-control toward their abuse and their abuser. As excerpts from each participant will show, although each victim was frustrated and afraid of what was happening to them, they did not respond to their victimization by in turn cyberbullying someone else. Alice described her response as one where she reached out to the cyberbully but he refused to cooperate with her requests. She then decided to discuss the abuse with her husband. Here is how she described it.
Well first I was just really upset. I emailed the student who posted the picture asking him to take it down but he didn’t. I then went to my husband shortly thereafter and talked about it and he assured me that this was not the end of the world and that seemed to calm me down.

Jane also described her response to the abuse taking place against her, and again there was no indication of her reacting by in turn cyberbullying another person. Jane said “the first one (cyberbullying incident), I wasn’t really surprised. The second one really blew me away and I became afraid”.

Robert also described a very controlled response in turning to college security authorities for help with this issue. When asked how he responded to the cyber abuse taking place against him, Robert said “umm, I went through the proper channels, through campus security”.

Cindy indicated that she tried to discuss her abuse with the cyberbully via phone but that did not stop the abuse. During her interview with this researcher, she said that “in the beginning I would respond to this guy (cyberbully) by saying how dare you talk to me in that way”. This was the extent of her response and she took no further actions when these discussions did not work in mitigating the abuse.

The controlled reaction by the participants in this study to their abuse suggest that the life experiences of adults and the challenges of growing up appear to suitably prepare them for effectively dealing with victimization from cyberbullying. Adult maturity appears to support the manner in which these adults responded to victimization, particularly when contrasted against the response among young adolescents as suggested by research such as that of Akbulut and Cuhadar (2011).
Dombeck (2007) supports the idea of social maturity as being a significant factor in enabling adults to deal with situations of discomfort, such as cyberbullying, in a socially acceptable manner or in a manner that does not cause problems for other people. He further identified that a lack of social maturity, as is often found in young adolescents, is responsible for the manner in which they deal with similar uncomfortable situations such as cyberbullying others in response to their victimization. Essentially, the social maturity of adolescents is different and in stark contrast to that of adults.

The concept of social maturity and the finding of this IPA study contrast with the principles of the general strain theory used as one of the theoretical framework’s for this study. Whereas Merton (1938) suggested that the general strain theory consists of only one source of strain, the failure to achieve a desired goal, Agnew (1992) and Froggio (2007) have offered alternative sources of stain to this theory. They suggest that strain develops from an individuals interaction with a negative stimuli. In response to this confrontation, the person acts in a variety of manners, with one such action being revenge on those that have removed the positive stimuli. In the application of this theory to victimization from cyberbullying, the stain theory posits that one form of revenge would involve the victim in turn cyberbullying another.

This study’s findings contrast to the tenets of the general strain theory in that none of the participating victims of this study reacted to their abuse by cyberbullying another human being. The contradiction lies in the fact that among all participants taking part in this study, none reacted to the strain of cyberbullying by in turn abusing another person. The elements of the social maturity theory conflict with the sources of strain within the general strain theory as well. As Dombeck (2007) suggests, as adults mature they do so in a manner which allows them to deal with negative stimuli in a socially acceptable manner which does not cause problems for other
people. Thus, the foundational elements of the social maturity theory are in direct contrast to the sources of strain offered by Agnew (1992) and Froggio (2007). Social maturity among adults prevents a response such as revenge because such retaliation would cause problems to another person (Dombeck, 2007).

While the theory of social maturity acts as to discourage an impulsive reaction to a confrontation with negative stimuli, it does nothing to prevent or curtail the feeling of being defenseless among victims experiencing abuse. Contemporary research among victims of cyberbullying in middle and high schools finds that abuse may lead some victims to feel defenseless or lacking in a feeling of control over such incidents (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). In addition, contemporary literature pertaining to cyberbullying among junior and high school students presents evidence that a power imbalance exists among the cyberbully and the victim (Campbell, 2005; Froeschle, Mayorga, Castillo, & Hargrave, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2009; Privitera & Campbell, 2009; Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009).

Similar outcomes were obtained from this IPA study that support the findings offered by researchers such as Ortega et al., (2009) and Campbell (2005), as they relate to this aspect of victimization among young adolescents. This IPA study has identified that college students abused by cyberbullying often experience feelings of being defenseless and also feel a lack of control over the abuse that is taking place against them. Alice identified her experiences by stating “I felt a major loss of control. I really felt like I had no control of what was going on. I felt like my personal space had been invaded”.

Jane felt that the lack of control over the victimization taking place against her stemmed from her inability to control the actions of others. When asked if she felt she had any control
over the abuse taking place against her, she responded by stating “no control, I mean you can’t
control someone else’s actions”.

Robert too felt he had no control over his cyber abuse. When asked if he felt he had any
control over his abuse, he responded by saying “ah not much. I wish there was something I could
have done to stop it from happening cause it made me very uncomfortable”.

Cindy identified a feeling of lack of control as well. Her response to being questioned on
the level of control she felt while experiencing cyber abuse was “I had absolutely no control, no
matter where I went, there he was”. Cindy’s comments indicate that she felt she had no way to
escape the wrath of the cyberbully.

The excerpts from the participants indicate that participants felt that they could not
escape the cyberbully and consequently could not stop the abuse. In addition, each of the
participant’s excerpts suggested that there existed a power imbalance or negative differential
between the victim and the cyberbully, with the cyberbully holding a position of dominance over
the victim.

**Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment**

Numerous studies have been conducted among adolescents and working adults regarding
stress and depression as direct by-products of cyberbully victimization (Bandura, 1989; Hinduja &
In some extreme and widely publicized cases, the torment, stress and depression from constant
cyber abuse can be so traumatic that victims may either turn to thoughts of suicide, or actually
commit to the act, as a viable means of escaping the abuse (Hirst, 2010; Klomke, Sourander, &
Gould, 2010).
Participants from this study offered valuable insight into how stress, and at times depression, from victimization have affected their personal relationships with their spouse, potential heterosexual relationships, and relationships with their peers in college.

As a result, findings from this study have identified that stress and depression are direct by-products of cyberbullying victimization among post secondary school students. Alice described the stress, and limited depression, she felt because of her picture being posted on Facebook showing her being bullied by a classmate. She further described the stress she felt in having to present the information pertaining to her abuse to her spouse.

My experiences with being a victim of cyberbullying led to some stress in my life. First, I felt stressed when this guy (cyberbully) posted on Facebook the picture of the other guy sucking his thumb and twirling my hair. I felt stress because I was weirded out to just have to tell my husband about it because I didn’t do anything wrong.

I had stress and some depression for a small amount of time when this abuse was happening because it affected my personal and social life more than anything.

Jane’s experiences with stress and depression as a result of cyber abuse indicated that she felt confused as to why such an innocent thing as dating someone would lead to cyber abuse and harassment from another person. Jane illustrated her feelings vividly during the interviews by saying “I felt stress during the incidents of cyberbullying against me because I didn’t understand why this other woman was abusing me, particularly because the relationship I had with the guy didn’t last that long”.

Robert indicated that he had experienced stress because his cyberbully was interfering with his friendships and potential relationships with women in school. The stress became so intensive that it impaired his physical health as well as his psychological well-being.
When I refused to have a relationship with that girl (cyberbully), in anger she would put stuff on Facebook about the other women that I would be talking to in school. I found that to be very stressful. My being a victim of cyberbullying has caused me stress and it has affected relationships I have with other students for sure.

Embarrassment, too, is a common feeling identified within contemporary research on cyber abuse. According to Mesch (2009), the impact of cyberbullying among victims finds that this construct is a repeated behavior that offends and causes embarrassment among student victims. In contrast, Ortega et al., (2009) in a study among pre-college level students found embarrassment to not be a significant aspect related to cyberbullying victimization.

Participants taking part in this IPA study felt that embarrassment is a feeling characteristic of victimization from cyberbullying among themselves and their peers. Three out of four of the participants taking part in this study described feeling embarrassed over their abuse when confronting their classmates and school administration officials. Among these victims, embarrassment made going to class uncomfortable, as well ask having to alert members of the school administration community of their abuse.

Alice discussed that she felt embarrassed not only about the picture of her being posted to Facebook, but also embarrassed with respect to the large number of negative comments that others had posted on Facebook about the picture. Alice further indicated feelings of embarrassment associated with her having to approach the Vice President of Student Affairs to ask for help with this issue that she was experiencing. Here is what Alice had to say regarding her feelings of embarrassment.

I would say that the incident of the picture being posted to Facebook of me and that guy was very embarrassing to me. It was not only the picture but the 115 unwelcome
comments others made that I found embarrassing. It was also embarrassing to have to tell the Vice President of Student Affairs.

Robert similarly discussed his feelings of embarrassment as it relates to his cyberbully sending a nasty email using Robert’s username and password to the class that he was in. He described how embarrassed he was on the day this occurred and when he entered the classroom.

What I found most embarrassing was the incident where that girl that was cyberbullying me sent emails out to every member of the class I was in. The embarrassing part was when I walked into class that day and everyone in the class is looking at me like I have six heads.

Lastly, Cindy identified her feeling of embarrassment as causing her to feel foolish over what she felt was her inexperience in properly progressing with new relationships and dating.

I was embarrassed at how foolish I felt after I stopped and thought about the whole situation with the guy (cyberbully). I was embarrassed because I thought that I had did this right, I mean I waited like 3 months before we even actually met for coffee.

**Frustration leading to self-Blame**

Patchin and Hinduja (2006) in a study among pre-higher education level students argue that anonymity associated with cyberbullying often leads to feelings of frustration among young adolescents primarily due to their inability to identify the cyberbully.

This study has identified that frustration is a common feeling among college students victimized by such abuse. In contrast to the findings of Patchin and Hinduja (2006), participants taking part in this study indicated that their feeling of frustration were not based in the anonymity of the cyberbully, but instead stemmed from the feeling that they were alone in dealing with and
mitigating their cyber abuse. Alice knew the student who was cyberbullying her as he was a student in her class. Her frustration was evident in her comments “I went to the guy in my class that took the picture and posted it to Facebook. I asked him for about one week to remove the picture but he refused to do so”.

Jane offered a different view of how frustration manifested in her life. She indicated her feelings by stating “I felt frustration because I had to change my routine. I felt like I was being followed everywhere I went. Yeah, I changed my life around because of it”.

Robert described through his excerpts that his frustration was two-fold. First, he felt frustrated because he could not establish friendly relationships with other women because his cyberbully would contact and harass these women in response to his communicating with them. He further identified his frustration with law enforcement personnel because when he approached the police asking for help with mitigating his cyber abuse, they police did not take him seriously and laughed at him, thereby increasing his feelings of frustration among people in positions of authority.

Going back to my experience with the girl who was sending emails to our class using my Angel account, this girl would also send like…. if I were communicating on Facebook to another women, she would sent them nasty messages. I got alarmed with this girls behavior and I told my probation officer (participant is on probation). He told me to tell the police department. So I went to the police department and they laughed at me and they told me to take care of my own business.

Cindy also experienced a similar frustration to that of Robert particularly in terms of the frustration she felt when law enforcement officials did not take her cyber abuse seriously when she approached them for assistance.
Well with that guy I broke up with, umm, I actually brought the phone to the police because he literally texted me like 500 messages in a week. And they (the cops) passed it around the police station and laughed at the messages, they thought it was funny. I’m still frustrated over how they handled this situation.

Bauman and Pero (2010) have identified that some victims of bullying and cyberbullying attribute their victimization to something that they might have done to cause it, instead of assigning such blame to external sources.

The frustration associated with constant instances of abuse among victims of cyberbullying cause some victims to feel that the abuse is in reaction to something they did to cause it. In essence, they internalize the frustration which leads to self-blame (Bauman, 2010; Bauman & Pero, 2010).

This study has found that with these participants self-blame is a direct result of cyberbully victimization among college students. Three out of four of the participants taking part in this study directly voiced their initial belief that they thought they were cyberbullied in response to some sort of action or behavior that they themselves took part in. Furthermore, the majority of participants taking part in this study did not initially place the blame for their abuse on the cyberbully.

Alice discussed that she wondered if she had done something to cause this abuse to take place. Furthermore, she was concerned how others would perceive her abuse and if they would think that she had done something to precipitate the abuse.

I found myself doubting me. I wondered if people will think that I had done something to encourage this behavior. I asked myself did I egg this on. I was really beginning to doubt and blame myself for the cyberbullying.
Jane also described in the interviews her feelings regarding her own perceived self-blame for her abuse. Unlike, Alice, she did not indicate a concern with what others might think regarding her abuse and victimization.

At first I wondered what I might have done to pull myself toward this. You know the victim kind of goes through that blaming yourself stage. So I went through that blaming myself stage, telling myself that I did this to myself. I put myself in this situation.

Cindy experienced the feeling of self-blame accusing herself of not waiting long enough in progressing with her new relationship involving the man who turned out to be her cyberbully. In a sense, she perceived this negative action as a form of penalty being levied against her for her mistake.

Well I thought I deserved what happened (cyberbullying). Like I thought I brought it on myself because I didn’t wait long enough to meet with him and stuff like that. So I kept telling myself that I kind of brought it on myself, and now this is what you get.

**Summary**

In Chapter 4 I identified and reported the themes that were derived during the data analysis segment of this project. The themes were then qualified with verbatim quotes from the participant to support each finding.
Chapter 5

Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences and the psychological impact of cyberbullying victimization among college students. Two primary research questions were used to conduct this exploration:

1. What are the lived experiences of college students with cyberbullying?
2. What meaning do participants give to these experiences?

This study was anchored in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis which is a qualitative research approach best suited for the exploration of how a person reacts to, and their perception of, a particular phenomenon which has taken place in their life. IPA was an appropriate approach for this study because it allowed for the detailed exploration of how participants taking part in this study made sense of their instances of cyberbullying, as well as the meaning they gave of their experiences as victims of cyber abuse.

Through the use of in-depth interviews and subsequent data analysis using the Smith et al, (2009) model for Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, I learned first hand from the victims about the various mediums that were used to electronically bully them. More importantly, I learned from this exploration how victims felt emotionally and psychologically about their abuse, the meaning that they gave of their experiences, and how they reacted or responded to their abuse.

Six themes were generated from my analysis of the data obtained from the participants involved with this study. The themes include the following:

1. Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear
2. Distrust of technology and mistrust of people
3. The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem

4. Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances

5. Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment

6. Frustration leading to self-blame

These findings represent new information to the database of literature particularly because they uniquely describe the experiences of college student victims, a demographic which has not received significant amounts of research with regards to cyberbullying.

**Repeated instances leading to feelings of vulnerability and fear**

Studies have been conducted in middle and high schools that show repeated instances of cyber abuse do indeed exist among middle and high school students. For example, Li conducted a study in 2006 among 264 middle school Canadian students in effort to identify the prevalence of cyberbullying among these students. While the study confirmed the prevalence of cyber abuse among the sample examined, her research also determined that almost half of the cyberbullies used electronic bullying to harass their victims on more than three occasions.

Similarly, Vandebosch and Van Cleemput conducted a study in 2008 involving 279 male and female students age 10 to 18 years old established within 53 focus groups. One of the significant yields of this study was that it confirmed repeated abuse among the study participants. It also determined that negative cyber activity must include a repetitive pattern of deviant offline or online actions to be considered cyberbullying.

As a consequence of repeated instances of cyber abuse, studies in the literature suggest that young adolescent students often describe feelings of fear and of vulnerability associated with their victimization. For example, Juvonen and Gross conducted a study in 2008 among 1,454 students between 12 to 17 years of age undertaken in part to identify the psychological impact of
online victimization. Findings from their study have indicated that victims of online abuse frequently felt increased levels of stress related to fear and vulnerability from their abuse.

Similarly, Sourander et al., (2010) studied a sample of 2,215 Finnish adolescents examining associations between cyberbullying and psychiatric and psychosomatic problems among adolescents. Their findings have indicated that a quarter of the respondents reported fear for their safety to be a primary emotional symptom associated with cyberbullying.

This IPA study confirms the findings of these earlier studies within the literature. Exploration of this problem of practice has found that repeated instances of cyber abuse do indeed occur among college students whom are victims of cyberbullying. All of the participants taking part in this study vividly described that they had experienced repeated cyber abuse through various technological mediums during the period of their victimization.

This IPA study has also identified that repeated instances of abuse often leads to feelings of vulnerability and fear among victims within the higher educational domain. All of the participants taking part in this study expressed that they felt vulnerable as a consequence to their cyber abuse. Some described vulnerability based in part on not knowing how their victimization would reflect upon them with potential employers in the future. Furthermore, some described vulnerability based upon the fact that that they did not know what action they would take that would trigger the cyberbully to attack them again. In addition, some participants described feelings of vulnerability because the cyberbully actually knew where they lived.

Almost all of the participants indicated that they felt fear associated with their abuse. They indicated that the fear they felt was out of concern for their physical safety, as well as generalized fear because they believed that they had no way to escape the wrath of the cyberbully.
What these findings suggest is that repeated instances of cyber abuse have a similar impact among college students as they do among younger student victims. Furthermore, they serve to support Bandura’s social cognitive theory because they show that both the environment and the person do indeed reciprocally influence human behavior. For example, within the technologically driven environment we live in people wishing to cyber abuse others actually have the means and tools to do so. In this IPA study the cyberbully abusing Alice was enabled by both cell phone and Internet technologies, providing him an opportunity to post a picture on Facebook showing Alice being physically bullied by another person. The cyberbully had a desire to cyber abuse Alice and the technologies provided him with the means and audience to carry out his abuse.

This finding has implications for the educational community because it clearly identifies that students experiencing cyber abuse are the recipients of repeated acts of electronic aggression that very often manifests in feelings of fear and vulnerability. Because of the Internet and various communications networks that at often serve as deviant gateways for abuse, there realistically is no effective way to stop the repeated acts of electronic abuse a cyberbully may dole out to his or her victim. Therefore, the only recourse that college and university officials have to mitigate the abuse is to educate the campus community at large. This should be done through policy creation that clearly describes the university’s terms for acceptable use of its technology. By educating the university community at large, and through the establishment and enforcement of policies pertaining to acceptable use, mitigation of incidents of cyber abuse may actually take place.

**Distrust of technology and a mistrust of people**

The database of literature holds evidence among victims in middle and high school that supports the finding that cyber abuse very often leads to feelings of a distrust of technology and a
corresponding mistrust of people among victims. In these studies, researchers focused specifically on the deviant use of technology, and study outcomes support a direct correlation between a technically charged environment and an individual’s behavior against another person. For example, Dempsey et al., (2009) in a study involving 1,665 middle school students found that experiences with cyber victimization are often associated with symptoms of anxiety among victims. They also found that anxiety among cyber abuse victims prevented their interaction with others. Furthermore, their study found that in some instances, the impact of cyberbullying is so strong that it caused many adolescents to avoid school, school functions, and to refrain from involvement in activities they normally enjoyed.

Similarly in 2006, Patchin and Hinduja conducted a study that involved 384 respondents less than 17 years of age to determine their experiences with various cyberbullying behaviors. Specific behaviors such as teasing in a mean way, intentionally excluding someone out of something, threatening someone, and unwanted sexual comments to someone were examined in this study. Results from this research indicated that over 30% of the victims removed themselves from using the medium used to cyberbully them, and 20% of the sample stayed offline for an extended period of time. The results have suggested that self-removal from online activities is a characteristic response among victims who have developed a distrust of technology and a corresponding mistrust of people as a result of cyber abuse (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

This IPA study confirms similar finding as compared to those of previous research studies. Three out of four of the participants involved in this study described that as a consequence of their abuse their perception of technology changed and so did the manner in which they used it. Some participants indicated that they had become more cautious in how they used technology, particularly the computer. One participant indicated that she also become more
protective in how her spouse and children used technology at home. Another participant identified that as a result of her abuse she had become more suspicious and untrusting of people and she also felt that her continued use of technological devices actually prevented her escape from the cyberbully.

This finding is significant because it has identified that among college student victims a distrust of technology and a mistrust of people are common. Furthermore distrust of technology and of people in response to cyber abuse often led victims to become more cautious in their use of technology and at times to completely avoid its use. Victims taking part in this study also identified that they felt trapped and unsure of whom to put their trust in to help them mitigate the abuse and escape the cyberbully.

This finding has implications for higher education in several ways. First, a significant part of the educational process today involves student use of the Internet and various technological devices to meet academic requirements. For example, online learning involves daily interaction between the student and the instructor. Through the use of synchronous and asynchronous modes of learning, students are required to submit research papers, assignments, and at times to work collaboratively with other students. However, once a victim of cyber abuse, some students are reluctant to take part in required academic online activities. As a consequence, their academic performance is diminished. Furthermore, avoidance of online activities impedes a student’s social participation in the various activities that take place on campus and off.

With this problem in mind, college administrators and leaders should take an active role and enact functional university wide policies regarding the acceptable use of technology. These policies should then be disseminated among the entire university population including administration, faculty, students, and staff. In addition, required periodic sensitivity training
classes for all employees and students should be conducted to better educate the university population on this problem of practice and processes the college is undertaking to combat this problem.

**The value of friends in college and their impact on victim self-esteem**

Contemporary literature contains studies which show that among young adolescent cyber abuse victims, friends often times cyberbully friends. For example, in 2010 Burgess-Proctor, Hinduja, and Patchin conducted an Internet based study surveying young adolescents and their participation in several adolescent orientated web sites. The sample for this study included 3,141 female respondents under the age of 18 years of age.

A significant finding from this research involved the determination that friendship is not a significant factor in immunity from cyber abuse among younger adolescents. Similarly the National Crime Prevention Council in 2010 suggested that among younger adolescent students, cyber victims subsequently electronically abuse their peers primarily because they find such actions are funny.

Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) surveyed 84 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age regarding their personal experiences with cyberbullying. Their findings indicated that about 50% of the population sampled reported victimization from cyberbullying. Moreover, 22% of the population surveyed reported cyberbullying others, suggesting that to some degree friends in turn cyber abuse friends.

As a consequence of cyber abuse, particularly between friends, studies have identified that a victim’s self-esteem is negatively impacted by such behavior. One example includes a 1999 study conducted by Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, and Lagerspetz which had as its goal the identification of how bullying affects self-esteem in adolescents. Findings from this
study indicated that victims of bullying had low levels of self-esteem, while individuals with higher levels of self-esteem were better able to deal with the effects of bullying.

The consequences of victimization were further portrayed in a 2007 study conducted by Patchin and Hinduja. In this project, 1,963 middle school students in the United States were examined in an effort to determine the relationship between cyberbullying and an individual’s self-esteem. This study found that both cyberbullies and victims of cyberbullying have lower levels of self-esteem compared to those who have not been either offenders or victims.

The findings of this IPA study contradict those of existing research with regards to this aspect of victimization. Through the exploration of the participants taking part in this IPA study, this research has identified that friendship plays a very significant role in the lives of cyberbully victims. Among these participants, my findings indicate that victims often turned to friends for guidance, comfort, and emotional support as a means of helping them cope with and endure their abuse.

In addition to the benefits of comfort and guidance, participants also suggested that friendship had a very positive impact on their self-esteem. While most victims taking part in this study indicated that their self-esteem was either slightly impacted during the period of abuse, or not at all by it, each participant gave statements that showed the value of friendship in helping them to maintain and in strengthening their self-esteem.

These findings are significant in two ways. First, they identify the powerful and positive influence that friendship has on higher education students whom are victims of cyber abuse. All participants taking part in this IPA study indicated that friends and friendship helped to put them at ease and gave them support, comfort, and guidance in dealing with their abuse. Second, these findings indicate that among victims within higher education, cyber abuse may not have a direct
and negative impact on a victim’s self-esteem. Instead of turning against their friends when they are abused, older adolescent and adult victims turn to their friends for support, comfort, and guidance, whereas younger victims do not.

In terms of implications of this finding for the educational community, colleges and universities should develop programs that encourage support networks among students who have been victims of cyber abuse. For example, college students who have been victims of this type of abuse should be asked to take part in programs at the school that would assist other students undergoing cyber abuse. Essentially a support network would be established that would allow victims, current and past, to bond and help each other in coping with both the immediate and long term ramifications of this type of abuse.

**Self-control in response to lack of control over cyberbullying instances**

Contemporary literature on cyberbullying among young students has suggested that victims frequently responded to their abuse by in turn cyberbullying others. What this finding has suggested is that younger adolescents often lack self-control in dealing with their victimization. For example, a quantitative study conducted in 2000 by Berthold and Hoover involved 2,200 middle school students with the goal being the identification of victimization leading to subsequent cyber abuse. Results from this project have indicated that bullied students were more than three times as likely to report bullying others when compared to students who had not been bullied.

In a quantitative study with a similar goal, Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Belschak in 2009 examined a sample of 1,700 adolescents in grades 5 through 10 within German secondary schools. One significant result from this research suggested that victims who were cyberbullied in chat rooms did subsequently cyberbully others in this same forum.
Research projects involving young victims of cyber abuse have offered into evidence that these victims often times experience feelings of a lack of self-control, and a generalized feeling of no control, regarding the cyber abuse taking place against them. The literature suggests two reasons for these feelings. First, researchers have suggested that this feeling stems from a power imbalance between the cyberbully and the victim. This imbalance leads to feelings of a lack of control among victims because they have no direct influence or power over the bully’s actions. Victims are therefore the entity of lesser weight within this relationship involving an imbalanced power differential. Second, researchers have identified that young adolescent victims often feel a lack of control as a result of the anonymity of the cyberbully to them. By not knowing who is abusing them, victims become frustrated and feel a loss of control in how to deal with their situation (Mason, 2008).

In support of these finding, Vandebosch and Van Cleemput in a 2008 study among 279 male and female adolescent students found that feelings relating to a lack of control over an abusive situation are the result of a negative differential, or power imbalance, between the cyber victim and the cyberbully.

Patchin and Hinduja offer support to the claim that anonymity is one of the most attractive characteristics to cyberbullies because they can hide their identity and elude their victims. They further suggest that this same characteristic also leads to a general feeling of a lack of control by the victim because they do not know who is responsible for their abuse (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

The findings from this IPA study contradict those of other studies pertaining to victim self-control and their reaction to cyber abuse. Participants involved with this study indicated that they did not respond to their abuse by in turn cyberbullying another person. Instead, they
responded to their abuse by seeking the assistance of the college Vice President of Student Affairs, the local police, or the campus security office.

This finding suggests that among adult victims a more controlled and socially accepted response had been taken toward abuse even though the victims felt that they had no control over what was taking place against them. Dombeck (2007) suggests that this type of response is indicative of social maturity within adults, and that social maturity enables them to deal with chaotic, uncomfortable situations, such as abuse, in a socially accepted manner.

A controlled response among adult victims is an important finding and has implications within the higher education community because it establishes a baseline of information in terms of how students feel and how they react with regard to their instances of cyber abuse. From this finding college administrators can develop policies and programs that should directly deal with the common feelings of discomfort often experienced by older adolescent and adult victims of cyber abuse. Policies that address the terms of acceptable use of technology among the school community at large, and the college’s intended course of action to deal with identified cyber abuse cases will be creating a supportive atmosphere conducive to safety, security, and academic success.

Feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment

Stress and depression are common by-products of cyber abuse among young student victims and existing research contains evidence that supports this information. For example, Ortega et al., (2009) conducted a study involving Spanish adolescent victims that had as its intent the identification of the emotional impact of victimization between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. One of their research findings suggested that stress and depression are common symptoms associated with cyber abuse.
Similarly studies conducted by Ybarra in 2004 and Ybarra and Mitchell in 2004 also suggested that victims of cyber abuse experience depressive symptoms in correlation with the stress associated with victimization.

Embarrassment also has been identified within the literature as a common characteristic attributed to electronic bullying. For example, Spears et al., (2009) conducted a qualitative study in Australia among students who were cyber abuse victims. One significant finding from their research was that cyberbullying evoked strong negative feelings and emotions among this study’s victims. The negative emotions included embarrassment, unhappiness, sadness, and depression according to the researchers. Similarly Haber and Daley (2011) argue that the negative impact of cyberbullying is magnified as compared to the impact of traditional bullying because the larger audience allows for more people to know of the abuse resulting in higher levels of embarrassment among victims.

In contrast, to the overwhelming majority of studies in the literature that have identified embarrassment as a direct by-product of cyber abuse, the literature also does contain conflicting study results with regards to embarrassment. For instance, Ortega et al., (2009) in a study among pre-college level students found embarrassment not to be a significant aspect related to cyberbullying victimization.

Stress, depression, and embarrassment can be such powerful negative influences in a cyber abuse victims’ life that in some extreme cases some victims turn to thoughts of suicide, or to committing the actual act. In one such study, Kim, Koh, and Leventhal in 2005 examined over 1,700 Korean middle school students with the aim of identifying the prevalence of suicidal ideation as a result of bullying among victims, bullies, and victim-bullies. Results from this
inquiry indicated that suicide ideation is higher among respondents involved in bullying in some way.

The findings from this IPA study support those within the literature that suggest that stress, depression, and embarrassment are very common by-products of cyber abuse among students. Each of the participants taking part in this project indicated that they felt significant amounts of stress during their period of victimization. Empirical research has linked the stress associated with abuse to be the result of ridicule from victim peers who knew of their abuse, their inability to stop the abuse, and in not knowing the long-term repercussions of the abuse that was taken against them.

Participants taking part in this IPA study also indicated depression as a response to their victimization. While the basis of their depression seems to be similar in basis to the reasons that they felt stressed, participants indicated that they felt depressed because they knew the cyberbully and they felt they had no escape form him or her. Furthermore, for some participants, depression was also based in the fact that they felt that authorities such as the local police did not take their complaints of abuse seriously and that they were unsure how long the abuse would last. Essentially initial frustration turned to short term depression for some taking part in this research.

Embarrassment too was identified as a common by-product among the participants involved in this study. Participants indicated that they felt embarrassed in confronting their peers at school who knew of their abuse, embarrassed because they had to tell their spouse or significant other about the instances of abuse taking place against them, and embarrassed because they felt that they rushed into intimate relations with a person who later turned out to be their cyberbully.
My analysis of the data from this IPA study also led to my conclusion that the stress, depression, and embarrassment indicated by participants taking part in this research align with the defining elements of the general strain theory. All three emotions were identified as the participant’s reaction to their confrontation with negative stimuli. While cyberbullying served as the negative stimulus presenting the confrontation to the victim, their response to the confrontation involved strong emotions such as feelings of stress, depression, and embarrassment.

This finding is significant because it illustrates the psychological impact of cyberbullying among higher education students. It identifies with and supports the findings of earlier researchers among younger adolescents in that stress, depression, and embarrassment are direct by-products of cyber abuse. As with earlier studies, this IPA study has found that the negative psychological characteristics of abuse interfere with the personal, social, and academic aspects of the student victim’s life.

The implications of this finding are important to the educational community because it shows that college students are equally traumatized by cyber abuse in a manner similar to their younger peers. This information is crucial to educational leaders because it serves as baseline information from which leaders can put in place preventative training courses, and outreach counseling services to help students deal with their abuse. For example, periodic required sensitivity training for the entire college community should be a first step in educating the community at large of the causes, effects, and consequences of cyberbullying. In addition, outreach counselors trained specifically in the impact of cyber abuse should be required personnel on campus and available to all students and staff at all times.
**Frustration leading to self-blame**

Scientific examination of the construct of cyberbullying has found that among student victims of cyber abuse, feelings of frustration very often lead to self-blame. For example, Patchin and Hinduja in a 2006 study among young adolescent students found that frustration was a direct by-product of cyber abuse and was experienced by the majority of subjects taking part in their study. Furthermore, this research has identified that the frustration the victims experienced was due to the anonymity of the victim.

Bauman and Pero conducted a quantitative study in 2011 among 30 deaf students in a high school for students with this type of disability. This project had as its goal the identification of whether frustration resulting from cyberbullying led to self-blame among victims. Results of their research have suggested a direct correlation between the frustration associated with cyber abuse and feelings of self-blame among victims.

Findings among the participants taking part in this IPA study have identified that feelings of frustration as a result of cyberbullying are indeed common among victims within the higher educational domain. Furthermore this finding supports those of similar types of studies in the literature involving younger students.

However, participants in this study identified that the frustration they felt was not based in the anonymity of the cyberbully, but instead with not knowing whom to initially contact within the college for assistance in helping them with their abuse. Furthermore, participants also identified frustration with law enforcement in the local community because they felt that law enforcement personnel did not take their complaint and abuse seriously, and that they did nothing to help mitigate the abuse.
This finding has implications for the educational community because it identifies that college victims of cyber abuse very often internalize the abuse and feelings they experience placing the blame on themselves instead of where it properly belongs, on the cyberbully. Internalization of this type of abuse and the subsequent self-blaming does lead some victims to physical and psychological impairment, and in some extreme cases leads to thoughts of suicide and to committing the act of suicide itself (Hirst, 2010).

This finding also has implications outside of the higher educational domain in that it vividly portrays the how limited knowledge and understanding that outside agencies have with respect to this new form of harassment. Several of the participants taking part in this IPA study described the absolute frustration they felt when law enforcement officials did not take their complaint of the criminal actions being taken against them in a serious manner. Instead of showing compassion and concern for the victims, the local law enforcement community offered no assistance and laughed at the victims furthering intensifying the negative emotions and feelings of isolation the victims were already experiencing. As such, education is again the key response to solving this issue. Law enforcement at all jurisdictions need to be trained on the makeup of this new criminal activity. Moreover, they need to be trained on how this abuse manifests in the subjects they are sworn to protect. It is only after this educational process takes place that police officers will be in a position to better serve the public with respect to this new type of crime.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

Technology continues to flourish and radically provide convenience, entertainment, and many other positive benefits to mankind. It seems that not one aspect of how we live, work, recreate, and learn has remained untouched by the continued advances in hardware, software
technologies, and the countless new and more powerful communications devices that are so prevalent in the world today.

However, along with all the positive benefits that people have derived from the continued advancement of technology, there is a dark and often time’s mysterious behavior attributed to digital advancement, that being the deviant use of technology or cyberbullying. Among middle and high school students this problem of practice is widespread and research has shown that many victims experience a full range of negative psychological and emotional consequences from such abuse (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nicols, & Storch, 2009; Mesch, 2009).

Therefore, it was the intent of this IPA study to explore the affects of cyberbullying among college students, specifically looking at the lived experiences of victims, the psychological impact attributed to the abuse taken against them, and the meaning that victims gave of their experiences. Based upon the findings of this IPA study, the following implications and suggestions are offered to three distinct factions within the higher education domain: administration, faculty, and students.

First, the findings are significant to higher education administrators because they show that cyber abuse is not just a problem of practice that occurs among middle and high school aged students, and then disappears once a student goes to college. Instead they indicate that this problem is potentially widespread among collegiate students, and that abuse does lead to very real issues of psychological and emotional trauma among them. Furthermore, it points out that abuse may have a detrimental affect on the academic performance of students and also interfere with their safety. Abuse also interferes with a student’s normal participation in the social aspects of college life.
Armed with this new information, higher educational administrators should create functional policies for their institutions that pertain specifically to the problem of electronic bullying. For example, administrators should create a policy that clearly defines the problem of cyberbullying, describes the actions the university will take to identify students conducting cyberbullying behavior within their jurisdiction, and the consequences and the sanctions the school will levy against those who violate the policy.

From the information offered as a result of this study, college and university administrations should actively establish counseling offices and crisis centers on campus where students can go to seek confidential guidance and assistance in response to their victimization. In addition, these centers should be staffed by highly qualified, compassionate personnel that can immediately assist the student victim in restoring security to their lives and to help them once again pursue their academic aspirations without the negative distraction of cyber abuse.

College administrators should put in place an outreach program specific to the problem of cyberbullying. Establishment of an outreach program will serve to make students aware of the assistance that is available to them. This can be accomplished through the use of information booths at various locations on campus; as a notification on the college website, and at campus events specifically aimed at increasing student awareness of the help available to them as victims of cyberbullying.

Lastly, from the information presented as a result of this IPA study, higher educational administrators should develop mandatory sensitivity workshops and training seminars with attendance required for all administrators, faculty, students, and staff of the college. Education is by far the best solution to this problem of practice because everyone connected to the school needs to know why this problem occurs, the affects this problem may have on them, and what is
being done at the university level to control or stop its spread. Education will also help alleviate some of the fears and the negative impact that student victims often experience from this abuse. A proactive approach to the problem of electronic abuse will go a long way in mitigating some of the negative emotional and psychological feelings that their student victims are experiencing and contribute to a safer school environment.

Second, the findings of this IPA study are significant to faculty members within colleges and universities. As an often first line of defense to abuse taking place within the classroom, faculty members need to know what their responsibilities are and how they can best help the student undergoing abuse. By so doing, colleges and universities will better serve their student victims in alleviating the frustration they experience not only from the abuse itself, but in not knowing who to turn to for help within the school system.

As highly trained research professionals, faculty members are uniquely suited for further exploration and examination of the overall impact of cyber abuse among students. As such, faculty members should take a proactive approach to cyberbullying by engaging in further empirical research of this construct among students in higher education. They should take an active part in researching how this phenomenon manifests itself among different groups of students such as gay students, students of different race, and students with various physical and mental disabilities.

Comparative exploration of the impact and affect of cyber abuse is also warranted among students who live on campus against those who commute to and from the campus from home. For example, research should be conducted to determine if student responses are different among students who live on campus versus those who travel from home to school and back. Studies that examine the differences, if any, between these two subsets of students would add valuable
information to the literature and also help higher educational leaders in understanding this problem more completely and in producing functional policies against such abuse.

A limitation of this study exists in that participants volunteering to take part in it were not of traditional college age. All of the participants in this study were over thirty years of age and did not attend college immediately after graduation from high school. As such, their experiences represent those of adult students instead of those of older adolescents. Therefore, it is prudent that future explorations of cyber abuse be conducted among older adolescent college students in an effort to determine the affect and impact of victimization among them.

**Limitations of this Study**

While this study has offered important information to the database of contemporary literature, several limitations do exist. One such limitation is that younger college students, those in their late teenage years or earlier twenties are not represented in this study. This limitation is beyond the control of this researcher since students in this age group did not come forward and volunteer to be part of this research. A second limitation of this study is that only one male participant took part in this study, again this factor is beyond the control of this researcher. A third and final limitation of this study is that as community college students, all of the participants taking part in this research are commuter students or those that do not live on the college campus. It is possible that the impact and meanings given by participants might be different among students who reside on campuses.

Lastly, a limitation of this study is that it did not contain students of color, any gay students, or students with visible handicaps. The limitation exists in that it is possible that students of color, those handicapped in some physical way, or those that are gay may experience abuse in a different manner than other students.
Opportunities for Future Research

There exist several opportunities for future research along the lines of this study. For example, an IPA study should be conducted that involves students who reside on college campuses in an effort to identify how, if in any way, the impact and meanings given may differ. A second IPA study for future research must also be conducted among college faculty members in an effort to explore their experiences with cyberbullying. An IPA study should also be conducted among college staff members to explore what affect cyberbullying has on non-administration and non-faculty members of the campus community.

Lastly, a similar IPA study should be conducted that explores the lived experiences and the psychological impact of victimization among higher education students of different color, race, and sexual orientation. Such a study might work to reveal what, if any, unique findings exist among this specific subset of students. Future studies should also be undertaken that explore the prevalence and impact of cyber abuse among students with various handicaps in an effort to identify how abuse uniquely affects them as higher education students.

Conclusion

This study has been significant because it has identified six themes or key findings that will add to the literature and knowledge as to the impact of cyberbullying among college students. This study has successfully and definitively identified that that abuse victims in higher education experience a host of negative repercussions related to repeated instances of abuse. Furthermore, it has also identified that as a result of repeated abuse, victims often experience feelings related to fear, stress, depression, embarrassment, a distrust of technology and people in general, and frustration. Ironically, this study has also identified one positive aspect related to
cyber abuse among college students, and that is that friends play a significant role in the coping mechanisms of these students.

While research on cyberbullying among college students is growing, new directions on the nature of the research is warranted. For instance, studies on prevalence, and the different methods employed by the bully to abuse their victims, should be redirected to involve research focused upon the impact of victimization among victims. Also, redirection should focus on studies that identify ways to mitigate the abuse among victims.

Future studies should also be focused on subsets of the college student population within a university since abuse, and individual student reaction to such abuse, may differ among these groups. For example, studies should be undertaken among students of a different race, and among students of different ethnic origins to determine if, and how, the affects of cyber abuse differ among these groups as compared to white students. Future studies should also be conducted among gay and lesbian students as their lived experiences and psychological impact may differ than that of other subsets of people.

Future studies are also warranted among students residing on the college campus versus students who commute to determine if residency has an impact on their lived experiences and psychological well-being.

Lastly, studies on this construct should be conducted exclusively among all male students and also on all female students to explore the uniqueness of their lived experiences psychological reaction to this type of abuse. The scientific inquiry into this problem of practice among all of these subset groups of students is necessary and should be conducted so that university leadership and faculty have a better understanding of how this problem uniquely affects various subcultures of the total university population.
Appendix A: Bandura’s Triadic Model of Reciprocal Determinism

Bandura’s Triadic Model of Reciprocal Determinism

Overt Behavior

Environmental Influences

(Anderson & Sturm, 2007; Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008).

Personal Factors

(beliefs, expectations, self-perceptions)
Appendix B

Cyberbullying: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences and Psychological Impact of Victimization among College Students

An Intrepretive Phenomenological Analysis

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Jack Rivituso and I am a doctoral student in Education at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies.

My reason for writing to you is that I will be conducting a qualitative research study on the lived experiences and psychological impact of cyberbullying among college students. As part of my research, I have been in contact with the Vice President of Student Affairs at Schenectady County Community College, and I have asked for her assistance in identifying voluntary participants with whom she has knowledge of having been victimized by cyberbullying while students at this college, and possibly willing to be interviewed for this research. In response to my request, the Vice President has forwarded to me you email address so that I could make initial contact with you regarding your potential participation.

Please know that you are in no way obligated to take part in this research project. However, should you agree to take part in it, please know that all information you give to me during the interviews will be kept in the strictest of confidence, with such information being destroyed at the completion of this study. Furthermore, your name will not appear anywhere in the publication of this research dissertation. Also know that you may stop the interview process completely at any time, and you may also refuse to answer any question asked during the interviews.

Your voluntary participation in this study will contribute to a better understanding of how cyberbullying activities impact college students. In addition, you will be given a $15.00 dollar gift certificate to Dunkin Donuts as a token of my appreciation for your part in this research.

Please contact me either by email: rivituso.g@husky.neu.edu, or by phone at: 518-986-3537 so that we can discuss your potential participation further and possibly arrange for interview times and dates.

Respectfully,

Jack Rivituso

[Stamp: APPROVED]

[Stamp: 11/02/25]

[Stamp: 11/01/11]

[Stamp: 11/01/11]
Appendix C Unsigned Consent Document – Northeastern University

Northeastern University, Department of: College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Joseph McNabb, Principal Investigator; Giacomo Rivituso, Student Researcher.

Title of Project: Cyberbullying: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences and the Psychological Impact of Victimization among College Students - An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Request to Participate in Research

We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to explore cyberbullying among higher education students.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project.

The study will take place at a location comfortable to you (e.g. campus library, conference room, café) and will take about 90 minutes per interview. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to take part in two, possibly three, separate interviews about your individual experience(s) with cyberbullying. The interviews will be audio-taped for transcription and analysis purposes only.

The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable answering some questions. If you do, you can skip these questions or refuse to answer. If you feel upset recalling past experiences or memories, the interview can be stopped.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about how this form of bullying has impacted college students.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will not identify you or any individual as being of this project. All audio-tapes will be destroyed following transcription and analysis.

The decision to participate in this research project is up to you. You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

As a token of my appreciation for your participation in this research, you will receive a $15 gift certificate to Dunkin Donuts.

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to call Giacomo Rivituso – 518-986-3537, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Joseph McNabb, the Principal Investigator at j.mcnabb@neu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Giacomo Rivituso
Appendix D – Primary Interview Questions

**Primary Questions for the First Interviews**

It is important for a researcher using an interpretive phenomenological analysis to learn as much as possible of the participant’s life background in context. In light of that, the following questions are aimed to that objective. Thank you again for your cooperation and for taking part in this series of three (3) separate interviews.

- Would you please tell me about your family experiences?
- How would you describe your experiences in elementary, middle and high school?
- How would you describe your experiences in college?
- Would you please tell me about your current job as well as your working experiences?
- How would you describe your experiences with the significant others in your life?
- Would you please tell me about your experiences with your parents and siblings?
- How would you describe your relationship with your coworkers or other students?
- How would you describe your experiences with your children?

**Primary Questions for the Second Interviews**

The second interviews have as their focus the details of the participant’s present lived experience as a victim of cyberbullying. Here the researcher is looking for a detailed account or story of the victim’s experience with cyberbullying.

- Would you please tell me how, or in what manner, you were cyberbullied?
- Would you please explain the frequency and number of times you were cyberbullied?
- How did being cyberbullied make you feel in general?
- What physical impact have you experienced as a victim of cyberbullying?
- What psychological impact have you experienced as a victim of cyberbullying?
- How has being a victim impacted your relationship with your family?
- How has being a victim impacted your relationship with your significant other?
- What impact has being a victim had on your relationship with friends?
What impact has being a victim had on your professional or work life?

How did you respond when the instances of cyberbullying against you took place?

**Primary Questions for the Third Interviews**

The third set of interview questions seek to elicit from the participants the meaning that the cyberbullying experience has for them. Participant reflection on the experience(s) is encouraged along the perspective of how various influences, past and present, have interacted and led them to this situation and meaning.

How would you interpret the meaning of your experiences as a victim cyberbullying?

How have influences such as family influenced the meaning you gave of your experiences?

How have influences such as friends and other social relationships influenced the meaning you gave of your experiences?

How have influences from your environment influenced the meaning you gave of your experiences?

How have these same influences directed your response to cyberbullying incidents?

What control do you feel you had when you experienced incidences of cyberbullying?

How has the stress and strain of these incidences impacted you, and your ability to live and work in your normal capacity?

How would you characterize your level of compose or control you has as a result of your victimization? Do you feel that you were able to handle the situation and continue to function normally?

How would you characterize your self-esteem?

How would you say that victimization has affected your self-esteem?

What other influences, past or present, would you say have influenced the meaning you give to your experiences as a victim of cyberbullying, and to your response to such victimization?
Lists of Mental Health Services in Schenectady County and New York State

In Schenectady:

Ellis Hospital Mental Health, 216 Lafayette St, Schenectady, NY 12305
(518) 386-3300

Community Mental Health Team, 650 Franklin St, Schenectady, NY 12305
(518) 370-5113

In New York State:

New York State Office of Mental Health
44 Holland Avenue
Albany, New York 12229
1-800-597-8481 (A toll free resource for questions or complaints about mental health services in New York State.)
http://www.omh.state.ny.us/
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Intermediate Students in the Midwestern USA. *School Psychology International*, 21(65), 65-78.


http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=11433


  www.pewinternet.org/Presentations/2010/May/Cyberbullying-2010.aspx


