CYBERBULLYING AND GENDER: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF HOW MIDDLE
SCHOOL GIRLS EXPERIENCE CYBERBULLYING

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Abstract

Studies suggest that girls are more at risk than boys to experience cyberbullying due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). Those who are targeted are more likely to experience a variety of repercussions inclusive of anger, social anxiety, despair, higher levels of depression, suicidal ideation, lower self-esteem, headaches, academic problems, drug and alcohol addiction, pedagogical problems for teachers, and higher rates of absenteeism (Brandau & Evanson, 2018; DePaolis & Williford 2014; Eden; Kowalski & Limber, 2012; Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, Larrañaga & Yubero, 2013; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). In this study, key middle school personnel were interviewed to better understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. The data gathered yielded three significant themes: 1. The vulnerability of girls was amplified through cyberbullying; 2. The post-cyberbullying experiences of girls were significant; and 3. The post-cyberbullying experiences of the adults involved were salient. One of the more unexpected findings to emerge in this study was the significant amount of time and frustration indicated by the school-based personnel to resolve and counsel those impacted by cyberbullying. This research was relevant to the type of understanding needed not only in the cyberbullying literature, but its implications for school and district-based personnel who have a vested stake in the health and well-being of all students. Cyberbullying’s importance was embedded in its negative impact on the academic, social, and psychological effects it has upon those victimized.

Keywords: cyberbullying, bullying, middle school girls, cyberfeminist, lifestyle-routine activities theory, technology, Internet, online, victim, social media, disinhibition, anonymous, negative impact of cyberbullying, school-based personnel
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Approximately 10% to 50% of adolescents have experienced the challenges, fallout, and emotional turmoil associated with cyberbullying, a phenomenon that has become a pervasive health issue (Brandau & Evanson, 2018). Too often, cyberbullying is relegated as an extension of “traditional” bullying, a type of bullying confined by face-to-face interactions, geographic location and constituted without some of the more prominent features of cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Although there are shared characteristics between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, cyberbullying is manifested in a wider range of venues and audiences, as it is not confined by location, and can potentially have a far-reaching impact with the use of social media. Thus, scholars have postulated that there are “significant qualitative differences” (Lee, Hong, Resko, & Tripodi, 2017, p. 13) between the experiences of the perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying and bullying.

Despite its somewhat recent emergence, the effects of cyberbullying are recognized as a serious public health problem (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic, & Salame, 2015; Brandau & Evanson, 2018) distinctly illustrated by higher rates of low self-worth, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, low academic achievement, anger, social anxiety, despair, lowered self-esteem, headaches, school avoidance (Payne & Hutzell, 2017), drug and alcohol addiction, pedagogical problems for teachers, and higher rates of absenteeism (Aboujaoude, 2015; DePaolis & Williford 2014; Eden, Heiman, & Olenick-Shemesh, 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2012; Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, Larrañaga & Yubero, 2013; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).

In addition to the emotional and psychological affliction felt, victims also fall prey to suicidal thoughts and self-harm (Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Wolke & Lereya, 2015; Zych, Farrington, & Ttofi, 2019). Boys who have experienced bullying are 10% more likely to
experience suicidal thoughts, while girls are 20% more likely to experience suicidal thoughts. It cannot be said that bullying or cyberbullying causes suicide, (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c) however, exposure to being bullied or those who bully others are at an increased risk for not only suicidal thoughts, but attempts and completed suicides (Bananno & Hymel, 2013; Baldry & Winkel, 2004). Of note is a Chinese study recently conducted by Han, Fu, Liu, and Guo (2018) that found that strong teacher-student relationships did not mitigate an elevated risk for suicide ideation amongst adolescents.

The serious nature of cyberbullying, underscored by instances of persistent violence and aggression, conceals a major factor for those who wish to study the phenomenon: many studies lump both genders together making it difficult to determine whether boys or girls are more at risk (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Nixon, 2014). This study focused on the cyberbullying experience of girls as understood by key school personnel, specifically counselors and administrators. Studies that do investigate gender have found that girls are more at risk than boys and that gender is a risk factor of whether one experiences cyberbullying (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Researchers have contended that there are two main reasons why girls are more at risk: a) girls and boys engage in very different online activities and b) girls are more at risk due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying in New York State has been well-documented stemming from a New York State special legislation named the Dignity for All Students Act or DASA. This study will focus on middle school girls who attend a suburban public school in New York State. Regardless of what school one attends in New York, the district and school are mandated to implement DASA and report on DASA infractions. The principal of the school
offered the school as a place of consideration for this study, as the school has experienced a number of documented cyberbullying incidences.

**Research Problem Statement**

The proliferation of mobile devices and unfettered access to technology in the hands of students starting in elementary school has atomized the traditional barriers of communication (Kowalski et al., 2019). Students therefore are quite adept at freely communicating with personal technological devices and apps beyond the walls of both school and home. Unfortunately, some of the communication is intended to inflict harm, often creating an imbalance of power between the perpetrator (if the identity is known) and the target. The impact on the lives of some students who have experienced cyberbullying is undeniable and has captured the attention of parents, educators, and elected officials. Further, cyberbullying behavior can potentially be generated from literally anyone; from strangers to Internet Trolls to one’s best friend.

The routines and activities (Cohen & Felson, 1979) of all students have been completely altered due to the access to technology. Face-to-face bullies may be deterred to target a fellow student if confronted with a capable guardian or bystanders. However, cyberbullying presents different challenges as capable guardians are not visibly present to the motivated offender. Instead, students with access to technology, may easily inflict harm upon suitable targets with a simple text message, a social media post, and/or an image. Complicating matters is the common usage of social media amongst teens, a factor that sets the stage for the potential of large audiences to participate and witness cyberbullying (Hicks, Jennings, Jennings, Berry, & Green, 2018).

The experiences of students, whether it takes place outside or within the school day, impact their ability to successfully navigate the school and, in many ways, has become the
purview of the school to monitor, provide counsel, investigate and change (Young, Tully, & Ramirez, 2017). In other words, an understanding of what lifestyle choices students are making is warranted due to the impact of the choices being made both inside and outside the school walls. The cyberbullying that may take place off school grounds maintains both an academic and social impact on students, thus a better and deeper understanding of their experience is justified.

Of particular concern is the notion that girls are disproportionately impacted as a result of simply being girls. Previous studies have lumped both genders together making it difficult to determine whether boys or girls are more at risk (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). According to scholars, the question of why girls are more at risk to have experienced cyberbullying has fallen into two categories: a) Their involvement in online activities is different than boys and/or; b) Girls are more at risk due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287).

Though gender is a protected class, girls are still targeted more than boys and more likely to be cyberbullied due to being girls (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Navarro & Jasinski, 2012). They may likewise be disproportionately affected in New York schools. For these reasons, this study examined the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls from the perspective of key school personnel at one middle school. Navarro and Jasinski (2013) have contended that many cyberbullying studies bypass the examination of a gendered perspective. This study has attempted to help fill that gap by examining the experiences of girls through the lens of a gendered perspective and their chosen leisure activities.

Milford (2015) has contended that the Internet for girls and women can be liberating rather than oppressive, or simultaneously both. This suggestion has warranted the exploration of the experiences of middle school girls to further our understanding of the dynamic relationship
between technology and gender. By deepening our understanding of this phenomenon, the
analysis of the experiences of middle school girls may in fact become a catalyst for not simply
how to prevent a traumatic experience, but rather to ignite a profound and nuanced
understanding of how the Internet and social media can become a source of empowerment and
liberation for girls rather than another entity that mimics the traditional gendered norms of
disempowerment and oppression.

To explore and better understand how girls have experienced cyberbullying, a middle
school in a suburban New York City community home to affluent families, middle class families,
and a growing population of Hispanic families (the latest census indicates that 77% of the town
is Caucasian and the median household income is over $100,000/year) has been chosen. The
district is a well-resourced district evidenced by providing students with access to technology
both at home and at school. The cyberbullying experience of boys was not studied, given the
sufficiency of cited research regarding girls. Previous research on gender victimization has been
conducted via the use of surveys and statistical instruments. The experiences of the girls will be
gathered by interviewing key school personnel such as counselors, psychologists, and
administrators who have been trusted with intimate portrayals of girls being cyberbullied.

Despite the fact of much discussion and analysis on the phenomenon of cyberbullying
and its effects, there is a paucity of research-based studies on how middle school girls have
actually experienced cyberbullying as well as a dearth of studies that have employed a gender-
based perspective. By focusing on the experiences of middle school girls through the
perspectives of school-based personnel, this study aimed to fill the gap that exists regarding the
use of a gendered perspective to understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls.

Significance of the Research
The findings from this study presented a better understanding how middle school girls experienced cyberbullying based on the interviews of key school-based personnel. The key school-based personnel were provided first-hand and intimate knowledge regarding specific cyberbullying experiences. The perspectives of school-based personnel supported the uncovering of connections between the cyberbullying experiences and lifestyle choices, factors which led to new revelations of how girls perceived the connection of their online habits to being cyberbullied. Understanding the factors that contribute to girls being cyberbullied supported specific and targeted anti-cyberbullying initiatives and policies. Eradication of cyberbullying is most likely not possible. However tailor-made initiatives may help to curtail cyberbullying rates and the cascade of emotional and academic problems that follow (Park, Eun-Yeong, Eun-mee, 2014).

How girls described their cyberbullying experiences with school-based personnel offered clues into timelines, where and how the incidences start (school or off school grounds) and if the experiences were ignited by using technology and then subsequently cascade into face-to-face environments or vice versa. Of particular concern is how girls described the emotional impact of being cyberbullied. Carvalho and Branquinho (2019) reported that girls have higher rates of being victims of cyberbullying compared to boys. Girls also reported (more so than boys) a greater degree of fear and sadness (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019; Kowalski et al., 2019). How school personnel approached and helped to resolve a cyberbullying experience may in some part be due to their understanding of how cyber-victimization impacts girls differently compared to boys. Complicating the cyber-victim and cyber-perpetrator dynamic is Park et al. (2014) who have delineated how cyberbullied victims may in turn retaliate, making them a victim in one situation and a perpetrator another. The roles may be interchangeable both from one situation to
the next or even in the same string of incidences. These factors have further complicated the phenomenon of cyberbullying, how those incidences are reported to school-based personnel, and thus how they are resolved.

As indicated, girls are more at risk to experience cyberbullying (Carvalho and Branquinho, 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). This study aimed to discover the types of conversations or incidences being shared with school-based personnel that lead to girls being cyberbullied. An assumption may exist that girls who are being cyberbullied are engaged in inappropriate activities via texting and social media, yet researchers have suggested that very innocent and age-appropriate Internet searching may increase one’s chances of being cyberbullied (Navarro & Jasinski, 2012).

Not all cyberbullying encounters experienced by girls results in emotional and academic turmoil. As a point of conjecture, girls who have been cyberbullied may have a built-in inner resilience or coping mechanism that help to offset the intended harm. In fact, Zych, Farrington, Llorent, Vicente and Ttofi (2017) reported that competence with social-emotional skills and empathy work as protective factors, where students not equipped with these skills are more at risk to have experienced cyberbullying. If so, the discovery of the deployed and perceived coping mechanism may support educators and parents in anti-cyberbullying curriculum development. Other protective factors, such as parenting, may serve as a deterrent to cyberbullying (Zych et al., 2019). This notion impacts how the school may generate relevant and targeted workshops for teachers, students, and parents.

How girls describe the resolution of the cyberbullying incident to the school-based personnel provided insight into not only their own coping skills, but also the level of involvement from both the school and their parents. Other important factors via this question
includes the conversation (if any) that took place between both the target and offender; the presence of an intermediary; the length of time it took to resolve the incident; as well as the influence or absence of other parties involved in the incident.

This study discovered not only the experiences of girls, as reported by girls to key school-based personnel, but also unearthed undercurrents of empowerment by finding ways in which girls can express who they are. Milford (2015) affirmed that research from the “ground up” allows for greater online agency and gender awareness. The ability of girls to self-express themselves online may be simultaneously liberating and expose them to vulnerability, yet a better understanding via the key school personnel charged with counseling and investigating cyberbullying cases was warranted with the hope of yielding insights into the cyberbullying experiences of girls.

In conclusion, new apps and technology are frequently introduced and identified by tech-savvy students. The robust and ever-changing market for social media apps and mobile devices deeply impacts how one may experience cyberbullying. As the market for technology grows with more intensity, the need for all stakeholders to become better educated on how students become embedded and networked in online environments is warranted and essential.

**Positionality Statement**

This researcher has worked in elementary education for the better part of twenty years in both a diverse section of New York City as well as a diverse county in the suburbs of New York City. A majority of these years have been dedicated to teaching many subjects, inclusive of recently becoming a school administrator. It has only been in the last three to five years that teachers and administrators have had to navigate significant incidences involving students and their phones. One particular case reported to me from an administrator at a small urban
elementary school spoke about 5th grade boys reportedly using their phones to show pornographic videos to 5th grade girls and stated that “This is what we would like to do to you.” This incident took place during lunch and was appropriately handled by the administration, yet the incident portrays a type of cyberbullying being used toward the disempowerment of young girls. This incident and others demonstrated the aggressive behavior directed at girls via the use of technology.

Further, this researcher is a White, middle-class male born and raised in the suburbs of Philadelphia. The middle-class sentiments regarding what school looks and feels like have been transformed over the last decade and a half due to my teaching experience. Though multiple occasions of examining how White privilege impacts both minorities and women, it is still a reality and a reality for which must be accounted. It was important for this researcher to be aware of the symbolism of power and authority attributed to White males and not exploit the imbalance of power embedded within traditional gender hierarchies. Minimizing the inherent imbalance of power and privilege, I leveraged professional insight and many years of experience with educational colleagues. One of those leverage points consisted of understanding that though I cannot change the fact that I am White and male, I can actively disrupt and distance myself from whiteness and white supremacist tendencies. In practice, this researcher takes active and overt measures to decenter my own voice, while centering the voices and narratives of those with less privilege.

Additionally, the professional insight and experience has in the past led to fruitful and natural conversations with colleagues of many different ethnic backgrounds. The connections made with colleagues over the years is most certainly attributed to the asking of questions, driven by an authentic curiosity to get to know students and adults for who they are. This ability has
organically evolved over the years to the point where it is fine-tuned and a valuable part of what it means to be a school administrator. The capacity to converse with adults was utilized to speak with counselors and fellow administrators to garner a better understanding of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls.

As a White male in authority speaking with counselors and administrators about girls being cyberbullied automatically positioned the relationship as unequal with a disproportionate amount of power allocated toward this researcher. Due to the awareness of the unequal distribution of perceived power within the relationship, it was incumbent upon this researcher to leverage friendly non-verbal and verbal cues to signal to the participants that our conversations were both safe and anonymous as well as demonstrated a sense of authentic trustworthiness.

This researcher was keenly aware of self-made biases and assumptions of how I would want my own son to occupy his time with technology might be very different from that of other families. Similarly, if family values were in line with that of my own, I was cautious not to favor or show bias in any way toward these families. For example, I had (and still have) grave concerns about the amount of screen time children experience. The concern stems from the findings of a study that claims increased screen time for pre-teens impairs their ability to read facial expressions and nonverbal cues which have a dramatic impact on how children interact with others (Uhls, Michikyan, Morris, Garcia, Small, Zgourou, & Greenfield, 2014). The ability to read facial expressions has been directly related to how emotionally in tune we are with another individual, which also has implications for a child’s reading comprehension level, empathy, and how well they can take the perspective of fictional characters (Johnston, 2012).

An aspect that this study did not cover is the concept of teachers bullying students, which is something I related to during my fourth-grade year. There was a particular teacher (now
deceased) who had a habit of poking her finger in the back of my head during math class. This action on her part was not to correct my behavior (I rarely misbehaved in school) but to rather force me to focus on math problems that I did not understand. I can recall holding back tears and uncomfortably swallowing the shame of not being able to complete the math problems as my classmates looked on, trembling in fear and hoping that they would not catch the ire of Mrs. Smith. In some ways, this account scarred my educational experience with math for years to come. It wasn’t until college that I found my educational footing and a love for learning.

Due to this experience and my complete awareness of it, it was incumbent upon me to not automatically side with the children who were cyberbullied; that the perpetrator in one way or another was also experiencing a type of internal pain. The acknowledgement of my possible automatic siding with the victim supported the widening of my own aperture. The widening supported my understanding of a cyberbullying interaction as dynamic and complex.

**Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls as understood by six school administrators and counselors in a mid-sized, suburban school located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Research questions:

1. How do girls describe their cyberbullying experiences based on the perceptions of school-based personnel?
2. What online activities made girls more vulnerable to cyberbullying based on the perceptions of school-based personnel?
3. What is the role of protective factors based on the perceptions of school-based personnel?
4. How were the cyberbullying girls' experiences resolved based on the perceptions of school-based personnel?

**Definition of Terms**

**Bully:** A traditional schoolyard bully is a student who wishes to repeatedly inflict harm on another student in a face-to-face scenario. Harm to another student can be taunting, teasing, name-calling, pushing, kicking, spitting, rumor spreading, and out casting. A bully often exploits an imbalance of power by being bigger, smarter, or funnier than other children (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

**Bullied/Victim:** Once one is the recipient of bullying behavior, they are a victim of another student’s desire to repeatedly inflict harm. Victims of bullying and cyberbullying do or do not necessarily show signs of being bullied most likely to certain protective factors in their lives.

**Bullying:** Bullying can be described as “bullied or victimized, when he/she is exposed repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (Olweus, 1993, p. 8). Olweus further characterized bullying by stating that it is “aggressive behavior or intentional harm doing, which is carried out repeatedly, and over time, in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power” (1993, p. 9).

**Cyberbully:** An individual who bullies using any kind of technology that allows them to communicate with others. A cyberbully uses the technology to repeatedly inflict harm at times using the cover of technology to remain anonymous and disinhibited (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

**Cyberbullying:** Cyberbullying is the repeated harm inflicted on individuals through the use of any technological device. Cyberbullying can be defined as having intent to harm, that the action is repeated, and that an imbalance of power is utilized. Often-times an imbalance of power is
represented by a student’s ability to anonymously communicate online (Olweus, 1993; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a).

**Cyberfeminisms:** Cyberfeminisms is the theoretical framework used in this study to help understand the phenomenon that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied than boys (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). Cyberfeminisms helps to explain the Internet as a site of oppression (cyberdystopian) rather than liberation (cybertopian).

**Cybertopian:** A view within cyberfeminisms that the Internet is a site of liberation and for girls and women to freely express themselves (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).

**Cyberdystopian:** This is the counter view of cybertopianism which claims that the Internet is a site of oppression and marginalization for girls and women (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).

**DASA:** New York State’s Dignity for All Students Act (The Dignity Act) “seeks to provide the state’s public elementary and secondary school students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying on school property, a school bus and/or at a school function” (NYSED, 2013).

**Disinhibition:** Students who are online experience disinhibition, which means that students are much more likely to say and do things online that they would not do face-to-face (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

**Empowerment:** The integration of an internal change (psychological) and an external change (political). Both internal and external empowerment is a change process where an individual realizes their potential to make their own decisions and goals; whereas external empowerment is the implementation of practical knowledge gained (Sadan, 2004).

**Middle School Girls:** Girls who attend school in grades six, seven, eight.

**Perpetrator:** A perpetrator is another name designating someone who bullies.
**Protective Factors:** Davidson and Demaray (2007) stated that protective factors are often taught by parents and can include characteristics such as cooperation and a willingness to help others.

**Target:** A target is a term that can be used interchangeably with bullied or victim.

**Technology:** Any device (mobile or otherwise) that allows for communication or access to information.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that follows informed how the phenomenon of cyberbullying amongst girls was explored. The focus on the cyberbullying experience of girls warranted the utilization of two frameworks: lifestyle-routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) and cyberfeminisms. The hybridization of the two frameworks within this study ensured that the perspectives of the female victims were thoroughly honored and analyzed within the parameters and facets offered by lifestyle-routine activities theory.

To address the embeddedness of technology in the lives of children and adolescents, the proposed framework for this study was lifestyle-routine activities theory, which has been suggested to hold much promise when investigating cyberbullying (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). The theoretical framing of lifestyle-routine activities theory accounted for the increased use of technology and the fact that it is embedded into the everyday routines and behavior of many students. The more technology that is used, the more likely students will experience some form of cyberbullying (Beran & Li, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010). The intentional incorporation of cyberfeminisms addressed the evidence that gender is a risk factor and that girls are more at risk than boys to experience cyberbullying due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). Although it is important to note that when boys and girls engage in similar, risky behavior online, girls are
more likely to experience cyberbullying (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).

**Lifestyle-routine activities theory.** Routine activities theory was first developed in 1979 by Cohen and Felson and has been commonly referred to as the “chemistry for crime” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). The theory was developed simultaneously with Hindelang, Gottfredson, and Garofalo's (1978) life-exposure theory, which suggested that an individual's daily activities, such as vocational and leisure activities, play a major role in contributing to an increased chance of being victimized. Cohen and Felson (1979) built upon Hindelang et al. (1979) and developed three main characteristics which helped to determine the likelihood of whether or not a crime will occur. In a situation where there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of a capable guardian, a crime is likely to occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Marcum (2009) contended that crime is not simply random, but rather a pattern developed by the convergence of the three main characteristics. The convergence of these three characteristics increases the odds of a crime occurring. Below, both offline and online examples of each characteristic are provided.

First, Marcum (2009) stated that the suitability of a target is increased if an individual has not taken precautions to safeguard themselves. An offline example might be as simple as a woman walking home after a late night of drinking in a neighborhood that lacks adequate lighting. The suitability of an online target could entail a person communicating on multiple platforms with individuals that she/he may or may not know or searching the Internet for content that is lewd or offensive. Choi’s study (2008) confirmed that risky online behavior increases one’s chance of becoming targeted and experiencing a cybercrime. An example of a cybercrime may entail the pilfering of one’s identity or online money scams.
The second characteristic necessary for a crime to occur is the lack of a competent guardian (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Parents working full-time jobs are not only unavailable to “watch” the house during regular work hours, which increases the probability of burglary; they may also not be physically available for their child arriving home after a day at school. The child, having access to technology, lacks a parental guardian to monitor their online activities, as well as technology to block unwanted messages and malware (Choi, 2008).

The third and final characteristic necessary for a crime to occur is the motivated offender (Cohen & Felson, 1979). The motivated offender therefore is given an opportunity based on the presence or absence of a capable guardian and the suitability of the target (Marcum, 2009). According to Cohen and Felson (1979) a crime will be more likely to occur when a motivated offender detects both a suitable target and the lack of capable guardian. As the use of free and accessible technology grows, so does its invisibility (Çetin, Yaman, & Peker, 2011) which means that the presence of a capable guardian may not have knowledge of the full range of activities experienced by their children due to the ease in which technology allows for the concealing of activities.

Lifestyle-routine activities theory has been shown to be efficacious in studies examining the online activities of young adults in pursuit of a dating partner. In a study of 16-22-year old’s, researchers used lifestyle-routine activities theory to investigate and analyze whether students who engaged in risky online behaviors were more likely to be victimized by cyberdating abuse. According to Ouystel, Ponnet and Walrave (2016), risky online behavior consists of “behaviors such as talking to strangers online or disclosing personal information” (p. 4). Further, the researchers predicted that the chances of experiencing cyber abuse as a victim may be higher for young people as they are frequently exposed to other motivated offenders through social
networking sites and having access to social media through smartphones, without the monitoring of guardians. Moreover, the access to unfettered technology and devices allows the motivated offender to contact the victim on a daily basis (Ouystel et al., 2016). Results of the study aligned quite well to what the theory predicts. The researchers discovered that “young people’s engagement in online risk behaviors is the most important predictor of becoming a victim of their partner’s digital controlling behavior” (p. 6).

Though lifestyle-routine activities theory has rarely been employed as a theoretical framework for cyberbullying (Navarro & Jasinski, 2012), its ability to predict the chances of a cybercrime (Choi, 2008) and cyberdating abuse (Ouystel et al., 2016) has been verified. Accordingly, the purpose of Navarro and Jasinski’s (2012) study was to assess the viability of the theory specifically for cyberbullying, as they were encouraged by the results of a Mesch’s (2009) findings, a model which predicted 23% of cyberbullying experiences. The dependent variable in this study was the likelihood of being cyberbullied. A survey ascertained whether the adolescents in the study had experienced one of the following things online: rumor spreading online about them; the posting of an embarrassing picture online without permission; the sending of a threatening e-mail, instant message, or text; someone taking a private e-mail, instant message, or text message you sent them and forwarding it to someone else.

Equally relevant to this study, Navarro and Jasinski (2012) discovered that adolescent females were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying compared to boys as well as the surprising finding that adolescents were more likely to experience cyberbullying while engaging in the research of harmless content. Despite the searching of harmless content, the authors proposed adding Internet research to the list of risky online behaviors. Even when searching for appropriate content, users are more at risk to communicate with others who may be motivated to
find suitable targets. Finally, Navarro and Jasinski (2012) found that despite the meteoric rise in popularity of social networking sites and applications, Instant Messaging placed students at a greater risk of being cyberbullied.

Though lifestyle-routine activities theory was developed almost forty years ago, its applicability and relevance to online victimization is warranted. Robust findings from various studies (Choi, 2008; Marcum, 2009; Mesch, 2009; Ouystel et al., 2016; Navarro & Jasinski, 2012) indicated that not only does lifestyle-routines activities theory have a place in cyberbullying studies, its usefulness as a theoretical framework is needed within the ever-changing and unpredictable world of Internet behaviors. It is therefore incumbent upon researchers and educators to build upon a framework with a predictive value which allows schools and districts to create relevant and efficacious anti-cyberbullying programs.

Of particular note to this study is the need of lifestyle-routine activities theory to be paired with a framework which explicitly takes on a gendered perspective. A gendered perspective is warranted to help explain why girls are more at risk than boys and to possibly explore the imbalance of power embedded between a suitable target (girls for the purposes of this study) and their perpetrator.

**Cyberfeminisms.** Cyberfeminisms is presented to address the evidence that gender is a risk factor (Dehue, 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2012) and that girls are more at risk than boys to experience cyberbullying (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019; Dehue et al., 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287) and not simply because the activities they engage in online are in a way riskier than that of boys. Although it is important to note that when boys and
girls engaged in similar, risky behavior online, girls are more likely to have experienced cyberbullying (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).

Cyberfeminisms first appeared in the scholarly literature in the early 1990s and since then, it has proved difficult to define given the lack of cohesion resulting from various agendas and conflicting perspectives from the ever-changing topography of digital culture (Milford, 2015; Paasonen, 2011). Daniels (2009) and Milford (2015) have both highlighted the belief that cyberfeminist studies might be better served if it were to be named cyberfeminisms, which is more inclusive of the diverse “theoretical and political stances that cyberfeminists occupy when engaging in discussions on gender and digital culture on technology” (Milford, 2015, p. 57). Both researchers have stated that there is a risk of missing the diverse and nuanced thought embedded within the connotation of cyberfeminisms as a singular and monolithic theory. However, a common thread of cyberfeminist theories and ideas is the proactive focus on the relationship between gender and technology.

To that end, cyberfeminisms can be referred to as a “range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan & Booth, 2002, p. 12, as cited in Daniels, 2009). Traditionally, cyberfeminists have split into two camps; one that claims that the Internet is a place of liberation (cybertopianists); the other contending that the Internet is yet another place of oppression (cyberdystopianists). Milford (2015), however, argued that a more nuanced perspective of cyberfeminisms is justified and contends that the Internet (and all of the technologies associated with communicating) is simultaneously a place of agency and constraint for girls. If change is to happen, societal norms will need to be adjusted to acknowledge the freedom allotted to all Internet users, even if it is problematic or uncomfortable for those who cling to patriarchal gender norms.
Thus, a more nuanced perspective is warranted to avoid blaming girls and women for problems (such as cyberbullying) they may encounter online. Girls and women who are victimized online are often blamed for their victimhood, their self-expression in other words is perceived as a threat to those who wish to maintain traditional gender hierarchies (Milford, 2015). Therefore, girls and women must be seen as having online agency and self-expression without the blame. What might seem like a risk associated with virtual self-expression, can be restructured to be viewed through the lens of a space for the manifestation of agency. Instead of seeing online spaces as restraining or liberating for girls and women, online spaces may simultaneously operationalize agency and also be a risk.

Application of Theory

Hindelang et al., (1978) life-exposure theory provided the building blocks for Lifestyle-routine activities theory which has suggested that an individual's daily activities, such as vocational and leisure activities, play a major role in contributing to an increased chance of being victimized. In a situation where there is a motivated offender, a suitable target, and a lack of a capable guardian, a crime is likely to occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Though cyberbullying victimization in middle school would rarely fall under the category of a crime, save for incidences that involved the sharing of nude or explicit images, the theory holds promise for this study given the emphasis upon the leisure activity of online communication leading to victimization.

The avid and popular use of cellphones amongst middle school students to connect with one another (Martin, Wang, Petty, Wang, & Wilkins, 2018) has allowed for the conditions to be set for girls to be targeted by offenders eager to cause harm in the absence of parents curating every moment of their child’s digital life. In one study, 40% of middle school students reported
that their parents did not monitor their device usage (Martin et al., 2018). In essence, many middle school students are connected and unmonitored through a variety of platforms and social media sites, factors that reflect major aspects of lifestyle-routine activities theory.

Specific to this study, middle school girls live a lifestyle rooted in routines and leisure activities potentially dominated by the use of cellphones and the need to stay connected with their friends (Martin et al., 2018) in the absence of a parent monitoring usage. Thus, the theory applied to this study holds the potential to unveil some of the online routines and leisure activities of middle school girls and how those activities may increase, or even help to anticipate their participation in a cyberbullying incident. For example, the unmonitored ease and frequency in which students stay connected might be considered a potential risk factor, placing girls, who are already at risk to be targeted more so than boys because they are girls (Navarro and Jasinski, 2013), more at risk to be the recipients of message or images intended to cause emotional and psychological harm.

In this study, Lifestyle-routines activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1978) offered insight by isolating different aspects of the routines and leisure activities that increase risk. Though helpful, this theory lacks a gendered perspective. Therefore, the gendered perspective of cyberfeminisms is warranted to ensure that the narrative produced by middle school girls is brought to the surface. As noted above, the Internet and the ability to network does not have to be solely limited to the dichotomy as a place of liberation or restraint for girls (Milford, 2015) but rather a place where the two are held in tension and discussed.

In practice, the ability to innocently connect with friends and express oneself within online spaces should in theory be free from harm and victimization. The reality is that online spaces connecting middle school students are not harm-free ones, yet that does not ultimately
mean that the spaces are void of liberating practices allowing girls to freely express themselves on various social media platforms, which are engineered to provide networked spaces of expression. It should be noted here that the freedom to express does not include the sending, asking, or receiving of explicit photos and videos.

Further, cyberfeminisms as a “range of theories” (Flanagan & Booth, 2002, p. 12, as cited in Daniels, 2009) acts as an active, rather than passive placeholder, to ensure that this White male researcher amplifies the narratives offered by key school-based personnel in their interactions with female students. If girls are in fact more at risk to experience cyberbullying because they are female (Navarro and Jasinski, 2013) then a feminist theory layered within Lifestyle-routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) helps to avoid the potential of engaging in further violence to the victimized, who are already more likely to be targeted. The emotional and psychological harm experienced by girls in this study cannot be undone or reversed; however, the inclusion of both theories centers the perspective of girls, while also simultaneously honors their chosen leisure activities, sometimes devoid of engaged parental monitoring.

**Conclusion**

The lives of middle school students are deeply connected and intertwined as a result of social media platforms and text messaging (Martin et al., 2018). Some of the communication that takes place is presumably innocent and does not cause harm. However, some forms of cyber-communication are intentional in that perpetrators target with the objective of inflicting psychological and emotional harm so much so that cyberbullying is considered a serious health issue (Brandau & Evanson, 2019). Not only do these interactions impact and disrupt the school day, they impact those who are targeted on a deeply personal level. Exacerbating the dynamic is
evidence that points to girls more likely to experience cyberbullying than boys (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013) and experience it in ways that cause sadness and fear in girls more so than in boys (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019). Further, it is the stated belief amongst some scholars that gender is a risk factor (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Therefore, one of the aims of this study is to make a concerted and orchestrated attempt at honoring gender as a risk factor by centering, and not marginalizing, the experiences reported by middle school girls.

As a result of this risk factor, Navarro and Jasinski (2013) have contended that many cyberbullying studies have bypassed the examination of a gendered perspective, thus leaving a void in the literature which explores and examines the cyberbullying experiences of girls. This study attempts to illuminate the victimization experienced by girls by providing the space for girls to express and articulate their experience. To ensure that the voices of girls rise to the surface in connection with their digital life, a gendered perspective layered and honored within an acknowledgement of their routines and activities was leveraged and used as a filter in which to interpret their experiences. Further, this study seeks to examine germane routines as they relate to a digitally connected life, which may lead to or help school-based personnel anticipate cyber-victimization and its subsequent resolution.

To fully address the growing field of cyberbullying, the literature review in Chapter Two will address the four-decades long history of bullying, the more recent arrival of cyberbullying, a deeper look at the theoretical framework for this study, as well as the wide-variety of platforms and mediums used by middle school students. The platforms and mediums are ever and rapidly changing, yet their impact on the lives of students remains fairly constant. Chapter Two will also clearly delineate between bullying and cyberbullying, with the intention of clearly establishing
cyberbullying as its own distinct form of victimization, rather than categorize it as a field nested under bullying. As previously stated, there are “significant qualitative differences” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 13) between the experiences of the perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying and bullying. Chapter Two will clearly delineate between the two fields and will offer a deeper look into the unique characteristics that work together to make the phenomenon of cyberbullying.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review focuses on four main bodies of research, along with a geographic context for the study immediately below. The first body of research presents a brief overview of the literature on bullying. Following the review of bullying is the most recent research on cyberbullying and its expanding impact upon the lives of school-aged children. The third section explores the intersection of two different theoretical frameworks: Lifestyle-routine activities theory and cyberfeminisms. The final section denotes the platforms and venues appropriated by students. The list of venues will evolve over time, yet it is important for practitioners to take note of the variety of accessible and free apps available to any child with access to a smartphone (Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a).

Bullying

The phenomenon of bullying first entered the scholarly landscape in the 1970s due to the efforts of the Swedish researcher, Dan Olweus (Beran & Li, 2007; Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014). Olweus’ definition of bullying epitomized the concern of parents and policy-makers due to the growing evidence demonstrating the omnipresent emotional and academic repercussions that bullying had on students. Olweus defined bullying as students being “bullied or victimized, when he/she is exposed repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students” (1993, p. 8). Olweus further characterized bullying by stating that it is “aggressive behavior or intentional harm doing, which is carried out repeatedly, and over time, in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power” (1993, p. 9). Olweus’ definition made an indelible mark on policy-makers, school-based personnel, and parents (Volk et al., 2014).
Furthermore, bullying has become a worldwide phenomenon due to its presence in the news and the ample research that links bullying with a host of short-term and long-term problems to both victims and perpetrators (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012; Zych et al., 2017). As a result of the negative psychological and academic problems associated with bullying, policy-makers and school officials have developed a keen interest in the topic. Not only does bullying pose problems for schools (Payne & Hutzell, 2017), its impact may even stretch to intergenerational transmission. In a recent study, boys who were said to have bullied at age 14 were more likely at age 32 to have their own sons become bullies (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012).

Traditional schoolyard bullies can be described as students who wish to dominate others while at the same time increasing their social status (Englander, 2014; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Overall, bullies have a high self-esteem and can be characterized as having highly developed social emotional skills yet seem to think that they are under attack in benign environments (Englander, 2014; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Examples of bullying behaviors include teasing, name-calling, sexual comments, purposely leaving someone out of an activity, rumor spreading, embarrassing someone in front of others, tripping, pushing, spitting, hitting, and punching, most of these incidences takes place on school grounds and in places like the cafeteria and playground (“Bullying Definition, 2015). As far as prevalence, a recent study points to about one third of middle school students experiencing some form of bullying (Hicks, Jennings, Jennings, Berry & Green, 2018).

Olweus (1999) claimed that bullies like to dominate others and have a low ability to empathize with others. Other researchers have found that children who bully, are more likely to become bullied once they enter middle school (Accordo & Accordino, 2011; Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Children can be involved in bullying as either victims and bullies and also as bully-
victims, which can be considered a type of victim who also shows bullying behavior (Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

The list of complications and negative impact of bullying is compelling enough to warrant a further look into cyberbullying, its characteristics, how it is manifested, and how it impacts perpetrators and victims left in the wake of incidences. These factors suggest an increased need of school personnel to understand the repercussions that bullying presents and that the impact of bullying is not bound by the brick and mortar of schools. The negative impact of bullying on the lives of students and communities at-large are quite profound and conspicuous. In the next section, a review of the literature, definition, and contours of cyberbullying will be delineated and presented.

**Cyberbullying**

The central phenomenon and main focus of this study is cyberbullying, a phenomenon that has gained notoriety due to a “plethora of correlational studies [which] have demonstrated a cogent relationship between adolescents’ involvement in cyberbullying and negative health indices” (Nixon, 2014, p. 143). Communication through technology has become so important to students, that they are hesitant to tell an adult for fear of being cut-off from their cyber world and losing Internet privileges (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Collins, 2011; DePaolis & Williford, 2014). The desire for middle school students to be connected to others across the Internet continues to grow in popularity and prominence. In fact, Kowalski et al. (2019) reported that an alarming 71% of American teens maintain at least one social media account. In one dramatic example, a girl in a cyberbullying study equated the loss of her Internet privileges with losing her soul (Baas et al., 2013).

The following section on cyberbullying is comprised of subsections:
1) Background surrounding the debate regarding the definition of cyberbullying and why an accurate and agreed-upon definition is essential for educators and policy-makers.

2) The impact of cyberbullying

3) The nature of cyberbullying and its characteristics are examined to allow for a more robust understanding of the phenomenon at hand.

4) Prevalence rates of not only technology usage amongst teen and pre-teens, but the also the wide statistical ranges of students victimized by cyberbullying.

E) Forms of cyberbullying and the exact types of communication currently in use.

**Definition.** Scholarly debate and disagreement amongst researchers exists around the specific definition and conceptual understanding of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a; Slonje et al., 2012; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012). The definition of cyberbullying is important for researchers due to how researchers study the phenomenon and how findings can be compared between different studies (Nixon, 2014; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, et al., 2012; Zych et al., 2017). Due to the fact that there is not a preponderant agreed-upon definition, there are major discrepancies and inconsistencies across studies, which muddle findings and stifles research progress (Aboujaoude, et al., 2015; Nixon, 2014; Olweus, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, et. al., 2012; Zych et al., 2015).

An oft-cited definition and scholarly work is Tokunaga’s (2010) integrative and empirically-based definition which includes the important concepts of harm and repetition: cyberbullying is “any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others” (p. 278). Though Tokunaga’s (2010) definition is more integrative than
others, the definition utilized in this study was created by Patchin and Hinduja (2015a). Their definition is grounded in their own research of over 15,000 respondents stretched over eleven different studies (2015a). Their current definition has evolved since 2006 to include the multiple devices used by perpetrators and their deduction that cyberbullying includes repetition, intent, harm, and an imbalance of power. Each are examined below.

Patchin and Hinduja (2015c) define cyberbullying as the “willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (p. 2). This definition accounts for the ability of students to not only communicate via traditional forms of cyber messaging via online messaging boards, gaming and text messaging, but is also inclusive of the ubiquitous access to a variety of social media and the ease in which denigrating images can be uploaded to a victim’s phone (Collins, 2011; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

This researcher’s proposed definition for cyberbullying differs slightly in that it emphasizes the behavior, the intent to harm, the means of communication, and that cyberbullying can be anonymous: Cyberbullying is the repeated behavior by those who intend to (sometimes anonymously) inflict psychological or emotional harm upon their victims through the means of digital communication and/or social media platforms. To decrease confusion, there is notable difference between harassment and bullying. According to the New York State Dignity for All Students Act (DASA, 2013), the behavior of a perpetrator is considered harassment if a student (or an adult) is discriminated based on their race, height, weight, skin color, sexual orientation, gender, ethnic group, national origin, disability, religion, or religious practice. A perpetrator could of course bully or cyberbully someone based on the protected classes and must rise to the level of substantially interfering with the victim’s ability to function in school.
Embedded within the above definitions are four characteristics that this researcher believes differentiates acts of bullying from other behaviors: repetition, intent, harm, and an imbalance of power. Supporting the definition of cyberbullying with these characteristics are important to both researchers and educators alike. Understanding what cyberbullying is and how it is constituted allows interested parties to devote resources where they are needed and not needed as well as helping administrators, teachers, and parents to detect and prevent cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a). Below, the four characteristics of repetition, intent, harm, and imbalance of power are described.

**Repetition.** Repetition of behavior is what separates bullying from harassment and therefore differentiates cyberbullying from other forms of online harassment (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Englander, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a; Tokunaga, 2015). Being pushed in the hallway on one occasion does not constitute bullying, as it is not repeated. The same can be said for an incriminating text message sent to a recipient. However, repeatedly using technology or a social media platform to cause harm to another is considered cyberbullying. Similarly, messages or videos created once, then disseminated via social media platforms and seen by others on multiple occasions, evolves from being a mean message into a cyberbullying incident due to the repetition embedded within various technological platforms (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

**Intent.** The component of the cyberbullying definition that receives the most scrutiny is intent. Researchers (Accidino & Accidino, 2011; Englander, 2012; Tokunaga, 2010) have argued that it is not the intent that matters when considering whether one was cyberbullied, but rather the conduct that is not wanted. This may confuse the definition of what it means to bully. For example, if a student runs and jumps in gym class, and accidently trips another, this might be
considered unwelcomed conduct, but it lacks intent to harm, and thus cannot be considered bullying.

**Harm.** If intent best defines the perspective of the aggressor, it is harm that symbolizes what is absorbed and interpreted by the victim. The harm could be physical, emotional, psychological, or social (Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Patchin and Hinduja, 2015b). Though harm is experienced in different ways due to some students being more resilient than others (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012) it cannot be undermined as a main conceptual component of cyberbullying. In fact, most researchers have agreed that offenders of cyberbullying inflict psychological, emotional and social harm (Aboujaoude et al., 2015; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Brandau & Evanson, 2018; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Ybarra, 2012).

**Imbalance of power.** The final component of a cyberbullying definition is the imbalance of power. An imbalance of power in traditional face-to-face bullying can usually be obtained when one student is larger, stronger, more popular, smarter, or more confident than another (Olweus, 1999). The imbalance of power exercised in face-to-face encounters can carry over into cyberbullying and vice versa (Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Englander, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a).

Unfortunately for cyberbullied students, the carry-over from the virtual world to the classroom is all too likely (Englander, 2012; Kowalski, et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Suler, 2004). More pertinent to cyberbullying is the imbalance of power that can be exploited by tech-savvy students (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015b). In other words, technologically proficient students can take advantage of others who are not as skilled at traversing online environments, therefore contributing to an imbalance of power. Examples of what constitutes tech-savvy
students may include the ability to hack into accounts, hide their own identity, and download apps that make it very difficult for victims to identify their perpetrator (Messitt, 2014). The accurate identification of perpetrators may not only be difficult, it is also a definitive and purposeful feature of cyberbullying, a method in which a perpetrator may employ to strategically conceal their identity. These actions and behaviors of perpetrators have an effect on their targeted victims, victims who may experience some degree of psychological or emotional harm.

**Impact of Cyberbullying.** The nature of cyberbullying inflicts harm upon unwilling targets who are victimized in a manner that impacts their psychological and emotional state (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019). However, not everyone who is cyberbullied experiences a negative impact (Lee et al., 2017). In one study, 55% of the respondents between the ages of 8 and 18 claim that being cyberbullied had no negative effect, offering attitudes of dismissal (Burgess-Proctor, Hinduja, & Patchin, 2010; Lee et al., 2017). Other studies indicated the negative impact generated by cyberbullying and uncovered data that revealed about one third of the targeted experienced at least one symptom of stress (Nixon, 2014; Zych et al., 2017).

Though much of this study focused upon victims, cyberbullying also impacts the social, emotional, and psychological health of perpetrators as well (Hicks et al., 2018; Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Nixon, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). In other words, the communication occurring under the cover of anonymity after school hours, impacts both perpetrators and victims so much so that school personnel are needed to help offset some of the more pernicious effects of cyberbullying (Baas et al., 2013; Collins, 2011; Eden et al., 2013). The effects of cyberbullying inclusive of suicide, negative social-emotional effects, and victimization of younger populations are examined below.
**Suicide.** Long-term effects of cyberbullying reach well into adulthood and include an increased propensity for suicidal ideation (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello, 2013; Hamm, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Other scholars have agreed with this evaluation in that youth who bully are at an “elevated risk for suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completed suicides” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010, p. 3). The correlated link between suicide and cyberbullying is grounded in research on peer harassment: victims and perpetrators have an increased sense of feeling hopeless and depressed coupled with decreased self-worth. These symptoms can precede suicidal thoughts and attempts (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Long-term studies into adulthood also indicate a correlated link between cyberbullying and suicide. According to Hinduja and Patchin (2010) cyberbully victims are 1.9 times more likely to have attempted suicide compared to cyberbully offenders who are 1.7 times more likely to have attempted suicide in young adulthood. This does not mean that cyberbullying causes suicide. The act of taking one’s life is a serious and tragic event that cannot be attributed to one phenomenon. Fragmented relationships with both peers and parents as well as other emotional problems are usually existent factors as to why someone would choose to take their own life (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a).

**Social-Emotional Impact.** Though a very small percentage of cyberbully victims experience suicide ideation, victims from multiple studies reported significant health and social problems which have included anger, social anxiety, despair, higher levels of depression, lower self-esteem, headaches, academic problems, drug and alcohol addiction, pedagogical problems for teachers, and higher rates of absenteeism (DePaolis & Williford 2014; Eden, Heiman, & Olenick-Shemesh, 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2012; Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, Larrañaga & Yubero, 2013; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Payne & Hutzell, 2017). Other research has underscored the
notion that the more severe an adolescent is bullied, the more likely that individual will experience mental health and social issues, as well as display low academic achievement and psychosocial problems (Tokunaga, 2010). The psychological and emotional impact of cyberbullying on the lives of those victimized is unmistakable. To better understand cyberbullying and why the impact is so pernicious, an analysis of what makes cyberbullying the phenomenon it is required. Therefore, the nature of cyberbullying is examined below.

**Nature of Cyberbullying.** The phenomenon of cyberbullying is unique not because it is the source of emotional and pain and suffering for some, but rather due to the use of technology to communicate in ways that are deceitful and intended to cause harm. The distinctive facets that formulate the nature of cyberbullying are anonymity, pseudonymity, disinhibition, virality, and lack of supervision, all of which are described and examined below.

**Anonymity and pseudonymity.** One of the key factors that differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying is the ability of tech-savvy students to anonymously communicate to classmates outside of school hours, off school grounds, and usually at home (Aboujaude, 2015; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Collins, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). In this regard, offenders can remain anonymous by assigning themselves pseudonyms while at the same time eschewing face-to-face interactions. In fact, Dehue et al. (2008) reported that many victims do not know the identity of their bullies and write that “visual anonymity increases depersonalization” (220). Traditional bullying tactics require the offender to muster the courage to express their violent messages in a situation where they might feel guilt or conscientious of those actions. In fact, Patchin and Hinduja (2015c) remarked that it is much more difficult for most people to be mean to someone else in face-to-face situations because “shame and guilt readily kick in” (p. 47). Tokunaga (2010) concurred and suggested that “students who would not
otherwise engage in traditional bullying behaviors do so online in response to the anonymity offered through electronic media” (p. 279).

Instead, the anonymity of cyberbullying allows the offender to hide, not receive feedback or social cues, and therefore have little opportunity to empathize (Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Willard, 2003). Cyberbullying perpetrators also feel more emboldened to behave aggressively while online. A study from the perspective of college students revealed that over 50% of the 325 students reported that they felt empowered and emboldened by the ability to be anonymous during their middle school years (Hoff & Mitchell, 2007). The source of the empowerment and bold behavior is the ability of students to hide beyond an “avatar” which may help to relieve some of the responsibility normally associated with face-to-face disputes (Accordino & Accordino, 2011).

Further, DePaolis and Williford (2014) reported that 38% of an elementary-age population knew the identity of their perpetrator while other studies reported that the number for teens in general is closer to 50% (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Either way, the data suggested that not every perpetrator takes advantage of the ability to be anonymous (Tokunaga, 2010). Patchin and Hinduja’s (2015a) body of research with 15,000 students and 11 different surveys, indicated that most students think they can identify their aggressor and that it is someone from their immediate social circle and not someone randomly trolling online platforms looking to cause agitation (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). Regardless, in cases where the offender cannot identify their perpetrator the opportunity to address the aggressive behavior ceases to exist, which contributes to students feeling powerless, less likely to report cyberbullying, and completely unnerved by the inability to identify an attacker (Aboujaoude et. al, 2015; DePaolis & Williford, 2014; Hoff & Mitchell, 2007). In sum, anonymity and pseudonymity make it easier for bullies to
create hateful online content, it also increases the likelihood of psychological, academic, and social problems for both perpetrators and victims (Baas et al., 2013; DePaolis & Williford, 2014; Toshack & Colmar, 2012).

**Disinhibition.** Disinhibition is generated by the ability of online users to perceive themselves as anonymous. Gorzig and Olaffsson (2013) have explained that Internet users are more likely to say and do things online that they would not say in a face-to-face environment; thus, users are disinhibited and morally disengaged from their actions and more aggressive online than in real life (Park et al., 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Some tech-savvy students feel empowered by taking steps to remain anonymous which means they remain visually anonymous while increasing depersonalization (Dehue et al., 2008; Hoff & Mitchell, 2007). The feeling of empowerment via anonymity is therefore deeply connected to one feeling disinhibited (Willard, 2003).

Online disinhibition can be positive for those looking to be empowered in situations of disempowerment, yet it can also be negative (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013; Suler, 2004; Willard, 2003). The ability to be anonymous online activates disinhibition, which can lead to the expression of language and behavior that users would not normally articulate in the “real world” (Willard, 2003, p. 74). At the same time, researchers propose that anonymity promotes a decoupling of one’s personal identity with one’s social identity. Students are thus deindividuated from their face-to-face identity and are not fully conscious of the social environment, which would normally provide context for behavior (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). Hence, once online, one is governed by a different social identity, which can be represented by behaviors and speech very different from one’s personal (offline) identity.
The suggestion that online users are disinhibited and say and do things they normally would not do in a face-to-face context is generated from disinhibition theory. Disinhibition theory is related to psychodynamic theory in that the barriers that one usually safeguards private feelings and thoughts are broken down when communicating via online platforms or text messaging. Disinhibition is manifested in two distinct forms: benign and toxic (Suler, 2004). Benign disinhibition is the sharing of thoughts and feelings about oneself online that one normally would not share with others in a face-to-face environment. The more insidious side of disinhibition is labeled toxic and is manifested by texting cruel messages with the intent of harming another. In concrete terms of disinhibition might be manifested, the rise of sexting amongst teens is on the rise (Madigan, Ahn Ly, & Rash, 2018).

Willard (2003) has identified five theoretical factors that help explain the issue of disinhibition. First, when a student uses technology, he or she is virtually invisible. The opportunities for anonymity as well as false identities are many and can give the opportunity to behave in ways that might not occur if one's identity were known. Second, cyberbullies cannot easily receive visual feedback of the pain they are inflicting via technology, which results in a lack of need for empathy. Third, today's social norms seem to promote online misbehavior, which acts like a supportive mechanism. Fourth, students have the opportunity to assume the role of an "avatar", which is an online personality that conceals one’s true identity. If students can bully through an online personality, they may be less likely to feel personally responsible for the bullying and hide behind the avatar. Last, students who feel more comfortable communicating online than in person tend to see cyberbullying as a viable option, especially students who have been victims of face-to-face bullying. Such students use technology as a medium for revenge, a popular reason for why students engage in cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).
**Lack of Supervision.** In addition to students being able to hide behind false identities, social media sites are not required by law to supervise or detect harmful posts or images (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). Ethical responsibility certainly rests upon companies, but the fact remains that social media organizations and providers are protected by the Communications Decency Act of 1996 which primarily stated that companies will not be held liable for the speech and content produced by their users. Further Gorzig and Olafsson (2013) claimed that lack of supervision may serve as a significant factor as to why disinhibition occurs and why some students react more negatively to being cyberbullied (Lee et al., 2017). Studies conducted in Turkey have indicated the significance of supervision by postulating that girls are not more likely to experience cyberbullying due to that country’s emphasis on close supervision of girls combined with an inculcation of empathy and social awareness (Çetin, Yaman, & Peker, 2011; Lee et al., 2017).

**Virality.** According to multiple researchers, the lack of supervision from social media sites has created and sustained virtual environments where one’s message or image holds the potential to spread to a wide and large audience in a matter of seconds (Hicks et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Ybarra et al., 2014; Zych et al., 2017). For example, a student who posts an incriminating image of another student can be seen and found by a plethora of students both during school and off school grounds. This aspect of cyberbullying is deeply connected to repetition, one of the defining hallmarks of what it means to bully in any environment and can be emotional painful and perpetually embarrassing for the victim (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra et al., 2014).

The nature of cyberbullying is one that is deeply intertwined in both the virtual and face-to-face environments experienced by today’s students (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). The world of
the Internet and the world experienced at school are interconnected in ways that for many adults is not relatable. The ability to communicate with advanced mobile devices and free apps only deepens the dependency on technology. The dependency is evidenced by the notion that technology continues to play a vital and routinized role in the lives of many students.

**Forms of Cyberbullying.** As noted, the manifestation of the nature of cyberbullying is characterized by the deepening and dynamic relationship that students have with technology. Specifically, technology on its own is neutral, yet those who wish to create messages that initiate aggression and harassment do so in a variety of ways and on a variety of sites and apps (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Udris, 2014). This next section is dedicated to some of the more popular forms of cyberbullying and their descriptions listed below in Table 1. Of note is the concept that the more severe the cyber-message, usually the greater impact on the student (Chen, 2013).

Although not explicitly stated within Table 1, researchers have profiled the relational aspect of cyberbullying citing that 91% of incidents have fallen into categories such as envy, intolerance, and break-ups (Hamm et al., 2015). Other examples include verbal abuse during the use of blogs, sexting, and griefing, which is defined as the intentional harassment of others during online gaming (Maher, 2008; Monks et al., 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

**Table 1**

*Forms of Cyberbullying and Subsequent Contextualization*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form of Cyberbullying</th>
<th>Defining Feature</th>
<th>Contextualization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rumor Spreading</td>
<td>This example is a form of gossip or outlandish comments about someone else. Girls tend to use rumor spreading more than boys, yet boys are not immune to rumor</td>
<td>Social media apps and text messaging hold the capacity to send messages at incredibly fast speeds, allowing for hurtful rumors to spread with alacrity. A rumor could be anything connected to</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flaming</td>
<td>Flaming derives its name from the concept of inflaming the emotions and feelings of those targeted.</td>
<td>Flaming consists of “sending or posting hostile, angry, or annoying messages” (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c, p. 54). The point of flaming is not to add valuable insight to a conversation, but rather to hurt the feelings of another via social media, text messaging, or email (Beran &amp; Li, 2007).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pictures and Videos</td>
<td>Hamm et al. (2015) discovered that the most stressful cyberbullying scenarios involved pictures or videos, where the victim was asked or coerced into sending pictures of themselves or were secretly filmed or photographed.</td>
<td>With the increased availability of smartphones, students can easily take embarrassing images or videos of unsuspecting targets and upload them to social media sites. The emotional and psychological toll of such exploits are untold (Patchin &amp; Hinduja 2015c). Some examples have been sexually explicit in nature (Hoff &amp; Mitchell, 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commenting or Messaging</td>
<td>Commenting can occur on a Facebook or Twitter post with the perpetrator using obscene language with their identity being known. On the other hand, perpetrators may choose to be anonymous and conceal their identity to comment or message people they wish to hurt (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</td>
<td>Obscene language that is posted cannot easily be deleted, which in turn allows the post to remain online for long periods of time, allowing the initial language to be repeated depending on the amount of views the post receives. The consequences of such posts have the potential to impact victims during the school day (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Spreading</td>
<td>Students can willfully divulge sensitive information to some</td>
<td>Information spreading can entail confidential information inclusive of a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonation</td>
<td>Impersonation is a more cunning attempt at cyberbullying and has been called masquerading by some researchers (Beran &amp; Li, 2007). One who impersonates others may be seeking revenge and/or to seriously harm the target’s reputation (Udris, 2014).</td>
<td>Impersonators can engage in a host of online activities to pose as their target or to lure a target into doing and saying things they normally would not say or do. Some of the more extreme examples are connected to sexual favors and blackmail (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c; Udris, 2014).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary School Findings</td>
<td>Patchin and Hinduja (2006) note that elementary school students report being ignored and disrespected as the most common type of experience.</td>
<td>Name calling, threatening, ridiculing, hacking, impersonating, and the subject of rumors were also forms of cyberbullying identified by pre-adolescent students (Aboujaoude, 2015; Baas, Menno, de Jong &amp; Constance, 2013; Collins, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexting</td>
<td>“The creation and transmission of sexual images by minors” (Lounsbury, Mitchell, &amp; Finkelhor, 2011).</td>
<td>A recent study conducted by Patchin and Hinduja (2019) found that “prevalence rates for sending and receiving sexually explicit images or video among a nationally representative sample of 5593 American middle and high school students. Overall, approximately 13% of students reported that they had sent a sext, while 18.5% had received a sext” (p. 2334).</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Prevalence of Cyberbullying
The impact of cyberbullying and the forms it takes is considered a threat to the health of adolescents and their overall well-being (Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Brandau & Evanson, 2018; Nixon, 2014). Though this much is clear, what is not clear is the actual level of teen involvement (inclusive of perpetrators and victims) in cyberbullying and the notion from Kowalski et al. (2019) that prevalence rates have not shown consistency over time; hence the relevance of Nixon’s (2014) reasoning as to why the disparities exist:

some researchers have asked adolescents to think about their experiences with cyberbullying within the last year, while others have inquired about adolescents’ experiences within the past 9 months, or the past couple of months. Given these methodological inconsistencies, it is not surprising that the prevalence rates of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration vary widely (p. 144).

**Overall Prevalence of Cyberbullying.** In a review of all of the cyberbullying literature published in 74 peer-reviewed journals between 2002 and 2015, Patchin and Hinduja (2015c) discovered that 2.3% to 72% of all students claim to have been cyberbullied; while 1.2% to 44.1% admitted to being cyberbully offenders. In a separate systematic review, Modecki et al. (2014) discovered that the prevalence rates for perpetration and victimization were 16% and 15% respectively. Patchin and Hinduja’s (2015a) review of 74 peer-reviewed articles in conjunction with their 11 different surveys (inclusive of 15,000 respondents) allowed them to make the claim that about one in every four or five students had experienced cyberbullying. Patchin and Hinduja’s (2015a) study though runs contrary to a 2018 study conducted in 42 countries by the Health Behavior in School-Aged Children which found that about 10% of 11-year old students reported at least one instant message reflective of cyberbullying. In the same study, 11% of 13 and 15-year old students reported being cyberbullied (Kowalski et al., 2019). In essence, scholars
lack agreement on the overall prevalence of cyberbullying. However, cyberbullying is happening, and when it happens, the impact can be detrimental and devastating.

**Age and Cyberbullying.** Though cyberbullying research has predominantly focused upon middle school students, cyberbullying is not an isolated phenomenon only experienced in early adolescents (Chen, Cheng & Ho, 2015; DePaolis & Williford, 2014; Maher, 2008; Martin et al., 2018; Monks et al., 2012). Preliminary research has suggested that anywhere between 4% and 46% of the K-8 population are victimized by cyberbullying (Collins, 2011) with a recent study indicating that approximately 37% of students between grades six and eight reported being cyberbullied (Hicks et al., 2018). The indication is that cyberbullying is a conspicuous issue not only in middle school, but in elementary school as well.

Findings from another study that specifically targeted younger populations of children found that 23% of students between ages seven and eleven were reportedly cyberbullied (Monks, Robinson & Worlidge, 2012). Research on elementary school children and cyberbullying remains rare but is a growing field with greater understanding geared towards the prevalence, nature and impact of cyberbullying on young students (Bass et al., 2013; DePaolis & Williford, 2014; Eden et al., 2013). Englander (2012) concurred with these sentiments and stated “abusive behaviors begin in elementary school and peak in middle school” (p. 43). This statement is supported by evidence that cyberbullying may already be the ascendant form of bullying behavior among children. In one study, the ubiquitous access to mobile devices and computers is apparent: 19% of third graders have cell phones and more than 90% of third graders play online games (Englander, 2012).

Researchers armed with the information that cyberbullying does occur before middle school have chosen to study the perceptions of elementary students. In a study engineered by
Monks et al. (2012), the researchers assessed the perceptions of bullying and cyberbullying of 214 students (ages 7-11) in five elementary schools located in southeast England. The students were given definitions of both bullying and cyberbullying and asked to be honest on a questionnaire where they were told not to be concerned with right or wrong answers. Monks et al. (2012) found that 20.5% of the students in this study identified themselves as victims of cyberbullying.

In a separate study conducted by DePaolis and Williford (2014), the researchers assessed students’ exposure to cyber-victimization based on the frequency in which they were cyberbullied and discovered similar results. Six hundred and sixty students in third through fifth grades in this study were assessed from six different elementary schools; 17.7% of which reported having been victimized only two months into the school year; while 11% claimed they had been victimized on a weekly basis (Collins, 2011). This rate seems to hold up over time, as a different study measured cyberbullying incidences by the month and found that 10% of 11-year-olds experienced some form of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2019). These two studies alone can be isolated to see why scholars disagree on overall prevalence rates of cyberbullying. Adding in the factor of age, only makes the detection of rates more complex and at times, misleading.

**Gender and Cyberbullying.** Traditional bullying statistics have usually portrayed boys being involved in physical bullying more so than girls (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). At the same time, girls have been shown to be more involved in forms of cyberbullying reflective of psychological and emotional harassment like gossip, rumor spreading, and other forms of aggression that are indicative of complex relationships (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). Further indicating the evidence of girls being disproportionately impacted by cyberbullying, results from a 2016 study “revealed that girls were significantly more likely than
boys to have hurtful information about them posted on the Internet (5% vs. 1%), have private information purposely shared (1% vs. < 0.5%), be the subject of harassing instant messages (3% vs. 1%), and be the subject of harassing text messages (5% vs. 2%)” (Zhang, Musi-Gillette, & Oudekerk, 2016 as cited in Kowalski et al., 2019, p. 25).

To this end, it is then not surprising that many studies exhibit girls equally likely or in some cases, more likely than boys, to engage in cyberbullying (Barlett & Coyne, 2014; Collins, 2011; Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Zych, 2015). The Youth Internet Safety Survey revealed that 69% of youths who were harassed were female. Other studies performed in Massachusetts by Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, and Coulter (2012) found that 7.2% of high school girls had been cyberbullied compared to 5.6% of boys; further, 11.1% of girls experienced both bullying online and at school compared to 5.6% of boys. However, boys were more likely to experience bullying at school only. Patchin and Hinduja’s (2015c) review of 24 peer-reviewed journals, found that 18% of boys were cyberbullied compared to that of 22% for girls.

Navarro and Jasinski (2013) agreed with the evaluation that “girls are at a greater risk for cyberbullying than boys are” (p. 297) and “engage in variations of social sabotage more frequently than boys” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). Further, Navarro and Jasinski’s (2013) own research has built upon the work of Ybarra and Mitchell (2008) and claimed that not only are girls at a greater risk of cyberbullying, but that many studies lump boys and girls together, overlooking a nuanced perspective of gender. Research by Holfeld and Grabe (2012) concurred. The have argued that middle school girls were more involved in cyberbullying than boys. Navarro and Jasinski (2013) stated that being a girl is a risk factor due to their already “disadvantaged position in society” (p. 299) and that the Internet and social media are intimately
connected to the cyberdystopian view that the Internet leads to the further oppression of women and girls. These observations are grounded in empirical research conducted by Navarro and Jasinski (2013) who found that:

Being female significantly increased the odds of experiencing cyberbullying; even when the (boys and girls) were engaging in comparable risky online activities to boys (i.e.: chat room usage), the odds of experiencing cyberbullying were greater for girls than boys. (p. 299)

Contrary to the above studies, Monks et al. (2012) reported no significant gender differences when it came to frequency of being cyberbullied. Conversely, in a systematic review of 109 studies, Barlett and Coyne (2014) discovered that cyberbullying perpetration was more common in boys than it was in girls, yet there was a moderating effect of age. Girls were more likely to be involved in cyber-perpetration in younger samples, yet it was determined that boys were more involved in older samples (Barlett & Coyne, 2014).

Though there may be a scholarly debate relative to gender differences in cyberbullying, this study maintains that girls are more at risk to be cyberbullied than boys simply for being girls. As a result of cohesive evidence cited above, a blending of two different theoretical frameworks are being advanced: Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory and cyberfeminisms.

**Theoretical Frameworks: Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory and Cyberfeminisms**

The integration of technology and cell phones into the lives of children has only become more frequent (Kowalski et al., 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Nixon, 2014; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015a). The CDC cited that 97% of all American youth have access to the Internet in some way and that 95% of adolescents are connected to the Internet (Nixon, 2014). In a sign of the importance of social media in the lives of teens, Kowalski et al. (2019) reported that 10% of
13-year-olds claimed they have access to anonymous messaging apps (as cited in Lenhart, 2015). In other words, the routinization and embeddedness of technology in the lives of children coupled with the question of how girls experienced cyberbullying warrants the utilization of two theoretical frameworks: Lifestyle-routine activities theory and cyberfeminisms. The underlying philosophy of lifestyle-routine activities theory argues that the more frequently technology is used and embedded into the everyday routines of students, the more likely students will experience some form of cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2019; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). Working as an extension of this correlation, Kowalski et al. (2019) made the argument that “social networking cites are increasingly common venues for cyberbullying” (p. 45) amongst teens.

On the other hand, cyberfeminisms is presented to address the evidence that gender is a risk factor (Dehue, Bollman, & Völlink, 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013) and that girls are more at risk than boys to have experienced cyberbullying due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). Therefore, the intersection of lifestyle-routine activities theory and cyberfeminisms will be explored as a framework to better understand the dynamic interplay of gender, technology, lifestyle and the experiences of girls who are cyberbullied.

**Lifestyle-Routine Activities Theory.** Cohen and Felson (1979) built upon Hindelang et al. (1979) by developing three main characteristics (cited in Chapter 1) of Lifestyle-routine activities theory. This particular theory helped to determine the likelihood of whether or not a crime would occur. Specifically, where there is a motivated offender, a suitable and attractive target, and a lack of a capable guardian, a crime is likely to occur (Cohen & Felson, 1979). Thus,
the probability of a crime being committed is reduced if one of the elements is missing (Choi, 2008).

Though lifestyle exposure theory and routine activities theory were developed before the existence of a cyberspace, the theories hold not only promise (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013), but much relevance as well (Reyns, Henson & Fisher, 2011) for the study of cyber-victimization. Grabosky (2011) argued that though the theories were initially developed to explain street crime, it can be easily transferred to understanding cyberspace victimization and crime.

The fusion of the two theories, now named lifestyle-routine activities theory, “provides an explanation of how opportunities for criminal victimization are produced by individuals’ everyday routines and lifestyle behaviors that expose them to risk” (Reyns et al., 2011, p.1153). This theory has suggested that an individual's daily activities, such as vocational and leisure activities, as well as their behavior, contribute to an increased chance of being victimized. Furthermore, the theory is grounded on the assumption that a crime can be inflicted by anyone given opportunity to exploit a suitable target in the absence of a capable guardian. (Cohen & Felson, 1979).

Choi, (2008) and Pratt, Holtfreter, and Reisig, (2010) have transferred the components of lifestyle-routine activities theory conceptually into studies conducted that have principally investigated cyber-victimization with results indicating the relevance of lifestyle-routine activities theory. Choi’s (2008) study found that one is more likely to be victimized if there are offenders present on the Internet; that the target is one that engages in possible risky online activities, such as online gaming and social media sites; and that a lack of supervision online equals both a lack of parental monitoring and software to block unwanted messages. One of the more important concepts to have emerged from Choi’s (2008) study is that user online habits and
lifestyle can be overlooked as unimportant, thereby placing themselves more at risk to be victimized. Particular to this study and relevant to this theory is the trending theme that teens are more likely to be cyberbullied on social media (Kowalski et al., 2019). Teen preference of venue can’t be overlooked, as it situates the leisure time of teens squarely on social media use.

Though lifestyle-routine activities theory has been employed as a theoretical framework for cyberbullying, it has rarely been used to explain the risk for both genders due to cyberbullying studies usually clustering gender together, thus providing an inaccurate portrayal of risk factors as equal for both and girls (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). Therefore, a gendered perspective is warranted to support an understanding of the experiences of girls and women.

**Cyberfeminisms.** Early cyberfeminists believed the Internet held the potential to be a liberating place for women, a place where traditional male hierarchies are dismantled and give way to a restructuring of gender lines. In essence the hope was that the Internet, and specifically digital/ “cyber” technologies, would evoke the foundation of feminism and beget true social gender equality (Daniels, 2009; Milford, 2015). Cyberfeminist who maintained this perspective proposed that cyberspace could become a “utopian site of unrestricted, transcendent emancipation from gender-related constraints” (Milford, 2015, p. 55).

To that end, scholars such as Ellcessor (2016) concurred with this perspective claiming that technology is not a place of freedom for women and extended the argument by stating that the “liberation [of] technology online spaces may reproduce and amplify the prejudices and normative assumptions of a broader cultural context” (p.14). This statement is based on Ellcessor’s (2016) own work who further elucidated by adding that societal concerns about girls and technology are magnified due to societal discomfort with girls’ agency and more specifically their sexual agency.
To address the notion that the Internet is either a place of oppression or liberation, scholars are split into two camps. Cybertopianists have advocated from the perspective that the Internet is a liberating place for girls and women and that the Internet can release girls and women from embodiment (Daniels, 2009; Milford, 2015). On the other hand, cyberdystopianists argue that the Internet is a platform of oppression and constraint, blocking feminine agency due to patriarchal norms. The application of this dichotomy for this study can potentially be underscored in how girls interpret their experiences.

From the perspective of cyberdystopianism, scholars have argued that the online activities girls and women have engaged in actually have done more to reinforce current gender hierarchies (Daniels, 2009; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). The argument from Cyberdystopianism has maintained that girls are more at risk on the Internet due to their already disadvantaged position in society (Dehue et al., 2008; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). This perspective is aligned to research conducted by Navarro and Jasinski (2013) given the evidence that a) girls were more likely to experience cyberbullying and b) being a girl increased the chances of a cyberbully experience.

Regardless of the intra-cyberfeminist debate, a common denominator amongst cyberfeminists is the belief that women must become empowered with the use of technology, so much so that the virtual world is reconfigured in a manner reflective of gender equality. Therefore, it is far more helpful to think of cyberfeminists as focusing on gender, current technologies, and the practices of feminist, while avoiding the simple dichotomy of whether technology is liberating or constraining (Milford, 2015). Instead of seeing online spaces as restraining or liberating for girls and women, online spaces may simultaneously operationalize agency and also be a risk.
Milford (2015) claimed that online gender equality is possible with the acknowledgment that “agency rests in the ways that girls are able to control their online portrayals” (p. 73). In fact, recent research has indicated that girls were aware of the risks that online activity represents and are proactive in implementing strategies to offset the perceived risks (Milford, 2015). The self-expression of girls online is deserving of not blame, but rather educational programs and initiatives that promote a more robust understanding of agency amongst girls and women (Milford, 2015). Reconstructing online spaces in this manner has the potential to reduce disempowerment and constraint while increasing agency and self-expression.

Milford’s (2015) call for a more nuanced view of cyberfeminisms is inclusive of a wider variety of positionalities. Cyberfeminist studies have excluded women and girls from lower socio-economic status, those without access to virtual technology, as well as women and girls from different races. Thus, it is essential that this researcher take into consideration that previous cyberfeminist dialog and discourse has excluded the experiences and perceptions of marginalized girls and women, which helps locate the importance of research from the “ground up” that allows for greater online agency and gender awareness (Milford, 2015).

**Mediums and Platforms**

In this final section, mediums and platforms are presented in an effort to compile an accurate portrayal of the apps and platforms being used by students. The reason for including such a list is to foster a broader and deeper understanding amongst educators and parents due to the wide variety of options (many of which are free) at the disposal of any student with a smartphone. The contents of Table 2 do not represent an exhaustive list of available apps simply due to the sheer volume of apps created for the use of communicating. Table 2 is therefore intended to be used as a springboard for understanding the breadth and depth of free and easily-
accessible apps. The breadth and depth blends with the research of Aboujaoude et al. (2015) and Patchin and Hinduja, (2015c) who all have claimed that the medium with which students choose to negatively communicate is wide and varied.

DePaolis and Williford (2014) have suggested that online games were the most popular arena for cyberbullying, while text messaging and social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) were purported to be the second and third most frequent sites for cyberbullying. Students continue to use a wide variety of means to communicate which includes texting, the three major social sites of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, video/image messaging, emailing, chat-room conversations, and websites created to purposely hurt someone’s feelings.

Table 2

**Popular Platforms Used and Descriptions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Facebook maintains a user population of over 2 billion, yet a significant number of teens seem to shun it (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c). Facebook not only has advertisements, but their marketing strategy is geared toward an older population with the average user being a twenty-five-year-old female college graduate (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Twitter has carved out a niche as the social media site that limits its users to 140 characters or less, making the hashtag (#) a symbol of both helpfulness, but also one that can be used to embarrass and harass others (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c). The app is known quite well as a way to follow people and/hashtags (Herrman, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Instagram allows users to take pictures, manipulate the image, post comments, and “like” the image. Interestingly enough, Facebook purchased Instagram in 2014 fully realizing the potential of Instagram due to its simplistic but elegant nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platform</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>Snapchat allows users to immediately communicate with one another using text or images, with the promise that the message will dissolve and then disappear in less than 10 seconds. Users enjoy this app due to the ability to share small moments with friends and feel connected while doing so. Snapchat also has more daily users than Twitter (Herrman, 2019).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vine</td>
<td>Vine is used on Twitter as a method of sharing 6 second videos. Top Vine users post 30-50 “vines” per day (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c). The creation of these videos allows for users to use their creativity by clipping together different segments of video to be shared with all of their Twitter followers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask.fm</td>
<td>The original intent of Ask.fm was to allow users to be fully anonymous under the veil of pseudonyms so that open, honest, and flirtatious conversations could take place. Ask.fm boasts over 123 million users (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c) and though the company encourages its users to be accountable and careful of content, there have been many reports of users being the recipients of crude and hateful language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yik Yak</td>
<td>Yik Yak is an amalgamation of Twitter and Ask.fm. Users can post anonymous comments within a 1.5-mile radius and is known to produce content not suitable for younger users. High school students especially enjoy this app as they are able to post explicit and anonymous messages that range from the sexual to the mundane to answers on a test (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secret and Whisper</td>
<td>Secret and Whisper are communities of anonymity where your identity remains veiled by the use of pseudonyms and by neither company requesting the authentic identity of its users. Secret and Whisper are not identical in how they allow users to communicate with the world. “Secrets” spread by messages being liked within one’s contact list—the more likes, the more the message spreads. On the other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
hand, Whisper allows users to choose from a wide variety of images, attach text to those images, and then spread the message on major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kik, WhatsApp, Viber, and Voxer</th>
<th>Kik, WhatsApp, Viber, and Voxer can all be categorized as different text messaging services that vary in popularity depending on the area of the world in which one lives. The main issue with these apps is that they work through Wi-Fi, which allows user to send as many messages as they wish without exceeding data usage plans. These apps are popular amongst youth who wish to obscure the number of messages they send by fooling unassuming parents who believe the number of text messages can be restricted (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gaming</td>
<td>Gaming networks have evolved from users playing single player games to playing against or with another user in the same room to being able to verbally communicate (with the aid of a headset and microphone) with anyone in the world wishing to logon to the same game. Consoles such as Play Station 3 or 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii, and Wii U all offer the user the ability to play and connect with other players from around the globe, creating an insular gaming community. This can be an exciting and positive experience, as many users will explain, yet it also leaves some users vulnerable to hateful and harassing speech that can be psychologically traumatic for users who associate some of their identity with the online gaming community (Patchin &amp; Hinduja, 2015c).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>TikTok is a more social media platform with over 500 million users (Herrman, 2019). The app is designed for users to be able to easily create and scan a variety of short videos. Not only are videos easy to create, but users are provided variety of prompts to incorporate other sounds or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Herrman, 2019. TikTok is a more social media platform with over 500 million users (Herrman, 2019). The app is designed for users to be able to easily create and scan a variety of short videos. Not only are videos easy to create, but users are provided variety of prompts to incorporate other sounds or
take part in a dance challenge. One of the defining features of TikTok’s machine learning capability is that a new user’s feed is filled with suggestions and people to follow immediately after setting up one’s profile (Herrman, 2019). Between November of 2018 and November of 2019, the app was downloaded more than 750 million times; more than Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube (Nicas, Isaac, and Swanson, 2019).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical.ly</th>
<th>The musical.ly app is extremely popular amongst middle and high school students. Social media platform was bought out by a Chinese company for an estimated $1 billion, with 60 million users in America and Europe. (Nicas, Isaac, and Swanson, 2019).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>Pronounced “Tumbler.” Though Tumblr was acquired by Verizon in 2013 for an estimated $1 billion. In August of 2019, the microblogging app beloved by those who liked to create and belong to quirky communities, was acquired for a $3 million. Many have left the platform (for a variety for a variety of reasons, but still remains a site used by teens (Swisher, 2019).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 has described the platforms currently popular among youth. It should be noted that the list and descriptions provided are the platforms currently trending and by no means should be interpreted as exhaustive or static. Technology and the integration of technology into the lives of youth rapidly grow and increase with new apps being created and introduced quite often. To that end, the topic of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has emerged as an area of interest for scholars, as ICTs not only impact adults, but students of all ages.
Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have evolved to the extent that anyone with access to a device capable of accessing the Internet is automatically ushered into revolutionized methods of communicating and connecting with others (Kowalski, Limber and McCord, 2019). Kowalski et al. (2019) also reported that 92% of Americans spend time on the Internet, with the astounding average of 24-hours per week. The ability to widely communicate on a multitude of devices and easily communicate and connect people one knows and does not know, is concomitant with the risk of becoming a victim of cyberbullying, a growing threat to not only the health of middle school students, but also elementary students, young adults, and adults (Kowalski et al., 2019; Lenhart, 2015; Pearson, 2015).

The use of ICTs is not inherently detrimental to one’s health, but because users choose to target other users, one’s health and well-being can become jeopardized. The risk of cyberbullying, therefore, is manifested in the negative impact on the lives of those cyberbullied and presents a considerable health threat to adolescent health (Brandau & Evanson, 2018; Nixon, 2014) and has overall become a pervasive health issue. These factors make it essential that schools, and administrators, counselors, and teachers in particular, understand cyberbullying as a unique form of communication.

Of particular concern is the notion that the routinization and proliferation of mobile devices in the lives of students (Kowalski et al., 2019) combined with the concept that students are more likely to be disinhibited while online, leaves students at an increased risk for becoming frequent targets of aggressors (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013; Suler, 2004). Though cyberbullying is more likely to take place off school grounds (DePaolis & Williford, 2014; Eden et al., 2013) and be carried over to the schoolyard (Englander, 2012; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c), its impact on student social-emotional health and academic achievement (Accordino & Accordino, 2011;
Nixon, 2014) has obvious and painful consequences for schools (Payne & Hutzell, 2017). Though traditional schoolyard bullying continues to receive attention due to its impact on the lives of students, the central phenomenon being studied in this review is cyberbullying, a completely different phenomenon (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Lee, Hong, Resko, & Tripodi, 2017; Ybarra et al., 2012).

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review has examined the salient research on cyberbullying. The scholarly concept of bullying was first developed in the early 1970s by Dan Olweus (Beran & Li, 2007), yet it didn’t make inroads into the national conscience until the 1990s (Volk et al., 2014). Cyberbullying is related to bullying in that it is the source of emotional pain and suffering for victims (DePaolis & Williford, 2014), yet a different phenomenon for online users who intend to (sometimes anonymously) inflict harm upon their victims through the means of digital communication or social media venues (Kowalski et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c).

Individuals who engage in cyberbullying behavior are able to do so due to feeling disinhibited, and thus say and do things that they normally would not say or do in social context. The foundation is constructed for cyberbullies to engage in a sense of depersonalization of the one they are targeting, which allows them to forsake empathy and justify their actions (Gorzig & Olaffsson, 2013). The inability of a cyberbully to witness the facial expressions and body language of a target produces a situation for the cyberbully to become decoupled from their own personal identity and in a sense, take own an online identity, which in turn grants sense of freedom (Dehue et al., 2008; Suler, 2004). In essence, one of the more distinctive qualities differentiating bullying from cyberbullying is the fact that bullies engage their target in face-to-
face situations (Olweus, 2011); whereas cyberbullies exercise their ability to operate and enable a certain level of technological competence.

Relatedly, the variety of platforms utilized by students to communicate is both deepening and expanding (Kowalski et al., 2019; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). Given the proliferation of platforms and venues, it behooves educators to become more aware of the latent accessibility of apps and social media venues, some of which are designed to hide the identity of users perpetuating two defining features of cyberbullying: disinhibition and anonymity. The ability to be anonymous has allowed users to conceal their identity and say and do things in a virtual environment that they wouldn’t normally say or do offline (DePaolis & Williford, 2014) thus reinforcing the subset phenomenon of disinhibition and less likely to be empathetic toward their victim (Gorzig & Olaffsson, 2013).

The phenomenon of cyberbullying has become more nuanced and layered when gender, and more specifically girls, is transferred from the margins of research and into the center. A study focusing on the experiences of girls warrants the analyzation of two different theoretical frameworks. Girls who have experienced cyberbullying may engage in behaviors and lifestyles that increase their chances of becoming victimized. The analyzation of girls’ lifestyle and behavior is supported by lifestyle-routine activities theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) which has helped to illuminate the factors associated with the likelihood of a crime occurring associated with cyber-victimization in general and cyberbullying specifically (Reyns et al., 2011). Though helpful, lifestyle exposure theory doesn’t fully and equitably address the evidence from Navarro and Jasinski (2013) that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied simply for being girls. To illustrate this point further, girls are targeted more so than boys evidenced by the increased likelihood that their private information is shared and that hurtful things are said about them on
social media at a rate more so than boys (Kowalski et al., 2019). Gender, therefore, is a risk factor, a factor unaddressed by lifestyle-routine activities theory, hence the warranted need for two theoretical frameworks in this study.

Navarro and Jasinski (2013) have contended that gender is a risk factor due to girls’ “inherent vulnerable position within society” (p. 287) and are therefore more likely to be cyberbullied than boys. To these researchers, gender inequality in virtual environments mimics reality, thus maintaining that the Internet is yet another example of an entity reproducing socially-accepted gender hierarchies. Early cyberfeminist divided themselves into two camps to help explain the intersection of technology and gender: one that upheld the Internet as a place of liberation for girls; while the other camp argued that the Internet was simply another place of disenfranchisement and oppression. A more current analysis of cyberfeminisms has yielded for a call to elevate the voices of multifarious positionalities and that the Internet can be both a liberating and risky place for girls (Milford, 2015).

The utilization of lifestyle-routine activities theory and cyberfeminisms will allow for a deeper analysis to not only capture the behaviors and lifestyles of girls, but to also understand those behaviors and lifestyles in tandem with the notion that the Internet can be both a risky and liberating place for girls; a place that simultaneously yields both self-expression and constraint.

This literature review has presented the perspective by Navarro and Jasinski (2013) that cyberbullying studies too often lump gender together, which creates inaccurate portrayals of girls. Why girls? The question of girls is grounded in the empirical evidence that girls are more likely to experience cyberbullying than boys and are more at risk to experience cyberbullying even when they engage in the same online activities (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013).
Given the evidence provided within this literature review, the methodology used and explained in Chapter 3 will provide the necessary structure and values required in order for the voice and stories of victimized middle school girls to truly come to the surface. The methodology in Chapter 3 and the protections afforded to participants will create the conditions for the local and immediate narrative emerge with the intentional purposes of being examined and analyzed.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHOD

Methodological Approach: Instrumental Case Study Design

To achieve the purpose of this study, this researcher used an inductive design leveraged by semi-structured interviews. The six key participants were found by using purposeful sampling. Observations and a document review also helped to ascertain the experiences of middle school girls. Instrumental case study design is defined by focusing upon a unit of analysis as a bounded system, such as a person or event (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Qualitative case studies are similar to other types of qualitative research in that there is a search for meaning and understanding. Differentiating case study from other qualitative approaches is that case study “is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37) and is less of a methodological choice than a choice of what to be studied (Stake, 1995).

The what of this study is the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls through the recounting of the phenomenon with six key school-based personnel. To better understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying, semi-structured interviews with six key school-based personnel charged with either investigating or counseling those victimized, has been conducted. The counselors and administrators interviewed are the holders of sensitive and intimate knowledge of the cyberbullying experiences of girls. All participants were interviewed in informal settings and settings of their choosing.

Merriam (2009) further defined the parameters of instrumental case study as a unit of analysis that can be “fenced in.” In other words, if what is to be studied is “not intrinsically bounded, it is not a case” (p. 41). Miles et al. (2014) agree that the case is the unit of analysis and can be graphically depicted by imagining a heart in the center of a circle. The focus of a study is thus the heart while the rim of the circle symbolizes the boundary of what will and what will not
be studied. This study will utilize instrumental case study, a type of case study that facilitates “our understanding of something else” (Stake, 1995, p. 3).

Stake (1995) further clarified instrumental case study by stating:

We have a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and feel that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case. We may choose a teacher to study, looking broadly at how she teaches but paying particular attention to [a particular aspect of her teaching]. Case study here is instrumental to accomplishing something other than understanding this particular teacher, and we may call our inquiry instrumental case study (p. 3).

By utilizing Stake’s (2005) definition of instrumental case study, this study focused on the collective narrative generated from six school-based personnel, rather than the different experiences of specific girls. Therefore, using Stake’s methodology allowed for the overall gestalt of the case to be studied, a powerful characteristic that served the purposes of this study while simultaneously honoring the expertise of the professionals and the voice of the victimized girls.

Regardless of what researchers label the focus of the case study: the heart (Miles et al., 2014); the unit of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016); the what of the study (Stake, 1995); or the phenomenon (Yin, 2014); the bounded system of interest requires the collection of data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) clarified that no particular method of data collection is required, but can include sites to be visited, “events or activities that could be observed, people who could be interviewed, and documents that could be read” (p. 95).

In this instrumental case study, the bounded system is delimited by documents germane to the study in addition to the semi-structured interviews with school-based personnel who have
been charged with the responsibility of counseling or investigating the experiences of girls who have been cyberbullied. Of note, all participants attend or work at the same public middle school in New York State. Thus, they are instrumental to the case, and their participation is essential to understanding the phenomenon of the cyberbullying experiences of girls at a specific site.

**Research Site for Case Study**

The research site was a suburban middle school in a southern county of New York State. The school’s population during the 2018-2019 school was 1231 students, 593 males and 638 females. Seventy-two percent of the students were White, 18% were Latino, 4% Asian, 3% were Black and less than 3% were multiracial. About 10% of the population were classified as Special Education students and about 12% were labeled as economically disadvantaged (nysed.gov, 2019).

The principal at this school had been concerned not only about the proliferation of technology, but how this technology was used and its impact on the emotional and academic lives of the students attending the school. The advantage of studying the cyberbullying experiences of girls who attended the same school provided access to their individual experiences which were informed by similar background knowledge due to their participation in how the school personnel implemented features of the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) policy. Further, the ubiquitous access to technology both at home and school was a common factor and one that cannot be overlooked. These factors warrant an investigation and analysis of the phenomenon at hand bound by enrollment at the same school.

The school’s website had been active evidenced by current announcements about fundraisers and excitement surrounding the performance of the school’s musical. Additionally, the school’s mission statement included an emphasis on not only academic performance, but care
for student self-esteem and respect. Located within the school and the district’s website was access for all stakeholders to information regarding the district’s Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) as well as the board’s policy on both bullying and cyberbullying relative to the DASA policy. The district’s definition of bullying was aligned to the definition outlined in this paper, which emphasizes an imbalance of power and behavior that is repeated over time and intended to harm another student. Within the bullying policy was also a cyberbullying statement which stated “The District also prohibits ‘Internet bullying’ (also referred to as ‘cyber-bullying’) including the use of instant messaging, e-mail, web sites, chat rooms, and text messaging when such use interferes with the operation of the school; or infringes upon the general health, safety and welfare of District students or employees.” According to the DASA policy, all New York school districts are mandated to disseminate information regarding the district’s implementation of their own version of a DASA policy. It is up to each district to create the wording and embody the policy into practice.

**Purposeful Sample Design**

The participants for this case study were all employed at the same middle school between 2017-2019. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative studies in order to find participants who have experienced the phenomenon under study and who can accurately answer the research questions in an information rich manner (Patton, 2015). In all, six key participants were interviewed for this study, all with experience in navigating the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls, hence participants could respond with information-rich responses.

In this particular district, teachers are not required to facilitate the resolutions or investigate cyberbullying experiences. Their main role is to report what they hear to the building-level administration, psychologists, or counselors. Therefore, teachers in this district do not have
the intimate knowledge of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school females in comparison to building-level leadership who are responsible for the investigation and subsequent resolution.

The type of purposeful sampling to select school-based participants in this study was criterion-based (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The criteria for inclusion or exclusion of participants is as follows:

- The participants must be a guidance counselor, psychologist, or building administrator with intimate knowledge of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls.
- The participants must have been provided clearance to participate by the superintendent of schools.
- The participants must have intimate knowledge of middle school girls who had been cyberbullied during their time at the middle school based on Patchin and Hinduja’s (2015) cyberbullying definition as written in the Recruitment Survey (Appendix E).

Participant sampling for this study was guided by a concerted recruitment and determined by the boundedness of the case. In order to gain access and permission to recruit, this researcher first sought IRB approval from the district superintendent to interview counselors and administrators charged with the responsibility of counseling and investigating cyberbullying incidences. Once district approval was granted, emails were sent to guidance counselors, psychologists, and administrators from the same middle school to ascertain their interest in being interviewed (Appendix A). If the personnel agreed to being interviewed, they were provided the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) as well as the Interview Schedule (Appendix C).

As for sample size, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have stated that purposeful sampling should occur until saturation is reached and when no new information has been ascertained from participants. In this study, sufficiency was reached with six participants due to their unique
experiences as school-based personnel equipped with intimate knowledge of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. Table 3 illuminates the roles, titles, and years of service within the middle school of the six, selected participants.

Table 3

*Selected participant information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Years at Z Middle School</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Investigatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Investigatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Investigatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Techniques**

Merriam (2009) has argued that the collection of data via the use of documents and interviews is essential to completing a more accurate and valid picture of the phenomenon at hand. Merriam (2009) also contended that data is not merely collected as if they were bits of information out in the world waiting to be collected. Rather, information must be observed and noticed by the researcher and “treated as data for the purposes of her or his research” (p. 86). Though the boundary between the heart or phenomenon of the study may not be clear, the data collected must be from a wide-variety of sources (Yin, 2014).

The data collected for this study focused on the use of two primary techniques: a document review and semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the document review was to ascertain the contextual factors that shape the issues surrounding the phenomenon of
cyberbullying, specifically at the middle school and more generally district-wide documents found on the district website. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews with six key school personnel was to gather a valid picture of the girls who had experienced cyberbullying at the same middle school.

**Document review.** The documents reviewed for this study included documents produced at the State level, the level of the district, as well as documents produced on the school level. The documents reviewed from the state consisted of the New York State DASA Law (2013) which emphasized the need for districts to create and maintain systems and practices that address and alleviate material incidences of bullying and cyberbullying. The role of the DASA policy within the school setting was especially important given the protection it provides to the thirteen protected classes.

Documents reviewed on the district and school level concerned the policies surrounding the Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) and Student Code of Conduct as they related to cyberbullying. Appendices D and E are demonstrative of the language contained within the district’s Code of Conduct policy to describe and define material incidences of bullying and cyberbullying. The documents further delineated the responsibilities of the school-based personnel tasked with investigating incidences of bullying and cyberbullying.

**Semi-structured interviews.** According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) interviewing is essential “when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them” (p. 108). Interviews are also helpful when researchers are interested in past events that for a myriad of reasons, cannot be replicated. Cyberbullying is difficult to observe in real time, thus the semi-structured interviews leveraged in this study allowed for retrospective reflection on the
experiences of the six key participants. The questions were thus designed so that the six key participants could reflect on their specific experiences with girls who had been cyberbullied.

Four main questions guided the semi-structured interview process with the six key participants. The four main guiding questions were as follows: 1. How do girls describe their cyberbullying experience? 2. What online activities made girls more vulnerable to cyberbullying? 3. What is the role of protective factors? 4. How was the cyberbullying experiences resolved? The objective of asking these four main questions was to ensure that the interview remained semi-structured, purposeful, and aligned to the contours of this study. The questions were also designed to create the space and freedom for the participants to articulate their story while also ensuring that the victimized girls and their stories remained at the center of the process.

All participants were audio-recorded either in person or using Google Hangout or Zoom. Each participant leads a busy professional life, which meant that this researcher was required to remain flexible in not only the time of day the interviews took place, but also how they took place. Every accommodation was made without sacrificing the integrity of the study, hence, participants were able to choose how and where they wanted to be interviewed. This was important considering the heavy topic at hand as well as a host of late nights and early mornings that their jobs demand on a weekly basis.

**Data Analysis and Techniques**

Qualitative research requires that the act of data collection and analysis occur simultaneously due to the emergent design of qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). Creswell (2013) contended that the analysis of data is inclusive of organizing data, coding themes, representing the data, and formulating an interpretation of that data. Thus, the interviews,
observations, and documents examined for this study were conducted in a manner to detect codes and emergent themes. Analysis took place immediately after the collection of data, a practice aligned to qualitative research.

**Coding.** According to Saldaña (2013), a code is a word or phrase generated by the researcher that “symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). Furthermore, MacQueen (1998) explained that codes are the foundation for theory and the argument of the investigator. Miles et al. (2014) concurred and added that coding is in itself deep analysis of the presenting data and can act as a critical link (Charmaz, 2001) between the collection of data and the emergence of meaning.

Saldaña (2013) described coding as taking place in two different stages: First Cycle and Second Cycle coding. First Cycle coding can be described as assigning codes to the data chunks. There are many different approaches to First Cycle coding, with no need to maintain allegiance to one. Similar to what Saldaña names as First Cycle coding, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) refers to this stage as open coding, which simply means the researcher is open to any possibility while reading the transcript of the interview. Words can be simply jotted in the margin, which can be the words of the participant or a concept related to the phenomenon. Merriam prefers the open coding process which provides a foundation for the researcher to be receptive to data that can be used in answering the research questions. The codes are therefore data-driven and can be revisited at any point, thus making the process iterative (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch, 2011).
For this study rev.com was used to transcribe the audio-recorded transcripts. Following the transcription forwarded by rev.com, the data was analyzed evidenced by the following steps delineated by open coding:

1. The raw data from the participants was divided by question type.
2. The data produced led to two different rounds of open coding. Words and phrases were annotated in the margins to help provide meaning based on what was reported by the participants.
3. At the conclusion of the open coding, words and phrases were identified to create a unique list.
4. The words and phrases identified in step 3 were then categorized based on context and similar themes.

The above process and protocol was utilized and supported the findings and themes indicated by this researcher, facets that will be discussed in Chapter 4.

The practice of allocating and combining codes to the data allows the researcher to then place the data into different categories. The patterns that emerge from the collection of different data points are sorted into categories that contain different examples of data (Merriam, 2009). The goal of creating different categories is to detect “recurring patterns that cut across” (Merriam, 2009, p. 181) one’s data. The naming of categories can be generated from the researcher, the participants, or pertinent literature.

This researcher created the concepts and categories reflective of what was examined in the data. According to Merriam (2009) categories should be responsive to the research questions and be exhaustive, which means that all data that was deemed important should be placed into a category. To ensure further validation of the category construction, categories should also be
conceptually congruent. In other words, three categories intended to be used on the same level of representation should be equal; not two on the same level of abstraction while the third is potentially a subcategory.

**Trustworthiness Strategies**

The following section outlines important steps that this researcher took to protect the participants and maintain integrity of the study. The transcripts, recordings, and any documents generated during the process of this study were locked in a safe accessible only to the researcher. All electronic items connected to this study were protected using passwords on Google Drive only known to the researcher. Files were stored in a password protected Google Drive folder. The sharing of files with the principle investigator was conducted with dropbox.com, which is password protected cloud storage. After a year, the main elements of the study (participant names and audio files) will be destroyed. Consent forms will remain in the physical possession of the researcher for three years and then will be scanned into a password-protected computer. After three years, the main copies of the transcripts will be stored on Google Drive and password protected.

**Credibility.** The ability to trust research results that are both reliable and valid is a concern that is paramount to researchers conducting research in applied fields (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research this means that a triangulation of the deployed methods of data collection can be compared. For example, a triangulation of findings arises due to the comparing of different sources of data which may include interviews and documents.

Other methods of confirming a research study’s internal validity is the use of member checking. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that member checking is asking for feedback on the findings from some of the participants. To that end, participants were asked for their
feedback on the transcripts of their interviews, which helped to avoid a misinterpretation of the meaning that participants have expressed.

**Trustworthiness and verification.** Trustworthiness in qualitative research is important due to its potential to influence the practice of practitioners. The data found in this study may aid school and district personnel who wish to have a deeper understanding of cyberbullying and its unequal influence on middle school girls. Creswell (2013) has claimed that the conclusions must be worth paying attention to. Conclusions that are worth paying attention to help to confirm and verify the data as relevant and worthwhile.

**IRB approval and protection of human subjects.** The site of this study does not have its own institutional review board; hence, approval was ultimately granted by the superintendent of the district and the principal of the school (Appendix D). Once approval was granted and received from the research site institution, the Northeastern University internal review board (IRB) approved the recruitment process of participants. The same timeline occurred to ascertain the appropriate approval for the permission to interview school-based personnel.

Creswell (2013) stated that the focus of internal review boards is the protection of human subjects. This is especially pertinent to qualitative studies and even more relevant to studies that require the participation of human subjects. Steps taken to protect human subjects for this study are outlined below.

Any direct reference to individuals (whether part of this study or not) were given a pseudonym. The school and district were also given a different name to protect all identifying markers. Within the content of the recruitment letter (Appendix A) and the informed consent document (Appendix B) school-based personnel were all informed how their identities would be protected.
A Northeastern University IRB-approved informed consent document (Appendix B) provided further protection of human subjects by allowing sufficient time to consider their decision to participate. Within the informed consent document, participants were provided with my personal contact information as well as information on how to contact the principal investigator and a representative of Northeastern University’s internal review board.

The initial recruitment letter (Appendix A) and informed consent document (Appendix B) both indicated to participants that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and that they could quit at any time as well as choose not to respond to questions. Though there were no known risks due to participation in this study, participants were warned that some of the questions may trigger emotional responses given the fact that they were being asked to reflect upon, what could potentially be, traumatic experiences that they have had to investigate or counsel.

**Limitations**

The first limitation of this study was the proposed number of participants, which is representative of qualitative studies. The findings of qualitative studies are also not intended to be statistically significant due to the limited number of participants. Though the intent of this study was not to produce statistically significant data, the limitations of the number of participants was mitigated by ensuring that data from interviews and documents were triangulated. Most important to me was the concern I had with presenting the true meaning of what was expressed by the participants. It is understood that the participants may not be able to truly account for events that occurred in the past; however, the participants were purposefully sampled and were considered professionals. I did not rely on their ability to recount specific
times, dates, and locations, but rather their ability to provide an overall narrative informed by their individual experiences and histories.

The second limitation to this study was based on the fact that all of the interviews and documents were based on a single-site. All participants and documents were governed by the parameters of instrumental case study using inductive design to uncover understandings in connections with girls who had experienced incidences of cyberbullying. Further, a limitation to this type of study means that the data produced from the research participants would be difficult to replicate and reproduce. At the same time, the findings that emerged would be difficult to generalize to other sites.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to answer the four research questions using qualitative case study methodology. Inductive design using semi-structured interviews with purposeful sample supplemented by observations to ascertain the experiences of middle school girls was chosen as the methodology for this study. The experiences of the middle school girls discussed in this study were bound by the same middle school in a county located in the southern region of New York. Six building-level personnel with intimate knowledge of the experiences of middle school girls were interviewed and asked about their perceptions and observations related to the research questions. The methodology, and subsequent questions, of this study allowed for the participants to provide a narrative of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. Stake’s (1995) description of instrumental case study also allowed for the freedom for the researcher to build a gestalt of the phenomenon at hand, an exciting and powerful prospect for a study such as this one.
Semi-structured interviews and documents were utilized as the main sources of data collection. The collection and subsequent collection of data not only provided the foundation for the study to be trustworthy, but also as a way to ensure that the emergent findings from multiple sources of data were in some way aligned. First and second level coding was enacted to determine the necessary categories (Merriam, 2009), which helped facilitate the organizing of raw data.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the interviewing of six key school-based personnel, participants were well-informed regarding the outline and structure of this thesis proposal. These protections have been detailed in Appendices A-D, demonstrating that every effort was made to not only maintain the anonymity of their identity, but to also foster an authentic sincerity and sensitivity given the nature of victimization and the topic at hand.

The underlying philosophies and subsequent methodology utilized in this study and stated in this chapter, have created the backdrop and structures to allow for the voices of victimized girls to live, emerge, and remain front and center relative to the context. Guided by the methodological structures discussed in this chapter, Chapter 4 will provide the space for the voices and stories, as told by six key participants, of middle school girls victimized by cyberbullying at the hands of their own classmates.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter reports on the findings from data analysis of cyberbullying experiences as reported by school administrators and counselors. The data collected contributes to the understanding of the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. The experiences of school administrators and counselors have helped to identify themes connected to the purpose of this study, which is to understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls attending a suburban school district in New York State.

Participants and Documents

The investigation of the above questions was gathered by using six one-on-one interviews with either administrators, counselors, or a social worker in the same middle school building. For the purposes of this study, the middle school will be referred to as Z Middle School. The counselors and administrators interviewed for this study are listed below in Table 4 using pseudonyms assigned by the researcher. Their backgrounds might be different, yet they all share the common feature of working directly with students and parents at Z Middle School.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Years at Z Middle School</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Investigatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Investigatory</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contextual Analysis of a Suburban Middle School

The research site for this study took place at a suburban New York City middle school in New York State. The school is populated by 1231 students, 593 males and 638 females. Seventy-two percent of the students are White, 18% are Latino, 4% Asian, 3% are Black and less than 3% are multiracial. About 10% of the population are classified as Special Education students and about 12% are labeled as economically disadvantaged (nysed.gov, 2019).

The analysis of the school not only included data gathered from the New York State Education Department’s website, but also a) New York State’s DASA policy, b) the district’s guidelines pertaining to DASA, c) the district’s code of conduct and d) the responsibilities of the DASA liaison. The process to first choose and then analyze these documents aligned with the research questions and rationale for this study. The documents were analyzed to ensure that a thorough and meaningful examination was conducted.

Dignity for all students act (DASA). Of import to this study is the context and climate in New York State, the location where this study was conducted. The New York State Education Department is addressing the trends in the lives of students and has drafted special legislation aimed at reform within all New York state public schools. DASA and the corresponding guide for administrators elucidates the state’s expectations for schools to create and sustain nurturing environments for all students, regardless of class, gender, sexual orientation, and weight. In other words, New York has legislated a policy with the sole intent to protect the rights of all New York
state public school students so that they may attend school free of harassment, discrimination, taunting, and bullying (DASA, 2013).

The district’s DASA guidelines. “In its simplest form, DASA is intended to afford all students in public schools an environment free from discrimination, harassment, and bullying in all its forms including taunting and intimidation and by any means including internet or other digital communications or media” (District website). Furthermore, cyberbullying and bullying must meet multiple standards for individual accounts to rise to the level where the case can be safely called bullying or cyberbullying.

The district’s DASA guidelines specifically state the following three points:

- “Unreasonably and substantially” interfere with a student’s academic performance and social-emotional health;
- “Reasonably cause” a student to fear attending school or the individual targeting them and/or;
- Take place off school grounds and be the cause of “unreasonably and substantially” interfering with the student on school grounds.

District code of conduct. The district’s code of conduct repeats the statements found in the DASA guidelines, but bears repeating due to the acknowledgement of the district that cyberbullying not only occurs, but that it has a detrimental impact on those involved. Accordingly, bullying and cyberbullying equates to the creation of a hostile environment by conduct or by threats, intimidation or abuse, that

- has or would have the effect of unreasonably and substantially interfering with a student’s educational performance, opportunities or benefits, or mental, emotional and/or physical well-being, or
- reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause a student to fear for his or her physical safety; or
- reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause physical injury or emotional harm to a student; or
- occurs off school property and creates or would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption in the school environment, where it is foreseeable that the conduct, threats, intimidation or abuse might reach school property.

**Responsibilities of the DASA coordinator.** The Dignity Act Coordinator (or liaison) is responsible for coordinating and enforcing this policy and the Dignity for All Students Act Policy in each school building. They are therefore charged with the promotion of a safe, supportive, orderly and stimulating school environment, supporting active teaching and learning for all students regardless of actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender or sex. The DASA liaison is also charged with promoting positive behavior and identifying curricular resources that support civility in classroom instruction.

**Coding Output from Key School Personnel**

The coding used to decide themes and one example can be found below. The three major themes or categories were created by examining the 22 smaller coding categories, which were derived from examples and quotations found within the transcripts. One example for each code has been provided as an illustrative example.

**Table 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding System</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vulnerability of girls</th>
<th>Virality</th>
<th>Rebecca reported that in one incident alone, a nude picture of a girl was shared with “13 other boys.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to technology</td>
<td>“Just in this middle school we have students who are certainly online, and talking to each other online, all night long. But we also have students who are watching YouTube until four in the morning.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deception</td>
<td>“Kids have what they call a finstagram account” to fool parents.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital literacy</td>
<td>School teaches digital literacy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupervised kids</td>
<td>Kids are watching “YouTube until 4:00AM.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media use</td>
<td>WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just one</td>
<td>Just one text or photo can send a group of kids into a frenzy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fallout of cyberbullying experiences for girls</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional reactions</td>
<td>“There's cutting and self-injurious behavior, suicidal ideation.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>Interviewing kids is fraught with “social shaming and fear.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More rumors</td>
<td>After interviewing, kids talk and spread rumors.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation of events</td>
<td>“Girls don’t have the emotional architecture” to disregard.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical issues</td>
<td>“Pushed in second grade.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>“Girls are coming out of class, missing class, feeling that they can’t stay in class.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>“Girls calling her fat.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No self-reflection</td>
<td>“It’s not my fault.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adult Perspectives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>“Investigations can take up to “70% of my time.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactions</td>
<td>“Sometimes parents get so angry, they just want to take the phone away and that's not necessary.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent expectations</td>
<td>One parent “threatened to put a sign on the Z Middle School lawn saying a sexual predator goes to school here.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convoluted stories</td>
<td>“We're just like, “Oh, you heard that? But this is what I heard” and it’s a completely different story.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental supervision</td>
<td>“I think it's very hard for parents to then supervise if they're really doing that [school work] or if they're actually facetimeing or what they're doing.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Parents' first interaction
Parents not used to hearing about cyberbullying since they are new to middle school.

Working with parents
“I love working with parents.”

Themes

The key findings presented in this chapter are organized in conjunction with the identified themes that emerged from the data collection. The themes are described in sequence depicted in Table 6. The themes were derived from Table 5, with the major theme being renamed to better illustrate the condensing of codes relevant to this study.

The first theme, the amplification of girls’ vulnerability through cyberbullying, is supported by different subthemes which include: 1) the viral nature of cyberbullying; 2) the access to ubiquitous forms of communication; and 3) the desire for some perpetrators to engage in acts of deception. The second theme to arise out of the data was the post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by girls and as reported by the participants. The data gathered supported three sub-themes: 1) a range of emotional reactions from the girls; 2) how girls responded to the school-based personnel; and 3) time missed in class.

The third theme to arise from the data was the post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by the adults involved. Three significant sub-themes were detected as a result of cyberbullying events: 1) time spent by participants investigating cyberbullying cases; 2) the emotional reactions of parents as catalogued by the participants; and 3) the outsized expectations for justice on the part of parents. The identified themes and subthemes were utilized to describe, explain, and better understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls at Z Middle School.

Table 6

Themes and Subthemes
Amplification of girls’ vulnerability. The first major theme to emerge from this study is the amplification of the vulnerability of girls to be targeted subjects; whether it was perpetrated by boys or other girls is inconsequential, as the experiences of girls, their life at home and at school were deeply impacted by the perpetrators. Their vulnerability is especially amplified with the three subthemes: 1) the viral nature of cyberbullying; 2) the access that students have to ubiquitous forms of communication; and 3) and the desire for perpetrators to engage in acts of deception.

Viral nature of cyberbullying. The viral nature of cyberbullying amplified the experiences had by girls victimized by cyberbullying. With access to free and easy-to-use technology, students are able to freely communicate with one another through a variety of ways. The sharing or forwarding option for any image, text, or video can be disseminated with much alacrity combined with the fact that the content produced is permanent and undeletable. The data collected within this section underscored the reality experienced by middle school students at Z Middle School.

The Z Middle School Code of Conduct states that language illustrating that “bullying or harassment” and “abusive language” or “language that intimidates” are Level 2 consequences,
which include both lunch detention and after-school detention. However, nothing in the student Z Middle School Student Code of Conduct specifically mentions acts of cyberbullying or the sharing of information; however, cyberbullying is defined in both the district’s DASA Policy and the district’s Code of Conduct. According to the principal and assistant principals interviewed for this study, cellphones are not permitted at Z Middle School, yet all personnel interviewed agreed that cyberbullying occurs both on school property and off of it.

The viral nature of cyberbullying can look different depending on how it commences. For example, Assistant principal Alex stated that he has seen text threads of up to twenty students. One mean comment or image about one student can spread with much ease simply due to the number of eyes associated with the thread. Alex further elaborated:

So, for instance, if kids all go to the Yacht Club, for instance, that produces the opportunity for a small social network to emerge. And one of the ways that that proliferates is through one text message thread. Very often an inappropriate comment, or a mean name, or a photograph, ends up becoming the driving force of a group text.

In a different case, Psychologist Liz recalled a scenario where cyberbullying was amplified due to two students teaming up together on an overnight school trip:

On the DC trip, two students are roommates and they'll say, "Oh, let's text this student in the other room." The girls will get on their phones, like one roommate will get on the other roommate's phone and say, "Give it to me, I'll start," and they'll write pages and pages of mean words that are exchanged to the other student, and they don't know that, maybe they said like, "You're fat and your boyfriend doesn't even like you, and he was flirting with me."
Principal Caitlin and assistant principal Alex also reported that videos go viral with much ease, videos laced with content intended to shame and embarrass the targeted student. In one example described by both Caitlin and Alex, a video montage was created that likened the targeted students to animals. The viral nature of cyberbullying also allows for events, and video montages, such as the one referenced, to linger on social media. Caitlin added that “even if it’s something that happened three weeks ago, on vacation, far away from our school building,” the cyberbullying event simply does not dissolve, but instead festers.

The viral dissemination of content includes the factor that all participants interviewed agree that there have been cases where boys pressure girls into sending them a nude picture. The boy then shares this image with friends, who then shares the content with more friends. Rebecca reported that in one incident alone, a nude picture of a girl was shared with “13 other boys.” In another separate incident described by Psychologist Rebecca, a boy pressured a girl to send him a picture of herself masturbating.

In another case, Alex stated that a video was made by a girl and shared with an untold number of other students and added that “once you send a picture of yourself that isn't something that you want the world to see, it's never going to be gone. And we've really seen girls almost not recover from events like this.” Both the state and district DASA policies contain language to ensure that schools attend to students victimized by incidences that substantially and unreasonably interfere with a student’s life at school. The girl’s case described above may have certainly been afforded the protections offered under DASA.

Psychologist Liz has observed that some boys target girls with Special Education classifications. For example, rumor spreads that a girl can potentially be manipulated due to her difficulty in controlling her impulses, a mood disorder, or a classification of ADHD, factors that
may result in boys requesting nude photos and videos of girls who might be more likely to acquiesce. Liz and Social Worker Mason agreed that many of these scenarios play out in 8th grade with the school’s more vulnerable students. Liz specifically highlighted that “special education students” and “students with low self-esteem” seem to be disproportionately targeted compared to students who are not classified as special education students. The district’s Code of Conduct Policy as well as the DASA policy would be applied here. The students being targeted fall under a protected class and the conduct is egregious enough to warrant disciplinary action based on the Code of Conduct as well as for the liaison to take specific actions relative to the case at hand.

One common scenario described by Liz consisted of a girl sending an image to a male. The male in turn shares the picture with friends, quickly making the photo or content available to others. In addition, the girl in this case may engage in actions that perpetuate the creation and sharing of images. Liz recalled the following scenario, “If boys stopped texting her, she would then start texting the boys, like just sending the pictures without asking.” Mason added that boys also requested images and commented on the bodily appearance of girls by saying, "I noticed that your boobs are growing. Do you have a new bra? You have a nice little butt. What about if you took off that bra?"

When asked to elaborate on the history of the phenomenon of sharing nude images at Z Middle School, Alex reported the following:

So, something I've noticed an increase in, even just in the short three years that I've been here, is that more and more boys are asking girls to send them nudes. And invariably what happens is, and this has happened. Specifically, I can think of at least five times, a
girl will comply with that request, and then a boy will then send those nudes to large
groups of his friends, or even the entire class.

The longtime School Psychologist Rebecca, confirms this situation by making the observation
that “kids are simply less restrained with technology than in years past.”

There are also instances which might seem “silly” to the outside observer, yet the
silliness serves as another example of girls disseminating information intended to cause harm to
a fellow student. Liz recalled an event where a girl was upset because she felt that another girl
had copied her sparkly and silver invitation. To exact revenge, the girl took a screenshot of the
fellow student’s invitation and texted to her friends that "Abby is such a loser, she copied my
invitation, no one go to her Bat-mitzvah." The girl proceeded to make this her Snap Chat story,
furthering the narrative of the copied invitations while simultaneously shaming another girl.

According to Psychologist Rebecca, information can also become viral by girls
confessing something they perceived to be confidential. The girl might release something
embarrassing to a supposed confidant. That confidant in turn uses the released material against
them to shame or embarrass. Rebecca reported that girls might share “something that they're
struggling with” or reveal details about “family dynamics or social dynamics that are affecting
them.” Situations can often spin out of control due to the supposed confidant releasing the
intimate information on social media.”

There is also the factor of volume. Social worker Mason has seen text message streams
that go on for pages. The messages, in this case, were aimed at the appearance of other girls and
the clothes they were wearing. Sometimes the messaging was targeted to the recipient of the
messages, and sometimes the messages were about a student who does not have access to a
phone, WhatsApp, or Snapchat. This can go on “for pages, after pages, that you cannot believe
the amount of time” being spent on messaging one another. The viral messages in this case spread, which eventually gets back to the targeted girl, who is then crushed to hear that she has been the target, only realizing this when others inform her.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, there have been a few cases where a girl shared or released something about herself that would be perceived to be true, but in reality, it is not. Alex noted that “we've had girls pretend to harm themselves and send pictures of it to other kids.” It should be noted that the other participants did not make note of this in their interview. Regardless of how it starts, developmentally inappropriate content is spread and shared with others, altering the everyday experience of those victimized.

The access to ubiquitous forms of communication. Students at Z Middle School, though not permitted to use the phones during the school day, either find the time during the day to use their phones or use them off school hours. This policy is printed in both the student Code of Conduct found on the school’s website and enforced by the school safety officers and building administration. As previously noted in this study, the number of students with access to phones and the technology that phones come equipped to handle, continue to skyrocket.

The details outlined above combined with Z Middle School faculty encouraging the use of technology to reinforce lessons, only helps to increase student access to different forms of digital literacy. Not only are Chromebooks readily available for students (on school grounds), but students also have become more fluent with such platforms as Adobe Spark and Google Classroom as well as sites that allow students to build their own websites. This type of free technology is ubiquitous, harmless, and positively powerful when used appropriately. As noted by the participants, the increased reliance on 21st century technologies and practices instituted by the school provides the space for students to build their own digital literacy, a factor that may in
fact contribute to increased screen time and the potential for perpetrators to engage in inappropriate and offensive forms of communication.

Both Alex and Liz concurred that the more girls use online platforms, the more likely they are to be cyberbullied. Caitlin further explained that sometimes incidences start off quite innocently, in that students might be discussing a homework assignment, which then might turn into something far more egregious. Rebecca offered her observation that there is a lot of pressure for students stay engaged online, due to homework assignments and the use of Google Classroom. Samantha concurred by adding “we have had a few incidents of kids figuring out how to add insults and harass” to others via Google Classroom.

Students, in other words, are already online, engaged in legitimate homework assignments. However, the desire to be a part of something exceeds the value of homework, “Kids are excited to be in mix of something physically in school with something that took place outside of school,” explained Alex. This notion is further compounded by the observation from all participants that the students with the better technology seem to be more in the thick of social situations. Alex added, “Just in this middle school we have students who are certainly online, and talking to each other online, all night long. But we also have students who are watching YouTube until four in the morning.”

Psychologist Rebecca observed that “I don't know that I've met a middle school child without a phone.” Her statement not only concurs with Alex’s insight in that “students are writing now more than ever in history,” but some of the content is inappropriate. Therefore, some of the content created within text messaging apps and social media is intended to harm, shame, and embarrass another student. Though the veracity of this statement is hard to quantify, what seems to be true is that middle school students at Z Middle School are engaged in prolific
writing, just not the type of writing that builds positive school cultures and experiences for everyone.

Interestingly enough Principal Caitlin reports that a majority of cyberbullying events occur off school grounds. “What happens is they continue and go over into the school day because our students are very preoccupied with social media with what’s happening in their lives and the lives of others.” Though cyberbullying events can and do take place off of school grounds, Rebecca reported that students can easily “pick up their phones in the hallway” and send a quick text or message. As the psychologist, Rebecca’s role is not to discipline students, hence her observation that she sees students in her office receive up to “ten text messages” on their phone, and thus reciprocating by authoring a response in kind. In one particular example that occurred off school grounds, but spilled over in the school day, assistant principal Samantha stated that a boy and a girl in a relationship traded salacious texts to one another: “In investigating that, there were a lot of things that were unclear, but there were texts exchanged, and both the boy and the girl said that there were inappropriate things said over text.” Specifically, the boy stated that he liked that she was “thick,” liked her “thicker body,” and that “he liked her ass.”

On a slightly different note, Psychologist Liz noted that cyberbullying from a communication perspective looks different depending on the age of the students. She stated that “It's interesting, because I think that the way it looks in 6th grade is very different than the way it looks in 8th grade.” In other words, the 8th grader might be more likely to use different apps and technology, while the 6th grader is more apt to use more text-based forms of communication. Alex, Rebecca, Liz, Caitlin, and Samantha all agree in that texting, Snapchat, and Instagram are by far the most popular forms of communication, regardless of grade level. Psychologist Liz has
observed that things are quite different compared to when she attended school and the tension that is created when trying to keep up with the technology students use, “A lot has changed since we were in middle school, due to the nature of how technology has changed, so for us it's very hard to always keep up with what's going on and what's the new way.”

Assistant principal Samantha received a case which included a different manipulation of technology during a school field trip, “On the bus the kids were airdropping pictures to each other.” No other participant mentioned airdropping as a way to communicate and target other students, which speaks to the ubiquitous nature of cyberbullying and how the availability of easy-to-use technology continues to pervade the lives of the Z Middle School students. In this particular case, the pictures were inappropriate in nature. Yet in a different case Samantha, investigated physical “fights” that occurred due to issues arising from Fortnight, as students who play the video game are able to quite easily communicate with one another while playing.

In a statement of frustration, Assistant principal Alex stated that if “there was a big red button I could press it and make an app explode it would be Snapchat. It is the absolute number one offender in this case.” However, Alex goes on to say that “Instagram raises the stakes a little bit because it connects the bullying, sometimes, to a specific image. So, if it is physical shaming, or abuse, or bullying, it's all the more cutting.” Assistant principal Samantha added that students are “sharing a whole lot of information with each other. I don't know how much” on sites such as Instagram and Snapchat. According to Rebecca, an app called House Party is another example where an incident occurs off school grounds, yet negatively impacts the students at school. Social worker Mason claimed that WhatsApp was one of the current favorites by students in his care.
During his three years of service at Z Middle School, Alex noted the following about the interplay between a text chain and the roles that some students play in that chain:

I have found, oftentimes, that other girls are often aggravating throughout the process, and by that I mean if you've got 20 kids on a text message chain, and two or three of them are acting abusively, five to seven of them might be raising the temperature through their-secondary comments. And then, when they come into school, they're spreading the rumor around that so and so said something about this girl. Because, quite honestly, I mean, I think the kids don't have a real understanding of the implications of their actions, and it's exciting for them to be involved.

Without prompt, Alex provided a different insight by thinking back to the way things were when he was a student and compared that time to now, “I think this kind of bullying and shaming has always occurred, but for the first time in human history we have a record.” Alex further elaborated on his this thought and cited that the written evidence used to be hand-written notes on pieces of paper. “I think back to when we were in school, where the teacher grabs a note that was passed between desks, now there's evidence, right? Now there's so much evidence of kids treating each other poorly.” Alex continued his reflection: “I mean, there's an infinite number of apps for an infinite number of purposes. And again, this is me just kind of thinking out loud, I find that students are turning to each other online to connect.”

The opportunity for tech-savvy students to target a girl, or any student for that matter, is easy, ubiquitous, and accessible to any party wishing to cause harm. Couple these factors with the observation that students have a hard time turning off their phones and the fact that communicating with an infinite number of apps, equates to the potential of the creation of a hostile environment that can be sparked and maintained with a few clicks on a cellphone. The
hostile environment can be created on or off school grounds, at any time of day and can potentially lead to a variety of issues for students.

**Deception.** This subtheme can be generally described as students engaging in acts of deception to hide their true identity or actively creating multiple, virtual identities. In many cases, the purpose of identity deception is to target another student or to hide some of the more flagrant and inappropriate content from the eyes of their parents. Acts of deception can potentially create vulnerable conditions for girls and can be considered a purposeful and intent-laden act to avoid consequences while simultaneously targeting another.

All participants reported that they had dealt with incidences where the perpetrator attempted to remain anonymous. Alex and Rebecca stated that students either want to remain anonymous from their parents or from the person they are targeting. Students, according to assistant principal Alex, create “parent-facing” identities on Instagram and post benign pictures and text for their parents to see. The content conveyed in this manner is intended to be seen by their parents and, according to assistant principal Alex, is fully intended to showcase a “different side of themselves.” All participants agreed that students create “Finsta” accounts, or fake Instagram accounts, intended to deceive parents in one way and express what they truly want to express in a separate account created for their friends. The “friend” account, could then be deployed to target another student without being detected by parents.

Due to assistant principal Alex having extensive experiences in investigating cases with girls, he was prompted to reflect upon why girls create these accounts. “Girls create these accounts so that their families can have access to an account aligned to their family values” as girls often “omit” embarrassing and unbecoming chunks of their virtual life when their actions are under investigation and scrutinized. Alex seemed to believe that what is left out can be a
result from girls wanting to maintain a certain image aligned to the beliefs and values of her family, which is sometimes depicted in the family-friendly Instagram account.

Alex further expounded on the topic of fake Instagram accounts: “Kids have what they call a finstagram account, which is a fake Instagram account that they use as a proxy to bully others or say what they really want to say about each other.” Upon further reflection, Alex noted that “I don't mean that as a judgment, but oftentimes a child’s Instagram account is parent-facing and have a sort of persona that's acceptable, or operating in some sort of ethical boundaries, whereas the finsta accounts are less the case.” Even so, Alex stated that these virtual spaces in essence create a platform for “poor behavior and language.” Psychologist Liz iterated that students “like to either make a new Snap Chat account or an Instagram account that's anonymous, and then it's a forum to bully without the consequences, no one knows who they are.” With reference to anonymous Snap Chat or Instagram account, she further offered the insight that there is a peak grade in which this occurs: “I think 6th grade, we don't really see this, I think it really starts the middle of 7th grade, and then I think the heart of it is in 8th grade.”

Assistant principal Alex and Psychologist Rebecca have observed that the acts of creating fake accounts have allowed students to have both an online and offline presence. There is a “purposeful mismatch of persona displayed in person and that of online persona” stated Alex. Rebecca concurred by adding that students can be a “model citizen on one hand and a perpetrator on the other.” Students thus have multiple personas depending on the scenario, who they are communicating with, and why they are communicating.

Assistant principal Alex added to the divergence of online and offline personas by noting his observation of a number of examples where a reasonable and rational person might perceive a certain child to be a model citizen. In these types of cases, the child seems to be “Enfranchised
in curricular and extracurricular activities. Then you receive a text message chain, as I often receive as evidence, where the child uses hateful and profane language that doesn't match the way they present in real life.” Alex summed up his thoughts by stating, “there are delivery mechanisms that kids didn't have access to before, but I would argue that it's the relative anonymity of the online space that encourages these behaviors.” Rebecca concurred with these sentiments by stating that students certainly feel “less restrained” on social media platforms.

Other scenarios of anonymity were confirmed by Assistant Principal Samantha and Social Worker Mason. Samantha recalled one particular boy who targeted another girl by stating “he allegedly changed his name” to secretly send the girl vulgarities and inappropriate messages. The boy was eventually caught, but it took the time of the parents and Samantha to determine who was targeting this particular girl. In a similar scenario Mason provided a chilling example of a girl who had been molested by her stepfather. The girl confided in a friend, only then to find that a fake account had been made by another student. The purpose of the account was to make fun of the girl who had been molested. Even so, she continued to come to school, but deeply suffered from this experience.

Social Worker Mason was the only participant who noticed that some girls purposefully trade phones with one another to text demeaning messages to another student. It seems that sometimes the bystander, who may not initially be invested in the conversation, becomes invested. In this type of scenario Mason explained that a student might give up their phone to another student, only then to have that student text inappropriate and disturbing messages to the targeted student(s). Other students sometimes get involved by becoming cheerleaders, encouraging the use of messages that shame and embarrass others.
The operating of anonymous spaces complicates life and compounds the vulnerability for Z Middle School girls. The complexity is generated from the up keeping of different personas for different people. Parents are intended to be the recipients of content worthy of their approval, while friend-facing accounts can potentially depict content and messaging intended for their friends. Some of the hidden content is intended to harm and demean others, which means that girls can potentially use the anonymous accounts to perpetrate acts of cyberbullying or become victimized by the same means. In sum, students at Z Middle School seemed to be less restrained while engaged in messaging one another, regardless of whether they are using their phone or their friend’s phone.

**Post-cyberbullying ramifications for girls.** The second theme to arise out of the data is the post-cyberbullying ramifications for girls as reported by the participants. The data gathered supported the sub-themes that girls a) experienced considerable emotional impediments in the aftermath of being cyberbullied and b) a variation in how girls responded to the investigatory and counseling processes. Practical ramifications also surfaced, which included c) time missed in class.

**Emotional responses of girls.** Though each participant investigated different scenarios and/or counseled different girls, common themes did arise. For one, potentially serious and intense emotional ramifications occurred in the aftermath of a cyberbullying incident. Participants also reported less intense emotional reactions of those who had been targeted.

**Intense emotional reactions.** Targeted and victimized girls experienced anxiety, depression, and a sense of withdrawal. According to both psychologists, Rebecca and Liz, some girls engaged in “self-injurious behavior” as well as suicidal ideation, which was also noted by Principal Caitlin. Rebecca elaborated more by saying, “We see a lot of cyberbullying in the
middle school, but my role really is that I become involved when it's having a real negative effect on kids, when often there's cutting and self-injurious behavior, suicidal ideation.”

Principal Caitlin discussed and focused on a particular case that she remembered and had this to say regarding the ramifications of girls being cyberbullied:

They talk about being alone. They talk about being misunderstood. This one particular girl had a boyfriend and because of some of the messaging that went back and forth, the boyfriend left her. They were calling her a whore, they were calling her promiscuous and so many words via text and that it spiraled. What happens with cyberbullying is that there's so many other symptoms that happen afterwards. For this young lady she became very depressed, very withdrawn on one part because her friends were accusing her of being something that she felt she wasn't and then her boyfriend left her. That solidified it for her and she started to believe some of the same things that she was reading about herself.

Less intense emotional reactions. There are also less serious and intense emotional responses that still impact the life of a girl. These feelings range from saying “It’s not my fault” or “they misunderstand me,” as noticed by Principal Caitlin. Important as well is Alex’s insight that “they [girls] don't have the emotional architecture to contextualize it, or, you know, in the best-case scenario to sluff it off.” Social Worker Mason reported similar sentiments and noted that the girls “never work it through [by keeping] it inside, making themselves to feel strong.” This is akin to Principal Rebecca’s observation that “there is something like culturally where girls I think want to be tough and they don't want to necessarily admit that they're hurt.” She then added that they “continue to sort of engage in the social media interaction even though they're being hurt without admitting that they're being hurt.” Other participants noted that girls who have
been targeted seem to be withdrawn from their typical social situations. They also seem to experience, according to Principal Caitlin, an identity crisis and often feel, stated Rebecca, “pushed away” by their peers.

In some cases, students have harbored negative feelings about another student that can be traced back to long-standing issues exacerbated by a cyberbullying event. In one example, Social Worker Mason reported that some counseling sessions are dedicated to the examination of issues that occurred during elementary school. During these sessions, girls bring things up like when they were “pushed in the second grade” or a time when one child lied to the other child’s parents about something that took place years ago. According to Mason, not only do these stories complicate the feelings associated with being cyberbullied, they also increase the time spent in counseling due to the layers that need to be explored.

As illustrated by Psychologist Liz and Social Worker Mason, girls also experienced self-esteem issues in connection with cyberbullying. In one particular case, Liz noted that the self-esteem of a particular girl was being impacted as others were “calling her fat and telling her that she's being cheated on.” Liz further noted that this particular girl was subject to other messages replete with words to shame her and was not a first-time victim. In a general way, Mason reported that targeted girls tended to blame themselves for the event. Other victims, he stated, are “combative” and “shoot back immediately” as a way of “protecting themselves.”

While the above describes the self-esteem of girls impacted due to being targeted, there are cases in which the girl’s self-esteem plays an essential role in the cyberbullying event. On this end of the spectrum are girls who have sent nude images or videos and are reported to like and even crave the attention. According to Liz, some of these particular girls are classified as special education students, yet the girls claim to enjoy the attention from boys after the sending
of the images. Liz provided a specific example and stated that a particular girl liked the attention so much so that it “felt good for her in that moment. She sent pictures on several occasions, even after we knew that she had sent the picture she would continue to send them.” Liz further illustrates the complex nature of moods affiliated with girls sending pictures to boys: The students would actually say that they would get a high in the moment, like it would feel good for them. One student would then have feelings of remorse and embarrassment and anxiety because after she had been able to reflect more what she was doing she would become ashamed of what had happened. Whereas the other student did not have that same type of reaction and was still feeling that type of attention-seeking, that gratifying feeling that she had, and would seek that attention constantly.

**Responses of students toward school-based personnel.** In addition to the emotional reactions documented above, there is the added complexity of the ramifications that occur when students speak to the administration or counselors about their experience. Convoluting the issue is that some students may potentially be reliant upon their phones for counseling. Social Worker Mason noted that in the aftermath of some incidences, emotional confusion occurs due to the reliance of the phone:

The telephone serves as a transitional object for girls’ confusion. Instead of going to the counselors and sharing their difficulties or talking to a teacher or talking to someone that they trust. Now the telephone has become a virtual counselor.

When students do attend to questioning and counseling with school-based personnel, other concerns are raised to the surface. According to Assistant Principal Alex, he finds “in these investigations is if you're the victim, oftentimes each step of the investigation involves new emotional territory, scary emotional territory, and the possible consequence of public shaming.”
The public shaming can potentially occur due to the possibility of more students discovering that an investigation is taking place, simply because students talk to one another. Psychologist Liz shared a story where one particular student was “very afraid to have me let the guidance counselor know, because she didn't want it to come back to her that she was the one that had to go to the psychologist about what had happened.” Alex noted that the complex emotional ramifications of not only being victimized by cyberbullying, but also the hole that one cannot seem to escape when more students discover an event has occurred as a result of an investigation.

A push-away factor on the part of other less-involved students can occur as well. Both Social Worker Mason and Assistant Principal Alex noted that this is the response of some students when they hear that a targeted girl is speaking with administration or a counselor. For example, Alex took the perspective of those called in to be interviewed and stated, that “cross referencing” will occur and that when a girl reports being bullied, word gets around that “the assistant principal talks to five other people” to determine the veracity and who was involved. According to Mason, this factor can cause students to be extremely defiant, even when confronted with pages of evidence. Alex further reflected and stated that “despite me being a fairly nuanced investigator, it gets back to the kids. So that's, in and of itself, socially shaming, and fraught with a lot of fear and anxiety.”

*Time missed in class.* Another universal consequence according to the participants is that girls miss instructional time due to the ramifications following a cyberbullying event. For instance, girls might stay out of class due to everyone feeling like they are looking at them. Rebecca explained more by stating:
Girls are coming down out of class, missing class, feeling that they can't stay in class because they feel that others are looking at them, that everybody knows, that will be seen at lunch. They come down to the guidance office, they miss class. The girls want to talk, they want to process it, they want to process it with me.

In one instance, Assistant Principal Alex recalled one particular incident that he was investigating that “categorically I would say she was unable to enter an academic environment without hysterically crying or leaving the room.” On the opposite end of the spectrum, there are also girls who take advantage of the resources available to them. For instance, a few girls have been known to create a pattern by trying to get out of a certain class on a certain day or time. However, Liz noted that “when it's a crisis situation, we drop what we're doing and we meet with the kid.”

In one way or another, it is evident that students miss class due to cyberbullying incidents. Students might miss class due to feeling ashamed or embarrassed about a rumor circulating in connection with a cyberbullying event. Students may also miss time in class due to an administrator interviewing multiple students in a particular case, which means the administrator requires the presence of all involved. Students may also miss class due to wanting or needing some kind of therapeutic intervention, which is usually supplied by a counselor. Additionally, students might be nervous about coming to school and attending class. Psychologist Rebecca stated that during the school year “girls are coming down out of class, missing class, feeling that they can't stay in class because they feel that others are looking at them, that everybody knows.” Assistant Principal Samantha reflected on how certain times of the year seem relatively quieter than others. However, when an event does occur, the time that students are needed to be interviewed “can take hours” out of the day, so much so that the girls
will continue to come down, come down, come down.” In this case, “come down” can be interpreted as the assistant principal’s office.

**Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by adults.** The third theme to arise from the data was the post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by the adults involved. Adults in this case equates to administrators, counselors, and parents. Though cyberbullying can potentially take place off school grounds, it remains the school’s responsibility to investigate and act upon incidences of cyberbullying (for a precise and elaborate definition of how the district defines bullying and cyberbullying, refer to Appendix E) that disrupts the flow of the school day.

The district’s Dignity for All Students Act (DASA) Policy reifies this concept and states:

> All forms of off-campus bullying, harassment or discrimination including, but not limited to cyberbullying, which may include the use of instant messaging, e-mail, websites, chat rooms and text messaging, or other acts in violation of this policy when such acts occur off school property and create or would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption within the school environment, where it is foreseeable that the conduct, threats, intimidation or abuse might reach school property. The expectation for administrators and counselors to create a safe school environment underscores the reality that it is their responsibility to investigate and provide counsel in connection with cyberbullying and bullying incidences that occur off school grounds, yet seep into and disrupt the school day.

The district conveys more detailed language fully articulating the expectations for school-based personnel. The document articulating this language can be found in Appendix E.

Specific to the district’s DASA policy and germane to this study is the district’s salient description of the roles and responsibilities of school-based personnel to advocate for the rights
of students who may be categorized as belonging to a protected class such as age, weight, race, religion, or disability. Most relevant to the central theme of this study is the category of sex and the vulnerability experienced by middle school girls being targeted and victimized possibly due to the fact that they are female. Within the context of post-cyberbullying ramifications for the adults involved, four significant sub-themes were detected within the data. They are as follows: a) the time spent investigating by school-based personnel, b) parent supervision and monitoring of cell phone use, c) the emotional reactions of parents, and d) the outsized expectations for justice on the part of parents.

**Time spent investigating.** Five out of the six participants were extremely clear on the issue of the time it takes to investigate reports of cyberbullying. A case could come to them by way of what they heard from other students or a communication from parents. Regardless of how they heard about an event, administrators are obliged to investigate and counselors obliged to counsel. These responsibilities are generally sketched in the district’s Code of Conduct stating that the School Board is “committed to providing a safe, supportive and orderly school environment where all individuals are treated with respect and dignity” with the expectation that students “maintain behavior that is free from all forms of harassment, bullying, or discrimination.”

Contained within the context described, Principal Caitlin summed up her major responsibilities as it pertains to time and her obligatory responsibilities:

My participation in all of these cases involved coordinating efforts with the parents, with psychologists and counselors. Not only do we investigate each student report, we then have to call home. I have to coordinate all that are involved. Then I have to inform teachers. I have to meet with the students who are in the same class. I have to inform their
other supervisors. These cases take hours and hours to get results in a day and then some over into the week. It’s like an investigation that you're doing because you're putting together pieces from different sources. These types of cases take lots and lots of time and I think require multiple people looking at it from different angles. When we have a case like this, I typically involve one of the administrators if not two. Depending who has the relationship with the student and sometimes we co-investigate, meaning that the two administrators might sit with one student to do the investigation.

Assistant Principal Alex explained and concurred with a similar insight:

I have, obviously, instructional responsibilities as well, but I primarily, and this year in particular, will deal with almost all of the discipline that occurs in the school. We decide how to investigate, who to talk to, we obviously include parents and, very often, the police, in the instance of serial cyberbullying.

With that said, Alex also wants to do right by the students and the relationships he has crafted: “It takes a long time to understand this in many conversations is, ‘I used to date that boy’ or ‘he likes my best friend and she said something.’” Caitlin described a similar observation by stating that the impact on time stems from students not wanting to “tell on their friends when they know a lot of information. This is what makes investigating a case like this really difficult. Like I said, you have to try to piece together different pieces.”

Alex reiterated the complexity involved, stating that complex social situations arising from social media and text messaging takes time to understand and unravel:

I mean, and that\'s a really complex and particularly if you\'re honoring the relationships that kids have. Like, it could take a night or more for the rumors to circulate through phone calls. Now, within 15 minutes you could be facing a situation that has escalated to
the point where it's going to require a week-long investigation at school, just unbelievable.

Assistant Principal Samantha stated that in one case alone it took her a total of ten to twelve hours. When she elaborated on her actions and timeline, she stated, “It was all the investigations, it was meetings with parents, it was a superintendents hearing, and all of the preparation around that. It was a lot of time.” She then reflected upon investigations in general by reporting that investigations can take up to “70% of my time.” Alex also provided estimates of specific time in one case, “I'm going to say that 60-80% of everyday for six business days of mine were spent investigating a particular case meeting with parents, you know, doing due diligence in investigating, and speaking to many of the children involved.” Principal Caitlin concurred with observations from a different case:

This took weeks because as we were talking about it more and more things came out that then needed to be looked into. It took weeks because I don't think the victim ever overcame it. Then it was a matter of getting her in touch with her own psychologist or social worker to help her cope.

Psychologist Liz offered her observations about the coordination and time it takes to fully understand fragmented bits of stories reported by students to different school-based personnel:

It takes a lot of time. There's so many hats that we wear that we're not able to give it as much time as it needs. Or I'll hear one thing and administration will hear something else, and there just isn't that time in the day to collaborate and check our stories. We're just like, “Oh, you heard that? But this is what I heard” and it’s a completely different story. Then we meet with the kid for 30 minutes, and if we just knew what the administrator had been told, the chain of events would be so different.
Psychologist Rebecca reiterated that administrators and counselors can potentially spend “hours upon hours of the school day processing something that's happened at night or on weekend.” She went on to say that “I think it's hard. I think school staff gets very frustrated by the amount of time that we deal with the impact of technology.” She went on to say that “We should be spending our time on so many other things and doing more preventative work.” Frustrated, she reiterated her point by stating that there are “100 million things that we could be doing rather than addressing what sometimes feels like really petty interactions” on the part of the students.

Parent supervision and monitoring of cell phone use. Revealed within the data was the concept that all participants recognized that part of the post-cyberbullying experience included the observations of how parents chose to monitor and supervise their child’s cell phone and technology use. Psychologist Rebecca has observed that students spend a significant amount of time on their devices at home, with some of the usage tied to leisure and some of the usage tied to course work within the school. She noted that certain classes expect students to be fluent and use technology by stating, “Earth Science is mostly all online,” which means the students are “watching videos” and other related content. Hence, web-based school work makes it more difficult for parents to supervise and monitor their child’s usage.

Rebecca reported similar sentiments and added her thoughts about the feasibility of parental monitoring and supervision by stating,

I think it's very hard for parents to then supervise if they're really doing that [school work] or if they're actually facetiming or what they're doing. It’s hard. I've looked into lots of these apps for my own kids, they're kind of messy, like cutting off Wi-Fi or
difficult to monitor. Most parents are very, very busy and it's not necessarily feasible to monitor everything your children do.

Principal Caitlin concurred with Rebecca and noted the following:

One thing is sometimes parents are very aware of how much their own child is online and in some cases, parents have no idea. Just coming from that stance, if parents are aware that their child is probably abusing even their ‘at home’ policies for using social media, then that's one way to start, right? Sometimes parents are caught off guard.

Psychologist Liz recalled a specific case and a specific parental reaction as a result of heavy monitoring and supervision. After repeated attempts to support their daughter (who was sending nude images of herself to boys) the parents decided to place her into a boarding school.

It was impacting the home so much that they sent her to a boarding school, and she started a lot with the pictures, there was a whole new pool of men or boys there who were then starting to ask for pictures, or she would send them without being asked. Then the school ends up kicking her out of the school, because they tried to set so many limits on her pictures and she couldn't abide by the limits.

Parental monitoring is difficult and came up naturally in conversation with Assistant Principal Alex. Alex concurred with Rebecca’s sentiments stating, “Sometimes I call parents, and they say, ‘We don't know what to do, she's on her computer all night long.’” He went on to say that it’s “obvious that there isn't a great deal of regulation of online behavior, and regulation is the least of it.” Social Worker Mason commenced his conversations with parents by asking about times their child uses the phone, how much freedom they are allotted, and if they are allowed to use it in their rooms unattended. According to Mason, once some of the basics have been established, such as who texted what to who, then the conversation can eventually turn to
healing, resources and support. Rebecca echoed similar sentiments in that she provides resources for parents, but that they are still overwhelmed:

It's still complicated because sometimes I've given parents links to resources for managing wi-fi and setting limits for cell phone use or computer use or for monitoring the kids. I think they're overwhelmed and my experience is generally that parents actually take the resources that you give them.

**Emotional reactions of parents.** The participants overwhelmingly identified that most parents are angry and upset upon hearing that their daughter was targeted in a cyberbullying event and that most of them simply want the event and the circumstances to go away. Psychologist Rebecca echoed these sentiments by stating, “Getting parents involved is also helpful, but it's not a quick fix necessarily.” However, she added, “Sometimes parents get so angry, they just want to take the phone away and that's not necessary.” Caitlin further recalled interactions with parents where they simply placed the burden on the school to resolve: “Yeah, some parents want to just see it go away, like I said before, and they put the onus on the school” and demand things like a particular class change or change of lockers to a different location of the school.

Principal Caitlin reflected upon a different case where the parents were “100% behind me but were also very pushy. They demanded that she get help.” The parents thus wanted everything to return to a sense of normalcy and routine. However, Caitlin underscored the notion that the parents lacked an understanding of how “delicate a situation that their daughter was in and how it required a lot of time and a lot of patience and a lot of counseling.” In essence, Caitlin thought that it was her job to “make them understand that this is not going to be solved overnight.” On a similar note, Social Worker Mason observed that “working with a sophisticated family who treat
their kids with a lot of freedoms” are easier to speak with regarding the specific timeline of events. On the other end of the spectrum, according to Mason, are parents with “less sophistication and knowledge of technology.” In order for the event to make sense to these parents, sessions take much longer due to “the need to go slowly” and help the parents digest the presented information “little by little.”

Principal Caitlin and Assistant Principal Alex noted that there were situations where the parents of girls had yet to encounter any difficulty with social media and web-based interactions and that they were hearing of their daughter being cyberbullied for the first time. Caitlin stated, “Unfortunately for us as administrators it’s the first time that [some] parents are dealing with it, and what we have to do is be very sensitive to how we communicate this with parents because they’re experiencing it for the first time.” Alex has had similar experiences at Z Middle School and raised the following point:

I often, in my conversations with parents, which are challenging to say the least, where you have a young woman who is being targeted in bullying, being bullied online. So, many parents who are experiencing for the first time someone saying something horrible or enacting a bullying stance on their daughter.

*Outsized expectations for justice.* Though one responsibility of school administrators is to administer disciplinary consequences for offending students, it is by no means the sole measure. According to the district’s DASA Policy, it is incumbent upon administrators to investigate as necessary, provide resources to the targeted and perpetrator, seek counseling for those in need, change student schedules, engage in restorative circles, seek the counsel of parents, communicate with the superintendent, and ensure that all students come to school feeling safe and supported. According to many of the participants, the friction occurs when
parents of the targeted look to the school to administer outsized disciplinary measures toward the perpetrator(s). As noted above, administrators are obliged to examine each case and student in a wholistic and fair manner. Below are examples of parents who do not ascribe to the standards and expectations described.

Psychologist Liz described a parent who had carved out time to examine their daughter’s phone at night. The parent occasionally found a thread of inappropriate messages and forwarded those messages by email to the school. In another scenario, Assistant Principal Samantha added, “the mother even went to the police” due to the parents being incredibly upset at the actions of the boy in question and the thread of messages found on their daughter’s phone. The father became so upset that he “threatened to put a sign on the Z Middle School lawn saying a sexual predator goes to school here.” Alex elaborated and reflected upon his experiences with parents and surmised that, “one of the most prevalent complicating factors in work like this is any party in an investigation, whether it's on the victim's side or the aggressor's side, having an outsized or unrealistic expectation of justice.”

As noted, many parents are not only upset and angered by the events, but in some instances want their sense of justice to be enforced. Assistant Principal Alex has encountered parents who send different messages to their daughters compared to what the child hears and receives at school. He describes this type of interaction in detail:

So, there's also the compounding factor of messages that are sent here versus messages that are sent at home, and I find that many girls, in particular, that are cyberbullied, they go home and have a mother or a father say, you know, “You should go back to school and say X, Y, and Z to this boy.” That's not right.
Psychologist Rebecca has had similar experiences compared to Alex and Samantha, as she explained that some parents are certainly helpful, however, the first instinct of parents is that their “child is the victim,” which triggers a response of anger, which prompts them to want to “punish or see a consequence laid on the perpetrators.” She went on to say that that “I think if we can get them over that initial anger” there is a better chance that they would work with us. She added, “We've had cases where parents have been very responsive and helpful and others where they are not.” Assistant Principal Alex’s reflections on his interactions with parents were similar in that he posited “I'm thinking about this girl in particular, she was receiving a huge amount of support, and reinforcement, and encouragement here at school and that might not have been the case at home.” He noted that the parents at home might “advocate for an aggressive response. Very often they say, “We're going to the police, we're suing.””

In an exception to parent reactions of fear, anger and injustice, Social Worker Mason has facilitated conversations with parents by bringing together the parents of both the targeted and perpetrator. Mason was able to allow both parents to view the messages and videos that went back and forth between the girls. Due to the parents having close ties in the community, Mason was able to have the parents talk to one another and have the entire incident be resolved quite quickly, but again this was “because they are very, very good friends in the community.” However, Mason also added that “mediation between parents is a very tough call. They can be very effective with some cooperative parents.” Mason also added that he loves working with parents, and while not every interaction is effective, he is comfortable with parents and relies on his therapeutic skills and experience to positively resolve a variety of situations.

Summary and Closing
Proceeding from the analysis above, the data generated from the participants indicates a number of troubling observations regarding the cyberbullying experiences of girls at Z Middle School. A majority of Z Middle School students have unfettered access to easy-to-use technology, and some of those students are using their phones to access and manipulate social media sites to shame, bully and harass others, text with a number of apps, image share, and make use of others apps to create a hostile environment for some students. At the center is the treatment of girls who have been cyberbullied, partially due to the fact that they are girls. One of the more striking examples of girls being targeted are girls who have been targeted or manipulated to share explicit images and videos of themselves. Participants noted that Z Middle School boys were on the receiving end of those images and not girls.

Further amplification of the cyberbullying experience of girls was noted by the participants due to the combination of the viral nature of current technology and purposeful acts of deception. A wide range of apps and social media sites provide the space and time for students to communicate using written text that automatically deletes shortly after sending. This scenario occurs alongside and in conjunction with other apps and forms of communication that can include the use of images sharing or even the manipulation of images or videos to shame, embarrass or harass another student. Social media sites such as Instagram are leveraged as sites with the purpose of students freely expressing themselves to their friends with the use of “fake” accounts. The fake accounts can then be used as a platform to bully and harass others. As an extension of fake accounts, participants concur that students construct an innocent and parent-friendly account; the parent-friendly account may contain content aligned to family values, while the fake account functions as a platform for friends.
Observed by all participants is evidence indicating a growing trend toward girls sharing nude and explicit images of themselves to boys. Boys in turn share these images with their friends, which at times seems not to be a deterrent for some girls, while others are scared and traumatized by the experience. Traumatic and emotional fallout may occur not only due to the sharing of nude images, but also due to written texts where girls are shunned and shamed by other girls.

The emotional fallout from such events are wide and varied and are oftentimes handled by the guidance counselors and psychologists and coordinated with the support of the assistant principal. Assistant principal Alex handled a number of cyberbullying cases and is listed as the school’s official Dignity Act Coordinator, which ultimately means that Alex is board provisioned with a tremendous amount of responsibility. In that vein, all staff at Z Middle School are accountable for the reporting of all incidences related to cyberbullying, bullying, harassment, and discrimination; a report that must fall into the hands of Alex.

Related to the theme of responsibility and accountability, an unexpected finding emerged from the data: the issue of time. All participants agreed (especially the administration) that the investigations, interviewing of students, the calling of parents, and the coordination of resources accumulates into an inordinate and incalculable amount of time. Though the time is spent ensuring that students are protected and cared for, the time spent on investigations takes the school-based employees away from other duties and responsibilities, such as proactively building positive cultures and teacher observations. Though this study did not focus on the issue of time specifically, it will be addressed in Chapter Five.

In addition to the interviews, two major School Board policies were reviewed that assert expectations and responsibilities to all district stakeholders relative to fostering safe and positive
school climates. Noteworthy within these policies are multiple sections dedicated to the describing and defining of bullying and cyberbullying as well as the procedures that all staff and students are responsible for enacting if they should witness, observe, or experience a cyberbullying event. A possible conflict of reality vs what is written could be apparent. Administration and students are charged with creating a positive and healthy school climate; yet this climate is difficult to enact if administrators are overwhelmed with the investigatory process and procedures warranted due to a cyberbullying or bullying event.

In conclusion, students have access to technology that allows them to communicate and share ideas, images, videos with unprecedented speed and efficiency. The viral nature of this type of communication not only spreads with great alacrity, but also provides the capacity for students to engage in purposeful acts of deception. The emotional impact on girls is difficult to measure in this study but can certainly be considered qualitatively significant. Further, administrators feel the pressure of the time it takes to investigate each allegation, which seems to not only be exhausting, but also detracts from other culture-building and pedagogically-oriented endeavors. The district, in writing, is supportive of ensuring that all stakeholders collaborate to create and maintain safe and positive school climates and there is a commitment to process and procedure regarding the reporting of incidences that may include the cyberbullying, bullying, harassment, and discrimination of others.
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study focused on the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls by interviewing six key school-based administrators and counselors. Thus, the instrumental case study design allowed this project to focus on the context of girls victimized by cyberbullying as reported by the participants. The context of different cases was derived from semi-structured interviews with the six key participants. The rationale for the type of participants was due as a result of the intimate details and knowledge imparted to the participants associated with cyberbullying cases by both victims and perpetrators. The district and school’s Code of Conduct Policy and DASA (Dignity for All Students Act) documents were reviewed to complement the context and narrative provided by the six key participants.

The theoretical frameworks used in this study was a hybrid of Cohen and Felson’s Life-Style Routine Activities Theory (1979) and Cyberfeminisms. Cyberfeminisms have been referred to as a “range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture” (Flanagan & Booth, 2002, p. 12, as cited in Daniels, 2009; Milford, 2015). Cohen and Felson’s Life-Style Routine Activities Theory (1979) suggested that an individual's daily activities, such as vocational and leisure activities, as well as their behavior, contribute to an increased chance of being victimized. A perpetrator’s ability to exploit a situation in the absence of supervision sets the conditions for a perpetrator to be able to target a victim at any time, any place.

This study emerged as a response to the research that cases of cyberbullying and its impact on middle school girls have been on the rise over the last few years and that girls might be at more risk to experience cyberbullying when compared to boys (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). Those victimized by cyberbullying can potentially experience significant health and social

Life-Style Routine Activities Theory lacks a feminine perspective hence the rationale of including a feminist-based framework. As noted in this study, the addition of a feminist perspective was essential as a result of the research that suggests that girls are more at risk than boys to experience cyberbullying due to their “inherent vulnerable position within society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). The inclusion of a feminist framework helped to ensure that the voices and stories of middle school girls were raised to the surface and underscored for the duration of this study.

An investigation into the literature surrounding cyberbullying suggested the following themes. Students simply have more access to technology with the use of a mobile device (Saint Louis, 2015). Students who are targeted have about a one-in-three chance of experiencing a negative symptom associated with being cyberbullied (Nixon, 2014). Tech-savvy students who cyberbully also engage in activities such as giving themselves pseudonyms or attempt to remain anonymous when targeting other students (Aboujaude, 2015; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Collins, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Not only do students attempt to disguise their identity, they are also more likely to be disinhibited. Disinhibited students are more likely to say and do things online that they would normally not say and do in a face-to-face environment. As a result, students are morally disengaged from their actions and more aggressive online than in real life (Park, Eun-Yeong, & Eun-mee, 2014; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004).
Cyberbullying can also potentially manifest itself in many different forms such as rumor spreading to body shaming (Udris, 2014). Another feature of cyberbullying is its viral nature. The lack of supervision from social media sites creates and sustains a virtual environment where one message or image holds the latent potentiality to become virally disseminated to a plethora of students in mere seconds (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014).

Emerging from the analyzed data for this study revealed the following themes about the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls at Z Middle School. The themes and sub-themes are organized in conjunction with the theories underpinning Life-Style Routine Activities Theory and Cyberfeminisms:

- **Amplification of girls’ vulnerability through cyberbullying**: Viral nature of cyberbullying, acts of deception inclusive of risky online behaviors, disinhibition, and anonymity, and variability in how and what platforms are used to cyberbully;

- **Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by girls**: Emotional repercussions to being cyberbullied, response of girls to school-based personnel, and time missed in class;

- **Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by the adults involved**: Impact on administrator time, parental reactions underscored by an inflated sense of justice.

**Findings in Context of the Theoretical Frameworks**

The themes that emerged from the data provided the foundation for insights relative to the research question. The response is manifested in the form of three findings described below. First, behaviors and conditions exist that significantly amplify the vulnerability of girls. Second, girls experienced a range of post-cyberbullying ramifications. Third, post-cyberbullying
ramifications were also experienced by the adults involved in cyberbullying cases. Adults in this case included counselors, educators, and parents.

This chapter places the gathered data into context as it relates to the scholarly discourse by providing a discussion of the study’s findings relative to the theoretical framework and literature. The remaining parts of the chapter will also underscore implications for practice, offer recommendations for future areas of research, discuss the limitations of the study before summarizing and providing final thoughts.

Consistent with the design of the study, findings are associated with Cohen and Nelson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory in concert with cyberfeminism, which can be described as a “range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture” (Flanagan & Booth, 2002, p. 12, as cited in Daniels, 2009; Milford, 2015). This study attempted to better understand the cyberbullying experiences of girls as reported by school personnel with intimate knowledge of cyberbullying cases coupled with the notion that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied due to their vulnerable position in society (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). The following section attempts to understand the middle school experiences of girls who have been cyberbullied.

**Finding 1: Amplification of girls’ vulnerability through cyberbullying.** The first finding is associated with Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory, which holds that a crime is more likely to occur without adult supervision and that one’s leisure activities can potentially place them more at risk to being victimized. Intersecting with this lens, this study has added a cyberfeminist perspective to provide the space to account for the “inherent vulnerable position” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287) of girls in society. Cohen and Felson (1979) claimed that a crime was more likely to occur if there is the presence of a willing
perpetrator and a suitable target. Seen through the lens of cyberfeminism, and more specifically a cyberdystopian view, virtual spaces can potentially lead to the further oppression of girls and women. In other words, simply being a girl is a risk factor, which in turn makes girls more vulnerable to acts of cyberbullying and thus the multi-dimensional and negative ramifications that can potentially occur.

Participants noted that both boy and girl perpetrators engaged in web-based activities during their leisure time, a factor that placed them at increased odds of being victimized. The access to cellphones and technology without adult supervision helped to set the conditions for would-be perpetrators to manipulate a situation where they are unsupervised. These concepts work together to provide the conditions for the vulnerability of girls to be exploited. For example, participants noted that the sending and receiving of nude, self-made pictures (sometimes referred to as sexting) has been on the rise. In this case, an unsupervised male perpetrator exploits his leisure activity by requesting an explicit image from a girl. In some cases, girls reciprocate with risky online behavior in the form of sending explicit images of themselves.

The vulnerability of girls is further amplified by the viral nature of cyberbullying. There were cases described where the victimized girl confided in what they thought was a friend through text messaging, only to find out that the confidence was broken when the recipient of the message used the content to shame and make fun of the victim by spreading embarrassing information. Social media posts on a platform such as Instagram allow students to use text, emojis, and images to target a student in front of an audience of students who can then potentially share the embarrassing photo or message with another audience of students. The
sharing functionality of social media sites supported the viral conditions for messages to be sent with ease to an unspecified number of students.

Acts of deception underscore another layer amplifying the vulnerability of girls and are featured by the Z Middle School students while engaged in virtual communication. One such form of deception were the attempts of perpetrators to conceal their identity and remain anonymous to those they targeted. According to the participants, anonymity can also be manifested in the form of students who created multiple social media accounts, disguised their identity with fake names, and curated fake social media accounts. The creation of fake accounts usually means that one account is parent-facing that aligns itself to family values while a separate account is crafted to communicate and connect with peers, concealed from supervision.

Anonymity and the creation of fake accounts certainly are deceptive acts, but so is the active and purposeful use of an app like Snapchat. Snapchat is a free app where students (or anyone for that matter) can send and receive messages that dissolve after a certain amount of time. Students can therefore send a targeted and hateful message to another student, full-well knowing that the message is untraceable. Normal text message requires the user to actively delete certain messages. Snapchat holds the potential to amplify the vulnerability of victims.

Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory provided credence to the leisurely and unsupervised cellphone use of Z Middle School boys, which amplifies the vulnerability of girls. Though this study did not focus on the experiences of boys, all participants concurred that boys have engaged in risky behaviors that exploit and take advantage of not only their access to technology, but also girls who are possibly more susceptible to being exploited. The participants noted a case where the victimized girl repeatedly sent nude images to boys both
upon request and unsolicited. Participants concurred that multiple instances of boys requesting and exploiting the bodies of girls is on the rise at Z Middle School.

During their leisure time, evidence suggests that students also used WhatsApp, Instagram Accounts, Fake Instagram accounts, Google Classroom, Air Drop, video games, images, and video montages. Based on the data collected, it is difficult to ascertain which students and how many are using the platforms at any given time. There is certainly the possibility that students make use of one, none, most, all, and more than has been listed. Students may in fact favor a few apps one month, only to switch favoritism in another.

It should be noted that just because students are accessing these apps, doesn’t mean that they are being targeted or targeting others. Seen through the lens of Life-style Routine Activities Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979), it simply means that during their leisure time, students are exploring the plethora of communicative and connective platforms to stay in touch with one another. Enhanced by the presence of social media and the willingness observed by boys to exploit girls, the platforms and apps act as vehicles that exacerbate the experience of girls.

If in fact students are left alone and their tech lives are not heavily curated by their parents, increased opportunities will occur for both boys and girls to be targeted. Seen through the cyberfeminisms framework, communicative apps enhanced by social media accounts create the potential for vulnerable and oppressive spaces for middle school girls. These virtual spaces become places where a girl’s dignity is jeopardized and a place where shaming becomes commonplace and viral.

The above findings are laced with the notions that intertwine with cyberfeminisms and Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory. Specifically, girls are potentially more vulnerable to being cyberbullied because they are girls, and that the
unsupervised and risky leisure activities set the condition(s) for girls to be cyberbullied in ways that boys are not. Seen through this lens, unsupervised perpetrators exploit the vulnerability of girls by manipulating the available technology to target and victimize.

**Finding 2: Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by girls and as reported by the participants.** Behaviors and routines, as defined by Cohen and Felson’s (1979) theory extends to placing a potential target at increased risk of victimization even if the leisure activities associated with the technology are neutral. Leisure activities connected to technology such as Internet surfing, social media use, Google Classroom assignments, and texting are all inherently neutral activities in that they only become vehicles for cyberbullying when a potential user decides to channel the technology into targeting and victimizing a different user. According to all participants, the use of easy-to-use, free, and accessible technology is on the rise at Z Middle School. With it comes acts of cyberbullying and the wide-range of ramifications.

One of the ramifications to the post-effects of cyberbullying is the emotional repercussions that fall upon the girls who have been victimized. The participants agreed that some of the cyberbullying incidences included the experiences of girls who truly required the services of the school psychologist and counselors. The participants noted that victimized girls in virtual spaces reported repercussions ranging from suicidal ideation, depression, remorse, embarrassment, feeling ashamed of their body or appearance, and anxiety. Certainly not every girl cyberbullied at Z Middle School suffers from the negative emotions described, however, the emotional repercussions are real and impact a variety of school-related and non-school-related activities.

Above and beyond the emotional fallout, girls who were part of a cyberbullying incident were also required to be interviewed by administrators and sometimes counselors. The
administrators are required by board policy to investigate, yet with the investigation, girls were observed to respond with an array of answers. These responses included feelings associated with public shaming and defiance. Assistant principal Alex noted that the investigation often involves “new” and “scary” emotional territory with the added possibility that other students will discover that they have been cyberbullied as a result of the subsequent investigation. In some cases, this factor can extend the feelings associated with public shaming to a new audience of students not associated with the original incident. Although completely unintentional, the investigatory experience has the potential to exacerbate the vulnerability of girls already victimized.

As a result of the investigations and counseling sessions, girls missed time in class. A few participants noted that girls simply did not want to return to class because they were nervous about seeing their classmates or felt that they were being looked at differently as a result of the cyberbullying experience. Psychologist Liz noted that there are, of course, girls who truly require counseling and the necessary attention after a cyberbullying event. Yet, there were also girls who yielded to the same pattern to get out of a particular class on specific days.

In light of the evidence and seen through the cross-section of Cyberfeminisms and Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory, the vulnerability of girls extends beyond the cyberbullying incident(s). Girls continue to experience negative emotions and repercussions that extends their vulnerability from virtual spaces to life within the school’s walls. The continued vulnerability is manifested in time lost in academic classes as well as the possibility that they will face feelings of shame as a result of others discovering an investigation is taking place.

**Finding 3: Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by the adults involved.** One of the unexpected ramifications to occur as a result of the findings is the pressure and stress of
the investigation of cyberbullying cases on administrator time. In some instances, administrators reported that a single case can take 10-12 hours to resolve. Confirmed cyberbullying cases involve a chorus of people inclusive of the students, counselors, parents, and in some cases, the police. The functionality of an app such as Snapchat (mentioned above) amplifies the difficulty of investigations. Many times, evidence of a cyberbullying act has been deleted, omitted, or dissolved. When this occurs, administrators are charged with the responsibility of the recovery of data by relying on what students saw and witnessed.

In other cases where sexualized content is still available, administrators are legally obliged to call the police, as school personnel may not view nude images of minors or handle phones suspected of housing illicit material. Any suspected case involving these acts must be reported to the police. Assistant Principal Samantha noted that especially complicated cases like the ones described above can take up to 40 hours to resolve.

With a finite number of school hours during the day and a finite amount of time that administrators and counselors have to speak with students during a given day, participants at Z Middle School experienced a tremendous amount of repeated frustration as a result of the time it took to remain responsive and react to cyberbullying allegations. Even though this study focused on the cyberbullying experiences of girls, the concept of time emerged with each participant as a stressor.

Given that there are multidimensional impacts, parent reactions to their child being cyberbullied at Z Middle School ranged from supportive to strained to extreme anger. Participants reported that the parents of some of the victimized girls demanded acts of discipline for the perpetrator. Even if school personnel agreed with the parent, school disciplinary acts are confidential. This is not the only disconnect. Participants also noted that they encouraged their
victimized daughter in essence to “fight back” which is completely contrary to the philosophy of the participants as well as the district’s Code of Conduct Policy.

Further complicating matters, many parents do not have the time or desire to curate their child’s routines and behaviors associated with cellphone use. Some parents do of course look at their child’s phone and institute usage limits. Despite the efforts of some parents, their child’s fluency with technology is far more advanced than that of their parents. Even so, the parent demand toward the participants is to resolve the cases quickly and make it go away. For a variety of reasons, these demands cannot usually be met, causing parents to feel frustrated or perceive that the school is not doing anything. The overarching finding in this area is that there is disconnect between parent expectations for justice and the school’s ability to act upon those demands.

Though cyberfeminisms and Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory do not speak directly to the ramifications experienced by adults, the victimized girls continue to experience scenarios where they continue to be vulnerable, and in some ways, are forced to relive negative experiences. In other words, the leisure activities associated with cell phone and technology use not only amplifies the vulnerability of girls but cannot be considered a stopping point for negative experiences. The negative experiences (although sometimes unintentional) associated with being a victim snowballs into other experiences inclusive of time missed in class and the fallout as a result of school-based personnel involved in the case.

**Concluding thoughts on the theoretical frameworks.** The leisure activities, behaviors, and lack of adult supervision places vulnerable girls at increased risk of being victimized. By incorporating Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routines Activities Theory, this study was able to view the evidence through the lens of how girls might experience cyberbullying. Cohen
and Felson’s (1979) theory was created well before the advent of cell phone use and our current society’s unbridled access to technology. Further, when the theory was first developed, no one could imagine eleven to fourteen-year-old boys and girls sending and receiving messages in the form of texts and images with great alacrity and ease. Regardless of the content of the messages, the technology-related activities place girls (and all students for that matter) at a higher risk of experiencing some form of cyberbullying.

Underscoring and amplifying the lived cyber experiences of Z Middle School girls is the fact that they are being exploited to share images, images that compromise their dignity, simply because they are girls. The combination of being a girl engaged in an unsupervised leisure activity increases the chances of a boy, or another girl, exploiting cyber-based communication with the intention of victimizing another. Seen through a cyberfeminism lens, much evidence exists to state that girls are not only vulnerable in online spaces yet continue to be vulnerable well after the cyberbullying event took place. The manifestation of this vulnerability can be observed in time missed in class as well as the feelings associated with the public shaming that occurs when new audiences discover an investigation is taking place.

Findings in the Context of the Literature

Finding 1: Amplification of girls’ vulnerability through cyberbullying. The first finding reinforced and supported the research conducted by multiple sets of scholars who have argued that girls are more likely to be victimized (Carvalho & Branquinho, 2019) due to their vulnerable position in society (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013). All participants observed that one of the more growing concerns is the fact that boys are requesting nude images of girls and that both boys and girls are engaged in some form of sexting behavior. This observation aligns to a systematic analysis conducted by researchers who have clearly claimed that sexting behavior
amongst teens is on the rise (Madigan, Anh Ly, & Rash, 2018) and that girls are more likely to be asked for a sexually explicit image than boys (Patchin & Hinduja, 2019). Some (not all) girls acquiesce to the request. In these cases, girls are being manipulated and exploited by boys, and at times, led to believe that the picture will not be shared with others. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

Access to technology for a student at Z Middle School means access to a wide-range of social media accounts and apps that allow for fluid and constant communication. This observation at Z Middle School aligned with recent research that indicates that many students have access to apps and communicate widely with their friends (Swisher, 2019; Zych et al., 2019). According to the participants, cell phone use within the school (and most likely at home) is pervasive. Aligned to both the research and the reporting of the participants, the ability to communicate to a broad audience with a few clicks on the phone supports the conditions for content to become viral within moments (cyberbullying (Hicks et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014; Zych et al., 2019). In this regard, the participants reported that in a moment’s notice, messages intended to shame and images intended to embarrass can be seen by dozens or even hundreds. Further, the sharing feature of apps and social media accounts are conducive for the constant flow of information and content, so much so that students are startled by the viral nature of messages.

In taking a deeper look at the literature generated in relationship to disinhibition theory, the conditions for girls’ vulnerability are ripe. Online users are more likely to be disinhibited by saying and doing things they normally would not do in a face-to-face context (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013; Suler, 2004; Udris, 2014)). In other words, the barriers that one usually maintains to safeguard private feelings and thoughts are broken down when communicating via
online platforms, social media, or text messaging. Multiple lines of evidence exist to support this theory, including the observation that middle school students do not make the connection between sexting and other risky behaviors with negative outcomes (Udris, 2014). From sharing nude images to family secrets, evidence suggests that girls are to some extent disinhibited and disconnected from the possibility of consequences associated with risky online behavior. This observation is aligned to the recent work of scholars who are beginning to have a consensus that sexting amongst teens is one the rise and that the anticipated consequences for doing so remain murky (Madigan et al., 2018; Patchin & Hinduja, 2019).

The literature further supported the notion that online users are deindividuated from their face-to-face identity, meaning that they are not fully conscious of their social environment and in some ways take on an identity driven by their online presence (Gorzig & Olafsson, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015c). In other words, when a student is engaged online, they are governed by a different social identity, which is manifested by behaviors and speech very different from their offline identity. Participant observations concurred with this thread of research by stating that there were times when a student’s virtual actions did not match their perceptions of the student. For example, participants were sometimes surprised to hear that a particular student was involved in a cyberbullying incident in light of a face-to-face history constituted by positive interactions.

According to scholars, one of the key factors that differentiates cyberbullying from other forms of traditional bullying is the ability of tech-savvy students to anonymously communicate at any point during the day (Zych et al., 2019) without the repercussions of having to immediately witness the negative reactions of others such as tears, anger, or facial expressions (Aboujaude, 2015; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Collins, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). By
its very definition, cyberbullying can be conceived as an unsupervised activity that transcends the physical imbalance of power and intimidation normally constituting the typical bullying scenario. The typical bullying scenario can be partially described as “face-to-face coercion, intimidation, and aggression” (Accardo & Accardo, 2011, p.15). Therefore, the face-to-face component of bullying is avoided when students choose to cyberbully.

These findings from the literature are partially in sync with the reporting of the participants. Participants reported that perpetrators certainly exploited the ability to communicate at any point during the day. However, a majority of students chose not to conceal their identity. In essence, anonymity was not a significant finding. Instead, what was significant was the ability of students to use and exploit their social media accounts and different text-messaging systems to communicate at any time of day without seeing the immediate reaction of those they targeted.

With regard to a student’s chosen method of communication, participants noted that students utilize a wide-range of platforms to stay connected, yet not always with positive and healthy intentions. Swisher’s (2019) review of the apps accessed by students is aligned to the observations of the participants in this study. Other evidence suggests that students created fake Instagram accounts to fool their parents with one, while hosting another for their friends to see. The account created for friends is a virtual place where students feel that they can freely express themselves, sometimes at the expense of others. Apps like Snapchat allow the text messages to dissolve, creating a scenario for a victim to lack evidence if they were to seek recourse in concert with a parent or school official. At the same time, nude images and video montages are not only created in the leisure time experienced by students, but also have the potential to create visceral responses in other students, responses that may in fact increase the chances of girls being targeted and cyberbullied.
A few of the participants noted that some students may not have a phone or may have limited access to the apps and social media described. In this case, students discover that they have been cyberbullied on an app in which they lack access. More than one participant noted that classmates were all too eager to tell a girl that she had been the object of shaming and cyberbullying on message threads that they were not previously privy.

**Finding 2: Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by girls.** One of the most prominent consequences of students living a life-style of unfettered access to technology is the increased possibility of becoming a virtual target. Contained within the scholarly discourse of cyberbullying are the litany of emotional repercussions experienced by those who have been cyberbullied. The list of emotional repercussions compiled by scholars includes anger, social anxiety, despair, higher levels of depression, lower self-esteem, headaches, academic problems, drug and alcohol addiction, pedagogical problems for teachers, and higher rates of absenteeism (DePaolis & Williford 2014; Eden, Heiman, & Olenick-Shemesh, 2013; Kowalski et al., 2019; Navarro, Ruiz-Oliva, Larrañaga & Yubero, 2013; Navarro & Jasinski, 2013; Payne & Hutzell, 2017).

Though the participants did not cite every repercussion listed above, a strong link exists between the literature and what participants reported Z Middle School girls to have experienced. Whether the girls at Z Middle School were seen by an administrator, a counselor, or a psychologist, they all reported that a majority of the victimized girls were not only deeply impacted, but also had access to cell phones, social media, and a wide-range of apps that promoted communication. These observations by the participants were also pronounced in the literature (Kowalski et al., 2019; Swisher, 2019).
A few of the participants noted that girls experienced feelings associated with public shaming or shame for being involved in a cyberbullying incident. In some cases, a new audience of students were informed of the cyberbullying event as a result of administrator interviews, causing girls to experience new and raw emotions associated with being victimized. According to Passanisi, Sapienza, Budello, and Giaimo (2015), the feeling of shame is closely tied to one’s sense of self as well as one’s perception and ability of how much they can influence a given situation. Specifically, shame is defined as a social emotion connected to a wholesale negative evaluation of oneself (Passanisi et al., 2015). The vulnerability of girls and the feelings they experience extends beyond the cyberbullying event with ramifications into deep psychological processes in how they perceive themselves in the world as a result of being cyberbullied and interviewed.

Finding 3: Post-cyberbullying ramifications experienced by the adults involved. One of the unintended ramifications cited within this study is the concept of time. Specifically, the time it takes administrators to investigate and counselors to counsel. The purpose of this study centered on the experience of girls who have been cyberbullied, not those charged with investigatory and counseling responsibilities. However, each participant interviewed raised the issue of the extraordinary amount of time it takes to investigate one single case.

The administrators interviewed for this study were especially frustrated by the notion that the time spent investigating was correlated with less time spent on instruction, teaching, and learning. According to Patchin and Hinduja (2015) educators who are already overextended can potentially fall prey to “overly punitive decisions” (p. 195) to discipline those accused of being cyberbullies. Patchin and Hinduja (2019) followed-up with this line of thought in the context of sexting when they asserted that overly punitive actions do not teach students and act as a barrier
to productive dialog and counseling. Though this factor goes beyond this study, it is important to note that the outsized parental expectations for justice in conjunction with administrator frustration, could lead to overly punitive decisions. This is potentially an area of concern.

A second topic that did not emerge within the literature review is the concept of parents taking aggressive actions at home after hearing their child had been victimized. According to the participants, these actions more often than not work against the principles of the school and the board policy. Parents either refused to work in cooperation with the school or demanded that the school take pervasive and cruel action to mitigate future cyberbullying attacks. In concert with participant observations about parent reactions, Patchin and Hinduja (2015) pointed out that “many parents are inclined to respond to their children’s victimization by immediately banning access to their phones, social media, gaming consoles or Internet in general” (p.207).

**Implications for Practice**

As stated within the purpose statement, the goal of this study is to better understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls at Z Middle School. To garner this understanding, this study has also chosen to focus in on the reporting of the counselors and administrators who counsel and investigate the girls who experience cyberbullying. To this end, a deep review of how girls experience cyberbullying provides the foundation for the implications of practice that may support a more positive experience for Z Middle School girls and all students.

The conditions must be created and sustained for girls to either experience a decrease in the frequency of cyberbullying or lower the impact of cyberbullying. To do this, the findings necessitate three major implications. First, the school and parents must work in concert to better supervise and curate the digital lives of students. Second, the implementation of student-centered
initiatives to accentuate student voice is imperative. Third, a dismantling of the imbalance of power inherent in gender relations is paramount and urgent.

**Z Middle School personnel and parents must work in concert to supervise and curate the digital lives of both girls and boys.** Evident from the interviews in this study, parents and school-based personnel do not have universal agreements on how to better monitor the digital life of middle school students. This is especially concerning given the research that states that students are twice as likely to engage in cyberbullying tendencies with poor care-giver monitoring (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). School and district policies exist on paper as found in the Student Code of Conduct and the DASA Policy. However, 21st century technology to curate and supervise the digital lives of middle school students is not being leveraged to inhibit egregious messaging. It is therefore essential that the digital lives of students are curated, monitored, and supervised. Not only will these efforts curtail the vulnerability of girls, a vulnerability exacerbated by the actions of boys, but also the frequency and volume of cyberbullying.

First, the universal banning of cell phones on school grounds is a policy that will only breed contempt and will all the meanwhile miss a valuable opportunity to teach middle school students how to appropriately use the technology available to them. Instead, school-based personnel should develop not simply policies around the issue, but easy-to-find resources on the district’s website. The district’s website holds much depth and breadth yet lacks a user-friendly section dedicated to providing easy-to-use resources for parents. Of note here is the notion that gender-specific and gender-neutral resources should be delineated to ensure that resources are substantive and meaningful for all parents.

Gender-specific web-based resources can be made readily available to parents of girls that connects them to the sharing of nude and explicit images requested by boys, sexting,
language that constitutes as cyberbullying, and steps to take if one’s child is a witness or subject to cyberbullying. Resources for the parents of boys might include actionable steps for the cyberbullying that occurs on video-gaming platforms, a factor noted by a few of the participants, as well as the parental language needed for parents to speak with their boys about the specific exploitation of girls’ bodies, the requesting of such images, and sexting in general.

Gender-neutral web-based resources might include suggestions for parents on the curating of their child’s digital life. Some examples of digital curation include setting parent controls for phone usage such as restrictions on screen time, web content, Siri web searches, Google web searches, game center usage, account settings such as email credentials, FaceTime, use of the camera, as well as app usage and control. The overall impact of cyberbullying on the lives of girls (and many others as well) is too extreme to not consider some or all of the above suggestions. A school cannot of course mandate the above methods. A school can however provide, promote, encourage, and publicize the use of these resources. This is not to say that students should be blocked from all access to their phone using parent controls. Instead, a gradual release of responsibility can potentially benefit students in how to use a phone to express themselves in ways that promote healthy friendships and expressions of who they are.

Second, administrators and counselors of the school should provide ongoing parent discussion nights and classes where not only are the above resources made public, but also taught. The school cannot assume that all parents are tech-savvy and willing to take on the digital curation of their child’s digital life. The school can provide classes and discussion around the topic of cyberbullying, inclusive of conversations that openly define acts that constitute cyberbullying and how the negative impact of cyberbullying permeates the lives of all students, their families, and the school. More specifically, the school must go out of its way to underscore
the relentless spate of cyberbullying incidences impacting the lives of girls, perpetrated by boys. Without highlighting the vulnerability and victimization of girls by the hands of boys, girls will continue to be more vulnerable than boys.

Third, all school-based personnel at Z Middle School would benefit from universally accepted rules and procedures regarding phone usage during school hours. If phones are in fact permitted on school grounds, then to what extent? If this is the case, then all within the school must be held to the same standards and standards that are enforced. Without the presence of enforced and consistent expectations, a multitude of students will continue to be targeted and school-based personnel will continue to be overwhelmed with the investigatory and counseling left in the wake of cyberbullying incidences.

**The implementation of student-centered initiatives to accentuate student voice.**

Some element of top-down policies should exist to support the digital lives of students. However, middle school students by nature desire to flex their independence. Acknowledging this factor can potentially lead to student agency and empowerment. School personnel and parents play an essential role in creating and maintaining expectations, but true change will be all the more potent when the message stems and originates from peers. To this end, suggestions are described below to support student-based initiatives to lead the change.

A powerful set of concepts has been recently promoted by Michele Borba (2016). Borba devoted an entire book to the research behind the benefits of how to promote and leverage kindness both at home and school, an antidote, she claims, to the increased rates of bullying at schools. One of the best parts about promoting and practicing kindness and empathy is that it does not cost a dime while simultaneously holding the potential for students and teachers to come to school happier, kinder, and more empathetic. Her thesis runs counter to current trends
observed in students who make use of technology to accentuate and highlight themselves through “selfie” images posted on social media. In essence, if we want more empathetic and kinder students, schools and parents would do well to cultivate kindness by modeling, expecting, and valuing behaviors that reflect kindness (Borba, 2016) rather than disinhibition and bullying.

Student councils and self-generating student groups encouraged by educators should be given the agency to promote kindness and acts of kindness. According to Borba (2016) practicing kindness is contagious and acts as a “boomerang: send it out, and it comes right back to you so you want to send it back again” (p.126). For example, Positive Post-It Days are days in which every student receives and writes a positive note. In this scenario, students are deeply impacted by being both the recipient and giver of kind words and thoughts. Structures such as these serve as a first step toward the development of cultivating empathy in students. Therefore, student and school-led kindness initiatives have the potential to engender a positive moral identity in students (Borba, 2016), a component that helps to reject and rebuke the strong tides of cyberbullying.

Secondly, it would behoove the district and school to implement restorative justice practices. In brief, restorative justice “in schools focus[es] heavily on relationship building and repairing the harm caused by acts of misbehavior, delinquency, and crime” (Payne & Welch, 2013, p. 540) and is essential to the building and maintaining of healthy relationships in schools (Payne & Welch, 2013). If restorative justice is to thrive, it is not something that can occur as a one-off event or in isolation in the midst of authoritarian disciplinary practices. Instead restorative justice must be implemented within the entire breadth of the educational system where student capacity is built to better understand the impact of their actions on others (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). To that end, incidences of cyberbullying can be
resolved with restorative justice practices where the student’s dignity and sense of self are held intact. Not only does this structure promote agency and student leadership but may also be something for past victims and perpetrators to aspire.

In concert with the implementation of restorative circles, a concentrated effort to communicate a new approach to discipline must be conveyed to parents. Student-led restorative circles would be a qualitatively different experience in contrast to typical modes of consequences dictated by outmoded approaches to discipline such as suspensions and detentions (Payne & Welch, 2013). As noted by a majority of participants, many parents at Z Middle School maintained outsized expectations for justice, even revenge, for students who targeted their daughter. Student-led restorative justice practices and protocols would inevitably turn the relative familiarity of traditional discipline practices on its head. This change in policy might be upsetting for parents and educators who feel as though that justice is likened to the punishment and castigation of a perpetrator. However, student-led groups offer a way to mobilize and empower students which may potentially offset parental and educator resistance.

A dismantling of the imbalance of power inherent in gender relations is paramount and urgent. Embedded within the framework of this study is a feminist perspective that centers the experience of girls. As previously noted, girls in general might be cyberbullied with more frequency simply because they are girls. Those who self-identify their gender as being female are more vulnerable to being targeted and harassed. Specific to this study have been the experience of victimized girls at both the hands of other girls and boys. This particular implication for practice is more concerned about the imbalance of power exploited by Z Middle School boys toward their female classmates. As stated by the participants, boys are requesting nude and explicit photos and videos from girls at an unprecedented frequency, some girls acquiesce to this
sexting request and experience a range of social, school, and parental consequences. Hence, the boys discussed in this study are exploiting their privileged position of power as boys to ascertain explicit material from their female classmates. Some of the images and videos sent to boys are then disseminated on a wider scale to other boys and used to shame and objectify.

It is therefore incumbent upon the school and district to dismantle and disrupt the current imbalance of power currently manifesting itself in this very specific form of cyberbullying. A plethora of resources exists to support not only Z Middle School, but other schools as well. Gender power imbalance within Z Middle School is simply a reflection of society, yet Z Middle School has the potential to be a beacon for dismantling current gender relations.

Some of the work must also begin in elementary school. On more than one occasion, participants noted that relationships characterized by animus commenced in early elementary school. The schools within the district would be wise to identify structures, values, attitudes, and assumptions that are complicit in elevating the status of boys over girls. Of particular note here is to not overlook society’s growing awareness of folx who identify themselves within the spectrum of LGBQTI. If girls are vulnerable to cyberbullying, so are those who self-identify as gender fluid, gender neutral, and those who embrace non-binary classifications of gender. To address this element, elementary school students would benefit from a curriculum focused on foundational components associated with digital citizenry. Ideally, a digital citizenry curriculum would have strong connections to the existing math and literacy curriculums with a specialized focus on how to interpret text messages, strategies to use when offense is taken, knowledge regarding the potential of a large audience being able to see and read what is posted, and ways to overcome the ease of being cruel to someone while texting and using social media platforms.

**Areas for future research**
This research project’s findings and implications set the conditions for a number of areas to consider for future research. The first area to consider is an update to Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-style Routines Activity Theory. The theory has been updated over the decades but lacks an emphasis on the everyday lived experience of middle school students who rely on technology that did not exist a mere five years ago. To some middle school students, phones are an extension of identity, a characterization that might contribute to an increased chance of being targeted. Research nested under the use of this theory may yield fascinating findings and implications given that middle school students are using cutting edge technology to communicate and share ideas.

Secondly, it seems that underage students are accessing platforms where the stated age requirements range from being at least 13 to 16 years old for Instagram and WhatsApp respectively. If students younger than the minimum age requirements are accessing social media accounts, researchers, policy-makers, and educators should hold the different tech companies accountable. It seems that a large-scale quantitative study would yield telling results on the ages of students accessing platforms below the minimum age requirements. Until advocates such as educators and parents demand that these policies be enforced, students of all ages will be able to access accounts and content that are not age-appropriate.

Thirdly, more research is needed on effective methods and approaches on how to better equip school personnel and parents to speak with females on sexting, the sending of nude and sexualized images, as well as how to address boys who harass and request that girls provide them explicit images. Although beyond the parameters of this study, the question must be raised on the volume and frequency of students watching web-based pornography. To what extent are students
exposed to pornography and to what extent does watching pornography disinhibit students from the sending and receiving of nude and sexualized images of themselves?

Fourthly, the dismantling of the gender imbalance does not occur in a vacuum during middle school. Before arriving in middle school, students are socialized both at home and in their elementary schools. It would behoove students, educators, and parents if future research efforts focused on the socialization between boys and girls during their elementary years, specifically addressing how boys speak to and about girls. Research to impact elementary school initiatives and curriculums have the potential to socialize boys and girls with a framework that seeks to disrupt and dismantle the current state of exploitation.

**Limitations**

The framework of this study included the examination of school and district documents as well as six semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with school-based personnel who were in the unique position of being provided the intimate details of the cyberbullying experiences of girls at Z Middle School. The participants are charged with many responsibilities. One of those responsibilities includes the investigating of cyberbullying incidences and the counseling of students who were deeply impacted in the aftermath of such incidences. Despite the deep and substantive insights provided by the participants, other school-based personnel work closely with students whose time and recruitment process limited their participation for this study. As a result, their voices are absent from the study.

Secondly, as a result of the focus of this study on the experience of middle school girls, the experiences of perpetrators and boys were absent. Though it may be quite easy to ignore the experiences of perpetrators, they too deserve to be heard, counseled, and provided resources. One can make the argument that the voices of the perpetrators are equally important in gaining a
better understanding of cyberbullying as well as understanding their own social, psychological, and emotional status. Given the exploitation of girls on the part of boys, boys too have an essential role in the dynamics of cyberbullying. Though their acts have been documented in this study, their perspectives and voices are absent from this study.

Thirdly, this qualitative study was conducted at one middle school in the suburbs of New York City with school-based personnel, with the major caveat that the actual voices of girls are absent from this study. There are hundreds of suburban middle schools within an hour radius of New York City, inclusive of several counties in New Jersey and New York. These middle school girls were not included in this study, which supports the notion for a larger quantitative study to cast a wider net in the region. This type of approach may reveal certain trends in connection with the experience of girls being cyberbullied in the suburban New York City region. In a similar vein, a completely different research tradition could be used, such as phenomenology, which would allow researchers to intensively focus upon the lived experience of students (Creswell, 2007).

**Final Conclusions**

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to better understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls by interviewing school-based personnel with intimate knowledge of cyberbullying incidences. The study was guided by the hybridization of Cohen and Felson’s (1979) Life-Style Routine Activities Theory and cyberfeminisms, which can be briefly described as a “range of theories, debates, and practices about the relationship between gender and digital culture (Flanagan & Booth, 2002, p. 12, as cited in Daniels, 2009; Milford, 2015) to help capture and contextualize the experiences of middle school girls attending a suburban New York City middle school.
Analysis of the data uncovered major themes, which supported the following three findings. First, the unsupervised leisure activities of middle school students set the conditions for behaviors to occur that contribute to girls’ vulnerability. Secondly, there are multi-dimensional ramifications associated with living a life-style associated with access to technology. Thirdly, the variability in how and what platforms are used to cyberbully exacerbate vulnerability of girls.

Building upon the themes described, three major implications for practice were detected:
a) Middle School personnel and parents must work in concert to supervise and curate the digital lives of both girls and boys; b) the implementation of student-centered initiatives to accentuate student voice is essential; and c) a dismantling of the imbalance of power inherent in gender relations is paramount and urgent.

The study emerged as a result of the growing trend of parents to provide their middle-school aged children with access to phones, phones that come equipped with user-friendly apps and access to social media accounts. Making matters more complex is a concept contained within the scholarly discourse which claims that girls are more likely to be cyberbullied due to their already “vulnerable positions in society” (Navarro & Jasinski, 2013, p. 287). To that end, parents and school-based personnel are on the forefront of understanding the experiences of girls in the context of a lifestyle that can be dictated and potentially overrun by technology with deep and unrelenting social and emotional consequences.

Middle school plays an essential role in the social-emotional development of all students. It is therefore incumbent upon all stakeholders to work in concert by taking agreed-upon and proactive steps to dampen the volume and frequency of cyberbullying-based communications. Cyberbullying by its very nature is contagious and viral. It unravels the social fabric of schools and plays a part in dehumanizing those who are most vulnerable. Despite the well-intended
efforts of some school-based personnel, the disinhibition and virality associated with cyberbullying must be replaced with systemic practices reflective of restorative justice, kindness, and a dismantling of gender-based victimization.
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Appendix A: Email to Recruit Participants

Dear (First Name),

I am currently a doctoral student at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies. The topic of my dissertation is the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. Given your position and valuable experiences at Z Middle School with cyberbullying and middle school girls, you are in a unique position to offer your perspective and insights. Your perspective and insights regarding the topic described have the potential to impact how others in similar positions are better able to reduce the number of cyberbullying incidences and learn about effective methods to resolve cyberbullying incidences.

As you know, cyberbullying has the potential to negatively impact student both academically and emotionally.

I would be happy to speak with you to answer any questions you might have. Please let me know your availability outside of regular school hours so that we can discuss the valuable contribution that you can make to the field and to others in similar positions.

Thank you in advance for considering participating in this research study.

Sincerely,
Neill
Appendix B: Personnel Consent

Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, USA
College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigators: Principal Investigator, Dr. Sandy Nickel, Neill Alleva Student Researcher
Title of Project: Cyberbullying and Gender: A Qualitative Study of How Middle School Girls Experience Cyberbullying

What is an Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study?
You have been invited to participate in this research study. This form tells you about the study, but the researcher is also available to explain it to you. You may ask me any questions that you have. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, you must indicate your consent to participate by both of you signing one of the copies of this form. The second copy is yours to keep. To contact the researcher for additional explanation, please contact Neill Alleva at 718-810-6648 or alleva.n@husky.neu.edu.

Why am I being asked to participate in this study?
You are being asked to participate in this study because you work directly with middle school females who may have experienced cyberbullying at Hommocks Middle School, part of the Mamaroneck Union Free School District. There will be approximately four to seven other personnel involved in this study.

What is the purpose of this research?
The purpose of this research is to understand the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. This study is being conducted as a student doctoral thesis project in Northeastern University’s Doctor of Education program.

What will you be asked to do?
You will be asked to take part in one interview. The interview will range between sixty and seventy-five minutes. You will be interviewed at a time and location that is convenient for you, which can include using virtual means such as Facetime, GoTo Meeting, and Google Hangout. During the interview, you will be asked questions relating to the cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls. Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. The interview guide has also been provided so that you are aware of the type of questions that will be asked. A transcription of the interview will be made available to you. Once all participant interviews are finished and I have written my findings, I will email you a copy of my findings to review. You will be asked to provide feedback via email or telephone.

Will there be any risk or discomfort?
Though this study will not focus on your personal experience(s) of being bullied or cyberbullied, it will however focus on the recounting of stories that you have heard about regarding the
cyberbullying of students. By doing so, you may experience some emotional discomfort. The stories you hear are from students you care about. The discomfort may arise when recounting the stories of the students you care about being negatively impacted by the actions of others.

Will I benefit from this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, participation may provide you with insights based on reflections that may inform your practice. Information learned from this study may help modify existing school or district policies and initiatives.

Who will see the recorded information?

Your role in this study will be kept confidential. No reports or publications will use information that will identify you in any way. I will review interview transcripts and remove all identifying information, including the names of people and places. I will mask all identifiable information with pseudonyms. All data will be kept in a locked file cabinet. This form will be maintained in a locked drawer for three years after completion of the study. All other data will be destroyed within one year of completion of this study.

Authorized people may request to see research information about you and other participants in this study.

I will only permit people who are authorized such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information. This is done to make sure the research is conducted ethically.

Will I be compensated?

There will be no compensation for your participation in this research.

Can I stop participation in this study?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you start the study, you may decide to stop at any time.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please contact Neill Alleva, the main researcher of this study, at any time. I can be reached by phone, 718-810-6648 and email, alleva.n@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Sandy Nickel, the Principal Investigator at s.nickel@northeastern.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

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,
Please check your decision below, sign and return to Neill Alleva.

I have read this the consent form and the investigator has explained the details of the study. I understand that I am free to ask additional questions.

_______ I agree to take part in this research.

_______ I do NOT agree to participate in this study.

Print Name__________________________
Sign Name___________________________
Date____________________________

Sincerely,
Neill Alleva
Appendix C: Interview Guide for School-Based Personnel

Intro and warm up
1. What is your role here at the school?
2. How long have you served in this particular role?
3. Describe your role as it relates to the resolution of cyberbullying experiences of middle school girls?

RQ 1: How do girls describe their cyberbullying experience?
1. What has been your experience with girls who have been cyberbullied?
2. Think of a particular girl who you know to have been cyberbullied. Describe some of the main features of her story. For example, the number of people involved, where and when the experience took place, if/how cyber experiences spilled over into the school day.
3. To what extent did the cyberbullying experience impact her school day?
4. Sometimes what students (and adults) do online does not match their face-to-face interactions. To what extent do you find this statement to be accurate when you think about this particular girl.
5. What are the types of adjectives girls use to describe their feeling or mood when they have had the opportunity to retell their side of the story?
6. How did this particular girl describe their role in the experience?
7. How did the girl describe the role of close friends during the experience?
8. What reasons were provided for the girl becoming a target?
9. To what extent have girls perceived the incidences to be unfair?
10. To what extent did the targeted girl believe that she deserved to be cyberbullied due to something that she might have said or done to the perpetrator?
11. Has the targeted girl been a perpetrator before or after the disclosed event? If so, please describe.

RQ 2: What online activities made girls more vulnerable to cyberbullying
1. In your opinion, what apps are most commonly used to cyberbully?
2. What kind of correlation have you detected between a girl being targeted and her use of technology- benign or otherwise?
3. Describe the extent to which benign apps and websites might be being used by those being targeted? Clarifying question: In other words, have you observed any trends in the types of sites being used and individuals being targeted?
4. To what extent do you believe or not believe that certain online activities create more vulnerability for girls?

RQ 3: What is the role of protective factors?
1. Describe a time that you heard or dealt with a cyberbullying incident where you were surprised to hear how quickly the case was resolved?
2. Can you describe a time(s) that a girl was targeted without negative impact? In other words, a girl may have been targeted, but her reaction was such to lead one to believe that nothing or very little had bothered her.
3. What are the factors that might help to bring a case to a close?
4. In your opinion, how important is the relationship of a cyberbullying victim with her parents?
5. In your opinion, how important is the relationship of a cyberbullying victim with her friends?
6. To what extent do you believe that school-wide initiatives help to prevent cyberbullying?
7. Describe if there have been instances where you were surprised about the resilience of a girl who experienced cyberbullying?
8. Follow up to question 7: If relevant, describe who the girl relied on for support and what you think their impact had been.

**RQ 4: How was the cyberbullying girls experienced resolved?**
1. Would you say that girls who have been victimized are more likely to become a victim again? By the same perpetrator? By someone different?
2. Describe the efforts of the school to resolve incidences.
3. Describe the efforts of some parents to resolve the incidences.
4. Describe the efforts to have the victim and perpetrator(s) speak to one another in the company of an adult? To what extent was this meeting productive in helping to resolve the case?
5. To what extent have girls been provided tools or a framework to avoid or discourage the frequency of cyberbullying.
6. Describe how you personally responded to a girl being cyberbullied?
7. To what extent was your response helpful in resolving the incident?
8. Was your response aligned with school policy? How so? If not, describe the steps you took that differed from school policy and why.
9. In your mind, how likely is it that victims who are targeted once, will be targeted again.
10. Can you recall the amount of time needed for the victim to feel like the experience had come to a resolution?
Appendix D: District Code of Conduct Definition of Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying means the creation of a hostile environment by conduct or by threats, intimidation or abuse, including cyberbullying that (a) has or would have the effect of unreasonably and substantially interfering with a student’s educational performance, opportunities or benefits, or mental, emotional and/or physical well-being, or (b) reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause a student to fear for his or her physical safety; or (c) reasonably causes or would reasonably be expected to cause physical injury or emotional harm to a student; or (d) occurs off school property and creates or would foreseeably create a risk of substantial disruption in the school environment, where it is foreseeable that the conduct, threats, intimidation or abuse might reach school property. Acts of harassment and bullying include but are not limited to acts based on a person’s actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender, or sex.
Appendix E: Responsibilities of the DASA Coordinator

The Dignity Act Coordinators will be responsible for coordinating and enforcing this policy and the Dignity for All Students Act Policy in each school building. Therefore they must: promote a safe, supportive, orderly and stimulating school environment, supporting active teaching and learning for all students regardless of actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender or sex; promote positive behavior; support infusion of civility in classroom instruction and management; identify curricular resources that support infusing civility in classroom instruction and classroom management and provide guidance to staff as to how to access and implement those resources; be responsible for monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of the District’s anti-bullying, harassment & discrimination policy; address issues of discrimination, bullying and harassment, or any situation that threatens the emotional or physical health or safety or any student, school employee, or any person who is lawfully on school property or at a school function or which create a hostile school environment; address personal biases that may prevent equal treatment of all students and staff; and serves as the designated official to receive complaints and will investigate accordingly.