CYBERBULLYING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ADOLESCENT GIRLS’ PERSPECTIVES ON TECHNOLOGY’S IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIPS

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KELLY NICOLE MOORE

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APPROVED: ____________________________
Nancy Boyd-Franklin, PhD.

_______________________________
Karen Riggs Skean, PsyD.

DEAN: ____________________________
Stanley Messer, PhD.
ABSTRACT

This exploratory study examined adolescent girls’ perspectives on how technology impacts their relationships with their peers and the phenomenon of cyberbullying. A qualitative analysis of nineteen interviews was completed using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The rise in technology use by teens has resulted in significant changes in the amount and type of social interactions that they engage in within social circles (Osit, 2008). In a 2010 study completed by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, using telephone surveys and focus groups nationwide, it was found that over seventy percent of teens owned a cell phone and generally used it for many different purposes besides placing calls (Lenhart, 2010). With increased use of technology, negative aspects have emerged, as rumors, pictures, and private information can be spread faster and to more people, and online pages can be created to taunt victims (Pew, 2007). The term, “cyberbullying” has been used to describe the types of aggressive and harassing behaviors that result in teens being victimized via technological devices (computers, cellular phones). This study explored the experiences of adolescent girls’ use of technology, asking them to reflect on their beliefs about their peer group and offer their input on how interventions from adults can be more effective in addressing cyberbullying incidents that occur. Results from this study indicated several themes related to this issue: excess of access, bystander drama, impact on social interaction, egocentrism of adolescence, boundaries of school, home- social boundaries, personal accountability, and violent repercussions. Implications for research, schools, parents, mental health providers, adolescents, and policy were also discussed.
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CHAPTER I

Statement of the Problem

A survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart, 2007) found that one in three teens have been harrassed online at least once—many experiencing it multiple times. Rumors, pictures, and private information can be spread faster and to more people, and online pages can be created to taunt victims (Pew, 2007). Eighty-seven percent of American girls ages 12 to 17 use the Internet for the means of communicating with one another outside of school. The digital age that adolescents live in today serves as both an educational and communicative tool, but can also be a playground for dangerous and unsafe activity as well. As recently as 2007, psychological research had failed to examine this phenomenon in great detail (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). It appears that online bullying increases the intensity and likelihood of hostility in the schools and in face-to-face interactions of those involved.

In 2005, the MacArthur Foundation conducted a study focusing on digital and media learning among teens and concluded that regardless of the amount of time spent online, teens are developing technological skills that are necessary for them to be competent and competitive in their world (Ito, 2008). This study also found that teens spend an average of 6.5 hours a day engaging with some form of media, and that 87% of teens ages 12 to 17 use the Internet, half of these on a daily basis. The media outlets that are used by most teens in this age range are computers, cell phones, personal digital assistants, and video gaming systems (Ito, 2008).
As the Internet has expanded its scope, adolescents are finding it to be a great resource for increasing their ability to communicate with others (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Many adults assume that adolescents use the Internet to make connections with strangers, but one study found that adolescents overwhelmingly use the Internet as a way to maintain their existing network of friends (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). Essentially, these studies have identified that teens today are saturated with media influences and usage on an ongoing basis, and this use of media influences their daily lives and how they interact with the world around them.

The concept of cyberbullying is becoming a hot topic in psychology. Recent news stories focusing on deviant behaviors displayed by adolescents as a direct result of online interactions has increasingly played out over television, radio, and Internet news outlets over the past few years. Cyberbullying has been given multiple names in academic research including *online harassment*, *bullying via electronic communication*, and *Internet bullying*, among other variations. In recent years, this issue has expanded to include the exploration of the rise in use of mobile phones by teens and how phone usage contributes to harassment and bullying among teens. In their 2007 study, Agatston, Kowalski, and Limber defined cyberbullying as “using the Internet and other digital technologies such as cellular phones and personal digital assistants to be intentionally mean or to harass others” (p. 60). Another study cited a definition that went further to include “email, cell phone and pager text messages, defamatory personal eb sites, and defamatory online personal polling sites to support deliberate, repeated, and hostile behavior by an individual or group, that is intended to harm others” (Li, 2007, p. 1779).
Cyberbullying is often discussed in conjunction with relational aggression and traditional bullying almost as an aside, but it is important to note that cyberbullying is distinct from these other two forms of aggression because of the issue of power. In cases of traditional bullying or relational aggression, the victim is usually less powerful as a result of their physical size or status in the school (Olweus, 1993). However, with cyberbullying, a very different dynamic is at work since a cyberbully is often only more powerful than their victim based on their level of technology proficiency. Thus, a cyberbully could be a child who is also feeling victimized physically or relationally at school (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

There have been conflicting findings related to gender differences in cyberbullying. According to Patchin & Hinduja (2006), girls are more frequently the victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying than boys. However, other studies that have found that girls are more likely to be cybervictims and that boys are more likely to be cyberbullies (Li, 2006; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). However, Lodge and Frydenberg (2007) identified that adolescent girls have a slight edge as far as the positive/negative impact of technology use, or lack thereof, as it relates to their status within their social hierarchy. That is, the ability to access technology to communicate with peers helps girls to maintain connections, which is an essential part of how they establish their places within social circles. While cyberbullying seems to have a range of definitions in the literature, to date there has been limited use of qualitative methodology to gather data from teens about how technology impacts their social world in positive and negative ways. Research has also failed to include adolescents in the discussion of what interventions they believe would actually help youth use technology in healthy, prosocial
ways. The teen world, as it now exists, is a phenomenon that blends technology and the natural elements of adolescent development, including the need to develop and maintain different types of relationships. The sometimes angst-filled road through adolescence is irrevocably changed by the opportunities that digital media and the Internet provide to many adolescents. Cyberbullying appears to be one negative outcome when these technologies are mishandled.

In a 2005 article, Marc Prensky wrote:

I’ve coined the term *digital native* to refer to today’s students. They are native speakers of technology, fluent in the digital language of computers, video games, and the Internet…those of us who were not born into the digital world [are] digital immigrants. (p. 8)

Prensky (2005) further argues that in the 21st century educators should not make decisions *for* students, but encourages educators to use collaborative approaches to find new and innovative methods to educate youth that will motivate and engage adolescents in a digital world. This same method of youth engagement applied to the study of cyberbullying, could be beneficial in gaining a broader and deeper understanding of how technology impacts the social world of teens and how problems arise.

This study documents the voices of a small group of adolescent girls in an effort to gain a more in-depth understanding of not only their definition and understanding of technology use and cyberbullying, but also its scope and function in their lives. Pairing together the documented evidence of the rise in teens’ use of technology to maintain and create new social relationships with other teens, and the fact that cyberbullying has been on the rise in various forms, this study offers some ideas about the interplay of these two
issues from the perspectives of teens themselves. Recommendations are also identified to help educators, clinicians, researchers, and parents engage teens when social problems linked to technology use occur, and use collaborative strategies to effectively address youths’ needs.
CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

History and Growth of Technological Communication among Adolescents

Technological advancements have progressed in the last twenty years allowing people to interact with each other in quicker, faster, and more innovative ways. The increase in the number of individuals that can access technology, in conjunction with the lower cost of using it over time, has resulted in the normalcy of immediate access to other people as a way of life in many areas of the world (Osit, 2008). Over the past decade, both cell phones and changes in communication over the Internet have paved the way for teens to have access to one another in unprecedented ways. In a 2010 study completed by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, using nationwide telephone surveys and focus groups, it was found that over 70% of teens owned a cell phone and generally used it for many different purposes besides placing calls (Lenhart, 2010). Since 2004, this same study identified that the number of younger adolescents (ages 12-15) owning cell phones and/or having daily access to cellular phones was on the rise as well (Lenhart, 2010). Again, the increase in cellular phone usage among teens has not been studied in great depth; however, it is known that for many parents, there are benefits and drawbacks to their teen children having cell phones of their own.

Blair and Fletcher (2010) conducted one of the few American-based studies on cell phone usage (CPU) among adolescents exploring the benefits and drawbacks of cell phone use as identified by the mothers of adolescents. The major benefit for mothers in
this study was that the provision of cell phones to their teen children allowed the mothers
to monitor their child’s whereabouts and to be able to have a way of connecting to their
teen when he or she was not in the home. Ironically, this study also found that while a
mother may feel comfortable that her child can communicate with her, mothers that were
not as proficient in technology were unable to adequately monitor their child’s activity on
the cell phone. Thus, cell phone ownership for an adolescent can be a double-edged
sword for parents that are not technologically savvy, as parents may be able to monitor
their child’s whereabouts, but unable to monitor their child’s behaviors with cell phones.

This shift in the dynamic between parents and their teens speaks to the issue of
the manner in which technology is changing the face of adolescent development and
relationship building. This notion is further anchored by the development of social
networking sites that have provided adolescents with the tools to show as little, or as
much, of their private lives to the world as they would like.

Social network sites have become more popular in recent years, but they began in
the late 1990s and were mostly popular among college aged individuals. Boyd and
Ellison (2008) published a comprehensive overview of the definition and history of social
network sites and distinguished the term social networking from social network sites.
According to the authors, social networking implies that people use certain sites to
interact with and/or meet strangers. However, social network sites, such as Facebook and
MySpace, provide individuals with opportunities to make their social network visible to
others, interact with those chosen others, and make connections through the social
networks of their friends (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Many earlier social network sites failed
because they initially allowed users to become members for free and then attempted to
switch to fee-based systems. MySpace, launched in 2003, became the ultimate competitor, since it offered its site to users for free and had other amenities such as offering different page layouts and features for users to customize their personal pages. Also in 2004, MySpace was the first social network site that specifically offered minors an opportunity to become members of the network.

Despite many earlier concerns that teens were interacting with strangers online and were vulnerable to being preyed on and victimized by online predators, research reviews have indicated that in most cases, teens are using online communication and cell phones to maintain current relationships with individuals already known to them (Livingstone & Brake, 2010). When teens are able to communicate online, they are afforded the opportunity to offer or withhold information at their discretion (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

Valkenburg and Peter (in press) reviewed research to explore the functional uses of teens using the Internet as it relates to their emotional development. They indicated that self-presentation and self-disclosure are the common skills practiced by teens using the Internet. Social networking, chat rooms, and other electronic communications offer adolescents the access, anonymity, and asynchronicity to develop the skills of self-presentation and self-disclosure. Asynchronicity refers to the idea that a person can reflect on what they are presenting or disclosing before making it public online (Valkenburg & Peter, 2010). Although in this study, Valkenburg and Peter specifically focus on online communication, these concepts apply to other forms of technological communication such as sending text messages or picture messages through cell phones. Electronic communication provides the individual with time to reflect on what she is
about to share and time to decide whether to change it or not. One is not able to edit herself this way during face-to-face interactions (Valkenburg & Peter, 2010). There is not a great deal of research that directly addresses this issue of how technology has impacted the development of adolescent individual and social identities. The few studies that have researched this area have yielded indecisive results about how online communication affects adolescents’ ability to form an integrative sense of self and sense of social relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2010).

The rise in teens’ use of technology has also led to more discussion about electronic aggression, cyberbullying, and violence. The amount of access teens have to each other outside of the school setting (through cell phones, social network sites, chatrooms, etc.) has resulted in the increased vulnerability of youth to be victims and/or perpetrators of aggressive behaviors that can then disrupt the school environment (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). David-Ferdon and Hertz also argue that all of these issues combined suggest that electronic aggression and cyberbullying are growing public health issues that must be addressed by increased research in this area, as well as the development, implementation, and evaluation of prevention programs that specifically target electronic aggression.

**Traditional Bullying and Aggression**

In the past five years, psychological research has begun to establish a small body of literature specifically referring to the term cyberbullying. There have been many other names established such as online harassment, Internet bullying, and other terms that specifically focus on online interactions (Ybarra, Diener-West, et al., 2007; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007). In 2007, an early article about online harassment by Wolak
et al. found that using the standard definition of bullying derived from school-based research, online interactions that were considered harassment did not fit the traditional definition of bullying. This article made no mention of cell phone usage being a part of the harassment. This was also true of other earlier articles specifically studying this newer phenomenon of online bullying, now referred to universally as cyberbullying.

**Traditional bullying definition.** Perhaps one of the most prominent researchers on traditional bullying is Dan Olweus. His extensive work on bullying and his anti-bullying program are widely used across the world as a standard of effectively decreasing bullying incidences in schools (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006). According to Olweus, bullying is defined as a situation in which a child is being “exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other [children]” (Olweus, 1993). Olweus goes on to say that additional characteristics that must be present within such an interaction is that there must be an imbalance of strength, either physical or psychological. According to Olweus; however, bullying is not the correct term to use when there are two children of the same physical or psychological size are engaged in these repeated negative interactions (Olweus, 1993).

Olweus’ definition of bullying describes bullying in its most traditional sense, typical schoolyard bullying. According to the more traditional definition, bullying is characterized by more direct behaviors that occur face to face such as kicking, hitting, name-calling, social exclusion, or teasing (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008). A further analysis of bullying resulted in the separating of direct bullying from indirect bullying. Direct bullying was identified by Olweus as being more open, or overtly noticeable, attacks on a victim. Indirect bullying was identified as being more covert
attacks such as socially isolating victims, or spreading rumors (Olweus, 1993). Indirect bullying, as it was defined, began to be known by a different term in some subsequent literature: relational aggression.

**Relational aggression.** In 2002, Rachel Simmons published the bestselling book, *Odd Girl Out*, a book that sought to draw attention to the concept of “girl bullying” which is typically referred to as relational aggression in the psychological literature. Relational aggression includes the types of acts in which a relationship is used as a weapon. That is, a person is harmed through the damage (or threat of damage) to relationships. This can be carried out by preying upon the victim’s natural desires to be accepted, befriended, and included in groups (Simmons, 2002). Other forms of aggression most like relational aggression are indirect and social aggression. Indirect aggression occurs when the perpetrator acts in such a way that a victim cannot confront her, such as through the spread of a rumor. Social aggression occurs when a victim’s self esteem becomes damaged after being excluded from groups that she was once a part of, or desired to be a part of, and includes behaviors that specifically target the victim’s sense of belonging to a peer group (Simmons, 2002; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). By and large, girls are more likely to use these methods of bullying and aggression than the traditional and covert methods as outlined in Olweus’ work (Kowalski et al., 2008)

**Cyberbullying**

In an early article on cyberbullying, Patchin and Hinduja (2006) cite Gabriel Tarde’s 1903 law of insertion as a for telling of the impact of technology on human behavior. This law stated that “new technologies will be applied to augment traditional activities and behaviors. Certain characteristics inherent in these technologies increase
the likelihood that they will be exploited for deviant purposes” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, p.154).

Cyberbullying can be carried out in many different ways. According to Kowalski et al. (2008), cyberbullying can include heated electronic exchanges between individuals; harassment, that involves sending offensive messages to a victim repeatedly; and digitally altering photos of a person or portraying an individual inappropriately on the Web for others to see. Other cyberbullying behaviors identified by Kowalski include impersonating a victim online, (for example by creating a Facebook page in the victims name and posting private or embarrassing information that the victim would never publicly share), or tricking a victim into sharing information online and subsequently broadcasting the information for others to see. Ostracizing or excluding individuals from online groups can also be classified as cyberbullying. This is sometimes accomplished by being taken off of the “buddy list” for a particular chat group so the victim cannot gain access, or not providing the victim with the appropriate password or invitation to join an online community of peers. Finally, Kowalski et al. further identify cyberstalking, and “happy slapping”- a term that became popular in England-in which teens will assault a person while other teens film the incident with camera phones and later post the video on the web as cyberbullying behaviors as well.

Across studies, cyberbullying has been identified as taking place via cell phones, e-mail, Internet chat rooms, instant messaging programs, social networking sites, blogs, and websites (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008). It can also occur on online forums, such as FormSpring, that for teens have become the “online version of the bathroom wall in school, the place to scrawl raw, anonymous gossip” (Lewin, 2010). This particular
website is free for users and allows them to trade comments and questions anonymously. These postings can also be linked to a person’s other social networking accounts to be made public even further (Lewin, 2010). One study found that there is an increased feeling of helplessness among victims of cyberbullying because of the multitude of channels by which it can take place, youth feel they have limited means to stop it (Sourander et al., 2010).

Another distinction of cyberbullying is that it can occur both inside and outside of school as teens have access to their cell phones and computers in more than one location. Unlike traditional bullying, which requires the bully and victim to physically be in the same place, cyberbullying takes place across multiple settings. Thus, teens are vulnerable to reencounter a cyberbully several times each day, even when school is out (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Victimization then, may begin in a school setting, and then continue off school grounds via technological communication (Sourander et al., 2010). This extended and pervasive aspect of cyberbullying has not been closely examined in the literature.

One study examining victimization in Internet chat rooms found that increased access to and usage of technology by adolescents for communication purposes increases teens’ risk for victimization (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). In this study, the findings suggested that bullying in schools is not distinctly different from bullying in chatrooms primarily because of the teens’ perception of the victimization. In face-to-face bullying scenarios, the physical presence of all parties involved makes it more noticeable to the victim that he or she is not integrated into the peer group. Alternatively, in a virtual chatroom, one can be victimized and still remain in the chatroom and speak with other
members. Thus, he or she may not feel the same level of detachment from the group online as they do in face-to-face interactions (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). This finding suggests that this particular venue- Internet chatrooms- may not be as noticeable to the victim because of the virtual versus the physical reality differences, however, the study also indicates that findings suggest that there needs to be further study in the areas of aggression in virtual settings (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). This same study also found that victims of school bullying were more likely to be victimized in chatrooms as well.

Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) found that bullying in all its forms, physical, verbal, relational, and cyber, peak during middle school years (7th and 8th grade). The authors suggest that this increase in bullying may be associated with the need for adolescents to establish their social status during transition periods (e.g. changing schools or shifting grades) that are often associated with middle school. In studying the protective factors associated with avoiding victimization, the authors found that bullies reportedly have lower social isolation than victims and tend to have more friends. Friendship, consequently, can act as a protective factor against being bullied in all forms except cyberbullying. This was the only form of bullying that the authors found was unaffected by the number of friends an individual had, making cyberbullying very distinct from other forms of bullying (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Another protective factor identified by the authors was parental support which was demonstrated by parents that were helpful, loving, able to understand their child’s problems and worries, and able to make their child feel better when upset (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Parental support was a protective factor across all forms of bullying in this study.
Individuals who are cyberbullies also may be victims of traditional face-to-face bullying as the Internet offers these victims a chance to exact revenge on their bullies or to lash out and victimize others via technology (Kowalski et al., 2008). Victims of cyberbullying are likely to have more social problems, social anxiety, and low self-esteem. Bystanders play a slightly different role in a cyberbullying situation versus a traditional bullying situation. In a traditional bullying situation, a bystander is more likely to silently watch what occurs, or in some instances, aggravate the situation in a meaningless way. In a cyberbullying situation, however, a bystander can take three different roles: they can join in on inappropriate exchanges, forward messages, and/or choose to be silent. The increased options for a bystander to hide behind their technology, makes it more likely that a bystander will shift into the role of bully at some point in time (Kowalski et al., 2008).

“Girl World” and Technology

The term *Girl World* was coined in the popular nonfiction book, *Queenbees and Wannabes*, by Rosalind Wiseman (2002) to describe the world through the eyes of a typical adolescent girl. It refers to an adolescent girl’s perception of school, home, friends, parents, romances, interests, etc. Using direct quotes from adolescent girls that she worked with across the country using focus groups in school settings, Wiseman offered the book as a tool for parents to understand the world of their teenage daughter, and learn ideas for how to best engage their daughters based on the responses the author received from the girls themselves (Wiseman, 2002). This book inspired the popular film, *Mean Girls*, a hugely successful film which illustrated the costs of sacrificing one’s sense of self to gain popularity and social status in Girl World.
The sacrificing of one’s self is an aspect of adolescent girl interactions that has been discussed in other areas of literature. Mary Pipher described this process for girls, based on her own clinical work with adolescents, in her 1994 book, *Reviving Ophelia*. In the book, Pipher writes that girls face tremendous pressure during their pubertal years to choose between being authentic and being what others expect them to be. These expectations are not only based on cultural demands from schools, magazines, television and other media, but can also come from their peers. For girls who choose to sacrifice their true selves, they may believe that they must do so in order to be socially accepted – a high priority during adolescent years. Thus, for many adolescent girls the self that they expose to others is often culturally scripted (Pipher, 1994).

If one were to subscribe to this theory then, it would make sense that for many adolescent girls, the acquisition of cell phones and the use of online networking services such as chat rooms, email, and social network sites, would be a part of their current cultural script. As technology has expanded and become more accessible to teens, adolescents are able to expand their ways of maintaining relationships and exploring their sense of self (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). For girls technology has become the most important vehicle for maintaining social connections, which is an essential part of the social being of an adolescent girl. Access to technology for teenage girls provides them with the ability to be included by their peers, and to strengthen friendships and their social status. However, technology may contribute to their increased risk of falling victim to cyberbullying (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007).

For adolescents, identity is formed through understanding the self in relation to one’s interactions with others. Being online and communicating via technology (whether
through chat rooms, social networking sites, or text messages) offers adolescents a new and unprecedented way to experiment with their identity (Livingstone & Brake, 2010).

In 2007, the Pew Internet and American life Project found that girls are more likely than boys to be victims of online harassment (Lenhart, 2007). Typically girls, who are users of online social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook, are more likely to be bullied online because they have increased opportunities to be targeted by bullies online (Lenhart, 2007). This Pew study also found that 15% of teens have received unwanted messages that were meant to be private messages from the original senders (Lenhart, 2007). That is, private messages may be made public through forwarding features on cell phones, which allow a user to send a private message to multiple individuals via cell phones.

Wolak et al. (2007) suggest that girls may be more likely than boys to engage in peer harassment via the Internet. The authurs suggest that there is a more indirect quality to this form of harassment, and girls who bully tend to use more indirect methods even in traditional bullying situations.

**Sexting**

There have been virtually no studies done specifically about the increase in teens sending and receiving sexually suggestive images via their cell phones’ text and picture messaging capabilities, which is now referred to as “sexting” in the literature (Lenhart, 2009). The Pew Internet and American Life Project have remained at the forefront in reporting comprehensive data regarding teens’ use of technology. In December 2009, the organization released results from their research on teens and sexting. Using both surveys and focus groups, they discovered a great deal of information
about this new trend in technology use by adolescents (Lenhart, 2009). In [his/her?] study, Lenhar (2009) found that 15% of teens ages 12-17 had received sexually suggestive images on their cell phones; and that 4% reported had sent those types of messages from their cell phones to other teens. Interestingly, teens that were financially responsible for their cell phones sent sexually suggestive messages more than teens who were not responsible, or only partially responsible, for the payment of their cell phone accounts (Lenhart, 2009).

Lenhart’s (2007) focus groups also revealed three main circumstances that illicit sexting behaviors. These situations included the trading of pictures/texts between two romantic partners involved in a sexual exchange, the sharing of pictures/texts between a couple that are then shared with people outside of that relationship, and the pre-dating sexual interactions of two people on the verge of a relationship (Lenhart, 2009). It is important to note that Lenhart’s work in this area is the only study to specifically target the issue of sexting, an issue that has been discussed much more frequently in the mainstream media within the context of other cyberbullying stories, than in the research literature.

**The impact of technology usage and bullying on psychological well-being**

The psychological impact of bullying has been documented in many research studies focusing on traditional bullying and its specific effects (Fekkes et al., 2006; Nansel et al., 2001). Recent literature, however, has begun to directly examine the effects of cyberbullying on mental health. These more recent studies, as well as the literature on traditional bullying, are outlined below.
Many studies have found that for both cyber and traditional bullies and victims, the impact on mental health and general well-being in young adulthood can be significant (Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Sourander et al., 2010; Yang, Yen, Ko, Cheng, & Yen, 2010; Ybarra, Diener-West, et al., 2007; Yen et al., 2009). For example, Olweus (1993) found that 60% of boys characterized as bullies in grades 6-9 had at least one conviction by the age of 24 years old and 35-45% of these boys had at least three convictions. It is important to note that the type of conviction was not specified by Olweus in his study. It has been posited by others that these outcomes are related to the general characteristics of these individuals never employing appropriate patterns of negotiating with others in social interactions as children (Nansel et al., 2001).

Children and young adolescents that bully have also been found to engage in other problem behaviors such as drinking and smoking, and to have difficulty adjusting to school, both in terms of academic achievement and adjusting to different school climates (Nansel et al., 2001). Conversely, this same study found that bullies experience greater ease than victims in making friends and may socially surround themselves with peers that endorse and/or participate in similar problem behavior patterns. Another study found that victims of online harassment reported elevated use of alcohol and drug problems as well. More specifically, these particular youth fit the profile of victims that also acted as perpetrators of online harassment. For youth that fit this profile, these individuals reported problem behaviors that more closely align with those of bullies in both traditional and cyberbullying situations (Ybarra, Diener-West, et al., 2007; Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2007).
Another mental health issue linked to bullying is the psychosomatic symptoms experienced by individuals involved in bullying. Gini and Pozzoli (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of studies that examined this issue. They found that bullies, victims, and bully-victims (individuals that have been in the roles of both bully and victim of bullying) reported significantly higher psychosomatic symptoms such as headache, backache, abdominal pain, sleeping problems, bed wetting, and bad appetite, in comparison to children that had no involvement in bullying scenarios. In general, bullies had the fewest symptoms overall and tend to have more externalizing behavior problems. However, victims tended to have more internalizing issues such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Another study found similar symptoms in victims and bully-victims in cyberbullying scenarios as well (Sourander et al., 2010).

The link between social anxiety and technology use has also been examined in recent literature. One study found that adolescent girls are more likely to use their cell phones and online social sites than boys. They also reported that adolescent girls had higher levels of social anxiety in face-to-face interactions and thus, prefer to communicate via text messaging and social network sites. In this study, social anxiety was identified by the level of comfort a participant felt during a face-to-face interaction with a peer (Pierce, 2009). One could argue that for socially anxious teens, the increased use of technology as a communication vehicle may leave them more vulnerable to cyberbullying situations simply because they are more accessible via technology to their peers.

Another study found that adolescent girls with apprehensive and avoidant styles of coping with problems reported higher levels of cyberbullying as compared to
confident, optimistic girls. In this study, the apprehensive, avoidant girls were more likely to engage in negative coping styles such as drinking or smoking, than to seek professional help (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007).

With regards to cell phone usage, several studies conducted in Taiwan have shown problematic outcomes for adolescents who engage in frequent cell phone use. Yang et al. (2010) identified seven domains associated with problematic cellular phone usage (CPU). The first domain was tolerance, meaning that the teen had recently increased the frequency and duration of CPU in order to achieve satisfactory levels of communication time with others. The second identified area included withdrawal symptoms experienced by teens when not able to use the cell phone. A third area related to a teen engaging in CPU for a longer time or frequency than they originally intended. A fourth domain involved a persistent desire by the teen to reduce CPU or several failed attempts to decrease the amount of CPU. A fifth area identified by the authors related to the excessive time spent on CPU by teens. A sixth area included giving up academic, social, or recreational obligations as a result of CPU. And a final area highlighted by the authors involved the teen continuing to engage in heavy amounts of CPU despite encountering physical or psychological problems that were caused or exacerbated by CPU. Using these seven domains, the authors created a questionnaire to administer to adolescents in the Southern Taiwan community. They also measured other constructs such as aggression, suicidality, sleep issues, and substance use (Yang et al., 2010).

The authors found positive associations between problematic CPU and aggression perpetration and victimization among adolescents regardless of gender or age. Yang et al. (2010) attributed this to the fact that the increased cell phone usage increases the risk of
the adolescents being exposed to problematic interactions with peers. This study mirrors
the findings of the aforementioned social anxiety study in that the argument of increased
access and usage of technological means of communication may leave adolescents more
vulnerable to negative interactions with peers.

Yang and his colleagues (2010) also found positive associations between
problematic CPU and suicidal tendencies, significant depression, insomnia, low self-
esteeem, and substance use. With regards to sleep problems, there was an association
between CPU and short nocturnal sleep. The authors suggested that this may be due to
the intensity and frequency of cell phone use interrupting normal sleeping patterns or a
delay in the onset of sleep. They also mentioned that with the excitement and high
arousal in the brain caused by CPU, it is possible that it takes longer for the adolescent
who is engaging in these behaviors to fall and stay asleep. An interesting aspect of this
finding was that it was true for all adolescent groups except adolescent girls ages 15 and
older. The reason for this exception was not clear to the authors (Yang et al, 2010).

In terms of risky behaviors, Yang et al. (2010) also found that problematic CPU
was associated with unprotected sex for all adolescent groups except boys younger than
15 years old, and with suspension from school in boys 15 years old and older. This study
was the first of its kind to study the associations between problematic cell phone use and
risky behaviors in adolescents (Yang et al., 2010).

Another Taiwanese study found similar problems related to problematic cellular
phone use among adolescents. Yen and her colleagues found that functional impairment
was reported by many teens who also engaged in problematic cell phone use. The most
specific type of functional impairment problem was the symptom of the decreased
amount of time spent on or the giving up of academic, social, or recreational activities as a result of cell phone use (Yen et al., 2009). This same study also found that adolescents that suffered significant depression were more likely than other teens to have problematic CPU on a regular basis.

The reason these two studies from Taiwan are so significant is because of the history of technology in the Asia Pacific region. Taiwan was the first economy to have more than 100 cell phone plan subscribers per 100 inhabitants (Yen et al., 2009). The adverse findings from these studies then, can act as a warning about the possible mental health and well-being issues that could arise in adolescents in other countries that have acquired these technologies at a later time.

In situations when a teen is frequently harassed online, Ybarra, Diener-West, et al. (2007) found that this was related to increased behavior problems and weapon carrying at school. Adolescents in these groups indicated that they feel unsafe in school and are highly distressed. Because cyberbullies can hide behind screens and withhold their identity, the victims can feel as if they have no recourse or method of resolution (Ybarra, Diener-West et al., 2007). Wang, Nansel, and Iannotti (in press), found that depression is associated with all forms of bullying but is highest among victims of cyberbullying. This was attributed to the distinctive nature of cyberbullying which leaves the victims feeling helpless, dehumanized, and isolated (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, in press).

These studies indicate that the psychological and psychosocial effects of cyberbullying and technology use among adolescents is an area that needs continued study. The findings also indicate the importance of understanding the nature of
adolescent usage and their perceptions of how they are impacted by technology in their daily lives.

**Bullying Interventions**

In terms of traditional bullying, one of the most famous anti-bullying programs is the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program. The program aims to reduce existing bully/victim problems in and out of school settings, and to assist in the prevention of new problems forming amongst students (Olweus, 1993). As a part of his program, Olweus stresses the importance of adults within the school setting to be aware of the current problems and to also commit to be involved in the program’s implementation. The intervention occurs at three levels: the school level, the classroom level, and the individual level.

The school level includes a school questionnaire assessing the specific issues that need to be addressed in a specific school and involves preparing the adults in the school and at home to take on certain roles in the program. These roles include creating and participating in parent circles and teacher groups, identifying a contact person to take anonymous calls from victims or parents of victims, and increasing the supervision of students during less structured times in the school day. The classroom level involves the development of classroom rules against bullying, regular class meetings, role playing between students, cooperative learning and other activities. The individual level involves talks with bullies and victims, assistance from “neutral” students, and additional supports as needed to reduce conflictual interactions between students (Olweus, 1993).

Olweus’ program yielded a 50% reduction in bullying behaviors in elementary schools in Norway. However, it should be noted that the schools in his study also
received high levels of counseling and support. Other studies have found that there is a positive impact in the use of this type of program, though not as significant as those identified by Olweus (Fekkes et al., 2006). However, this program specifically targets traditional forms of bullying among younger children (elementary school age) and was developed years before many of the technologies used by teens were even created.

In the case of cyberbullying, there have been questions of how much power schools have regarding policy and sanctions related to this matter when many of the problematic interactions occur off school grounds or outside of the school day. Nancy Willard, a prominent attorney who has focused on cyberbullying policy and law, wrote in 2007 that cyberbullying involves speech and oftentimes, inappropriate use of free speech with technology among teens causes disruption in the school environment in different notable ways. This can include changes in a victim’s ability to participate in educational activities. Willard argued that certain landmark legal cases have paved the way for school officials to have more freedom to act when there is clearly a hostile situation that is impacting a student in the school setting, even if the hostile communication occurs off school grounds. Willard argues that when schools can clearly identify that an off-campus interaction is resulting in a hostile educational environment, the school can then take corrective action (Willard, 2007).

The problem may be that schools are still not fully aware of how or what they can do. However, female students in one focus group study pointed out that schools are not discussing the problem of cyberbullying and that they (the students) did not believe that school personnel would be helpful in dealing with cyberbullying situations (Agatston et al., 2007). Unfortunately, few studies have asked students directly about their opinions
regarding whether they believed in their school’s ability to effectively intervene in cyberbullying situations. Worthen (2007) also suggested the importance of schools conducting needs assessments relating to youth behavior and the school environment as a way of selecting appropriate prevention programs that can be adapted to address bullying issues. She calls for more research in the areas of electronic bullying/harassment, specifically in terms of prevention, in order to address the unique factors and outcomes associated with cyberbullying versus bullying’s more traditional forms (Worthen, 2007).

Sourander and his colleagues argue that the adoption of the Olweus model may not be adequate for cyberbullying interventions because it does not include cyber components that promote healthy cyberbehavior (Sourander et al., 2010). Olweus’ model is a whole school approach that was developed specifically for traditional bullying problems on individual, classroom, and school-wide levels. However, Sourander et al. (2010) argue that it would be useful to also develop cyberenvironments and supervision that would address the inappropriate cyberbehaviors demonstrated by adolescents.

Williams and Guerra (2007) suggest that whole-school approaches to bullying prevention should aim to create changes in the beliefs and behaviors about bullying and in the current attitudes about the acceptability of bullying among students. Additionally, the authors argue that it is important for schools to understand in more depth the nature of bullying via the Internet and other forms of technology so that the school can develop prevention plans that can adequately address these issues as well (Williams & Guerra, 2007).

In a 2006 study which examined elementary schools’ use of anti-bullying programs based primarily on Olweus’ anti-bullying program, schools showed a 25%
reduction in bullying during the first year and a decrease in depressive complaints from students (Fekkes et al., 2006). However, at the second year follow-up, all of the schools that had used an antibullying program in the first year of the study had significantly decreased their antibullying activities in the school, citing reasons such as not wanting to commit more than one year to the project, not having the time to commit to the activities, and/or needing to make other issues a priority. However, schools that had implemented a written anti-bullying policy engaged in more antibullying activities with students than schools that had no policy (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2006). The authors suggested that the reason for the decline of activity in the intervention schools may have been related to the decrease in counseling and teacher training provided by the research team during the second year, or due to the lack of some schools developing an antibullying policy. This finding suggests that anti-bullying programs are useful if schools have a great deal of training and support from program developers and if the school has enough buy-in from administrators that policies can be developed, implemented, and maintained in the schools (Fekkes et al., 2006).

Limitations of the Literature

Gini and Pozzoli (2009) report that for their meta-analysis of bullying and psychosomatic symptoms, self-report measures are commonly used as a methodology for obtaining data. Two of the eleven studies they used for their analysis employed the use of a clinical interview. The authors identified the lack of clinical interviews in the literature as a problem because self-report measures force the researcher to rely on the respondent to be honest in their endorsements of their own behavior and require some level of self-awareness on the part of the respondent. Few studies have used qualitative methods to
gather information on the issue of how technology impacts the relationships of adolescent girls and to gain a deeper, richer knowledge of the cyberbullying phenomenon. With technology changing so quickly, it is striking that so few studies have suggested that teens take a larger role in the development of prevention/intervention programs given that adolescents are clearly the experts on technological communication.

The traditional anti-bullying literature also does not provide a great deal of guidance regarding how cyberbullying fits into the current programs available. Since the Olweus (1993) model seems to be the predominant model in the field, many programs seem to be mere adaptations of it and leave out the importance of addressing technology altogether. This absence of cyberbullying as a part of current anti-bullying programs is striking and also seems to be an indicator of how new and fresh the issue of cyberbullying still is at this time.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore how technology use (cell phones, texting, email, instant messaging, cyber-bullying, and social networking sites,) influences and impacts the relationship experiences of adolescent girls with their peers. This research sought to gain a greater understanding of this phenomenon from the adolescent’s perspective due to the rise in reports of cyberbullying in the national media, and the increased use of technology by American teens. Much of the current literature on cyberbullying and teens’ use of technology has been researched using methods such as online and paper/pencil surveys. Few studies have engaged in direct conversations with adolescents about how technology has shaped and altered the way in which teens stay connected. The goal of the current research was to add to the growing body of literature
on this topic from a qualitative perspective. By interviewing teens about these issues, adolescents will be able to illustrate for researchers the scope of this phenomenon and help researchers to generate more specific questions for future studies on adolescents’ use of technology and cyberbullying. This study seeks to generate hypotheses based on the following questions:

1. Do adolescent girls have the same perception of the term cyberbullying as defined by adults according to research definitions?

2. What are the benefits to and drawbacks of teen girls using technological means to communicate with each other?

3. How does technology use by adolescent girls impact their friendships with other girls their age?

4. How can adults (parents, teachers, school administrators, clinicians, researchers) use the information supplied by teen girls about communication through technology to inform future research, parenting strategies, school intervention and/or prevention programs, and school policies around these issues?
CHAPTER III
Methodology

Qualitative Research

This study utilized qualitative research methods in order to obtain more in-depth and rich data from adolescents about their use of technology and to capture more broadly teens perspectives on how technology impacts their relationships. After reviewing the literature and discovering that the majority of studies related to this topic rely on mostly quantitative measures to gather information from teens, it seemed more appropriate to use a method that provides subjects with an opportunity to share more of their experiences in an open-ended format. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), one of the most important reasons to choose a qualitative research method is because it provides the researcher with a perspective of the world through the eyes of the subjects. In doing so, the researcher discovers information that can then be developed into constructs in the body of empirical work related to that subject matter. The focus of this type of research is gaining knowledge about how people experience events and the meaning that they ascribe to those experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

In an article arguing for psychological researchers to consider methodology other than the traditional experimental methods that dominates current research, Kazdin (2007) argues that alternative research methods such as qualitative research offer valuable information, but are rarely taught in training programs or highly regarded in peer reviewed psychology journals. However, the depth of information provided by qualitative
research methods exceeds that of traditional experimental research methods. Kazdin argues that methodological diversity will help to augment psychological research (Kazdin, 2007). The decision to use qualitative research methods for this study is born out of this notion. There were few studies that examined cyberbullying and adolescents’ use of technology in a way that offered them the space to provide responses to open-ended questions. Due to the relatively new nature of the cyberbullying phenomenon, it seemed to be most appropriate to gather as much in-depth information from the perspective of teens and to utilize a method of analysis that would generate hypotheses from the rich data gathered.

**Grounded Theory**

A specific method of qualitative research is grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The basis of this methodology is that theory can be built from data. Over the years, the term has been used in a slightly different way, basically meaning that “theoretical constructs [can be] derived from qualitative analysis of data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p.1). Grounded theory, in its most traditional sense, is meant to provide theory which may generate hypotheses for future research. However, the qualitative analysis methods described by Corbin and Strauss are identified as useful whether the researcher is seeking a “grounded theory”, aiming to develop rich and in-depth descriptions of a phenomenon, or for the purpose of case study analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study’s research design is qualitative in nature for several reasons. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), qualitative research allows researchers to have a deeper understanding of the inner experiences of the subjects involved in the research; determine how meanings of different phenomena are developed
within a culture or society; and discover variables, rather than testing them. It is with this theoretical framework that the current research design was developed. While maintaining the grounded theory framework, a modified version was done for the purposes of this study.

**Participants**

Twenty adolescent girls were interviewed for the study at their schools with the permission of the principals and school officials. These schools were located in New Jersey. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the in-depth design of the interview, the sample size was small for this study and there were no control subjects. The decision to use adolescents for this study was made because the study’s topic is directly reflective of the experiences facing adolescents today regarding cyberbullying and technology. The age/grade range is identified as the point when bullying behaviors begin to decline as adolescents are approaching the upper high school grades (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Many of the studies that discuss cyberbullying indicate that bullying, in many forms, is highest among elementary and middle school aged children (Dehue, Bolman, & Vollink, 2008; Vaillancourt et al., 2008;). A ninth or tenth grade student may be well past the stage of engaging most heavily in cyberbullying, but may also have more mature insight into the phenomenon, as well as insight into the other methods of technology and how they impact their relationships with their peers.

Due to the small sample size and the homogeneity of the population (20 adolescent girls from New Jersey), there are clear limitations concerning the generalizability of the findings that arose from this study. It is evident that the age, gender, and location of the subjects that participated in the study are not representative of
a comprehensive picture of cyberbullying and technology’s impact on teen relationships. However, this study seeks to add to the growing body of literature on this topic, in a qualitative manner, by accessing information directly and using in depth interviews with adolescent girls to define this phenomenon in their own words.

Of the 20 girls interviewed, one interview could not be used because the participant demonstrated considerable lack of understanding of most of the questions. The school guidance counselor attributed it to specific cognitive issues, and as a result, only 19 interviews were used for the data analysis. Of the 19 participants, 37% (n=9) were African-American, 37% (n=9) were Caucasian, 16% (n=3) were Hispanic, 5% were (n=1) Asian, and 5% (n=1) identified as Biracial. The average age of the participants was 14 years, 8 months old, with the range of ages from 14 to 17 years old. Fifty-three percent (n=10) of the participants were in the ninth grade, and 47% (n=9) were in the 10th grade.

Although the socioeconomic status (SES) for the participants was not collected for this study, both schools were located in middle class neighborhoods. In both schools, the SES ranged from lower middle class to upper class incomes.

**Measures**

This study utilized interviews as the method for obtaining data from subjects. Each participant was given a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) with specific questions relating to their opinions about how technology impacts their relationships and their thoughts about how their use of technology compares with their peers. Throughout the interview, participants were asked questions regarding both their own behaviors and their beliefs about their peers’ behaviors with regard to technology and cyberbullying. Finally, the interview concluded with the opportunity for the girls to provide any
additional information relating to the topic if they chose to do so. The interview questions were broken into four main areas of inquiry: Usage, Impact on Relationships, Cyberbullying, and Intervention and Adult Involvement. (see Appendix A)

**Procedures**

Two schools in New Jersey agreed to participate in this study and submitted letters approving the recruitment of their students in this study. Letters from the school and a parental consent form (see Appendix B) developed by the researcher were sent home with potential participants. The first students to return their forms, signed appropriately, were invited to participate in the study. There was a designee from each school to whom the girls could give their completed consent forms during school hours. The consent forms also asked for consent to audio tape the interview. The consent form explained the purpose and procedures for participation, risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality, limits to confidentiality, and provided contact information for all individuals that were affiliated with the study. The consent form also explained that the study was completely voluntary and the adolescent had the right to decline participation at any point during the interviewing process. The participants were also informed that they could decline the audio taping of the interviews at no penalty. Upon meeting with the researcher, each girl was asked to review and sign an assent form (see Appendix C) and given the opportunity to ask additional questions.

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were asked to take a few minutes to fill out a Background Information Form (see Appendix A), which asked questions regarding the student’s age, grade, school name, and ethnicity. The form was then attached to their interview responses. Later, a code name was assigned to each
participant. All names later referenced in this study have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

The subject was informed at the start of the interview that if at any time during the duration of the interview she wished to discontinue, she would be able to do so without penalty and would be thanked for her participation. Prior to conducting interviews, school guidance staff were informed about the study in order to ensure that should a problem arise in an interview or if the interviewee became upset, that there was support staff in place following the interview.

If given permission, the interviews were audio taped and participants were informed that notes would also be taken as responses were provided to ensure accuracy in reporting responses. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview and thanked for their participation in the study. Finally, each participant was informed that they could call the researcher if they had any concerns or questions about the study.

**Treatment of Data**

*Consent and Background Information Forms (See Appendix A).* The consent forms were kept in a locked storage file cabinet at the home of the researcher. Data from the Background Information Form was used to categorize participants based on grade, school, and race and each participant was assigned a code name in order to keep their identities confidential.

*Interview data.* Hard copies of interview data and audiotapes were stored in a secure location (locked filing cabinet) in the researcher’s home and no one other than the researcher had access to identifying information. Once all identifying information was
removed, interviews were transcribed using a transcription service. When transcription was completed, the information was transferred into a password protected computer database at the researcher’s residence. Three years after the completion of the research, all documents with identifying information will be shredded and any audiotapes will be erased by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Once all the interviews were conducted, the researcher used the Corbin and Strauss (2008) method of analyzing the data. This method does not use statistical procedures or other quantification methods to interpret findings. The method is based on grounded theory, in which the researcher generates hypotheses based on the data collected from the interviews. The data was analyzed according to grounded theory which involved several steps in coding data from the interviews. These steps include open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding examines the interviews in their entirety, and information is broken down to identify conceptual categories. This provides a foundation for understanding the data and further coding procedures. The next level of coding, which often overlaps with open coding, is axial coding. Axial coding involves collapsing the concept categories by finding connections and relationships between the different concepts obtained through open coding. The final step in the process is selective coding to generate a core or central category based on all the responses and coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the current study, responses from the interviews were broken down first by specific concepts. These concepts were then developed into more refined categories, and finally, themes were developed based on the categories of information provided by the subjects.
CHAPTER IV

Results

In this section, the responses of the participants will be outlined. The interview was structured into three major sections: technology usage, impact on relationships, and intervention and adult involvement. There were several subsections under these major headings which are explained in this chapter as well.

Technology Usage

Cellular phones. Of the 19 girls interviewed, 17 (89%) of the girls currently had their own cellular phones. One of the participants had had a phone in the past, but no longer had one. The other respondent who did not have a phone reported that she sometimes is able to use her friends’ phones in case of emergency or to send text messages to other friends. All of the respondents who had their own cell phones had text messaging plans as well as additional capabilities on the phone such as regular calling plans, cameras within the phone, and access to the Internet. Only two (10%) of the respondents who had their own phones were unable to send or receive picture messages, even though their phones had built-in cameras. These two girls reported that their respective parents restricted the picture messaging features on their phone plans. Of the 17 that had phones, 16 (94%) of the girls reported that their phones were purchased by a parent or grandparent. One respondent reported that her brother purchased her phone. When asked if their calls or texts were monitored by anyone to their knowledge, 14 of the 17 girls (82%) reported that no one monitored their calls or texts.
Of the three who responded that their calls/texts are monitored, one respondent reported that her brother monitored the texts and the other reported that her parents periodically check her phone’s number and text log. The other respondent reported that her father monitors her phone calls, but the level of monitoring is superficial. Mary, age 14, stated: “They [cell phones] are not monitored, as in, closely watched over….they [my parents] can’t see what I’m texting or who I’m calling…the only thing that shows up [on the phone bill] is [the number] you call.”

In terms of time spent talking on the phone, eight of the 17 respondents (47%) with their own phones reported that they spend one to two hours per day talking on the phone. Six of the 17 reported that they hardly ever speak on the phone and barely spoke even an hour on the phone. The rest of those who had her own cell phone reported that they sometimes talk more than 2 hours at least twice per week. As Ryan1, age 14 stated “Not very often and not for very long because I really hate talking on the phone. Not even, like, maybe – if a call goes longer than five minutes I try to find a way to end it.” Three of the respondents specifically mentioned that they only talk on their phones to specific family members such as their mother or cousins.

In comparison to this, the girls were then asked to quantify how often they send and/or receive text messages on their cell phones. Eleven (58%) of the 17 girls who owned their own phone responded in terms equivalent to all day long. Some responded with “24/7” and “all the time.” Many of these responses indicated that they texted throughout their day so often that there was no exact number of hours they could denote, but that they were aware that they spend large portions of their day texting. Kendall, age

1All subject names have been changed
15 stated that she spends “Everday. Every second” texting. Similarly Mary, age 14, said that she typically texted “All day. All throughout the day.”

The remaining respondents with phones (six respondents) reported less than eight hours of texting time on any given day. Out of those, only one reported that she texts about one to two hours per day.

Computers. All of the respondents had a computer at their home and had access to the Internet on a daily basis. Four (21%) of the respondents reported that their computers were located in their bedrooms. Other personal computer locations included home offices and laptops that could be transported to wherever the respondent wanted to use the computer.

When asked how they used their computers, 10 (53%) of the 19 respondents reported that they used Facebook and/or MySpace. Other responses included using the computer for homework (eight responses), instant messaging chats (six responses), YouTube and/or watching TV shows online (three responses), and music, games, and art activities (three responses).

When asked how much time they actually spend on the Internet per day, thirteen (68%) of the 19 girls reported that they spent two to four hours per day on the Internet actively participating in activities. Three of the 19 respondents reported spending more than four hours per day on the Internet and the remaining three respondents reported that they spend one hour or less per day on the Internet. Some of the respondents pointed out that during the weekends they may spend more time than usual, but offered a best estimate in reporting the number of hours spent. One respondent summed up her level of
Internet usage by stating, “I don’t even know. I could be on all day if my mom doesn’t tell me to get off.”

For many of the respondents, the question of how many hours a day they spend on the Internet was met with a long pause or laughter, and most of them used phrases such as “like”, “probably”, or “maybe” as if they were trying to make their best estimate of how much time they spent. It was evident that the amount of time spent was significant enough that many of the girls seemed surprised at the amount when they actually had to quantify that time. Some notable responses included Ryan, age 14 who stated that she spent, “Maybe three or four [hours], like, on a weekday but I spend almost all day on there on the weekends.” Similarly, Alicia, age 15 had difficulty estimating her Internet use approximating it as “Maybe two, three hours, maybe an hour.” Similar responses were provided by the other participants, as if it was difficult to quantify the amount of time spent on the Internet.

**Social networking site use.** The girls were asked several questions about their use of various social networking sites online. Twelve of the 19 respondents (63%) had a Facebook page and 11 of the respondents (58%) had a MySpace page. Some respondents had only one or the other; however, eight of the 19 (42%) had both a Facebook and a MySpace. Of those that were members of both social networking groups, all of them were members of MySpace prior to joining Facebook. The average length of time the respondents were members of Facebook was one year, as compared to the average length of time as MySpace user as two years or more. Nine (47%) of the respondents reported that they spend more than one hour per day on these social networking sites and
respondents reported spending more than two hours per day on their Facebook or MySpace accounts.

**Instant messaging program use.** Four (21%) of the respondents used more than one form of instant messaging program. Six of the respondents (31%) did not use any of the instant messaging programs. Other respondents reported using AOL Instant Messenger (six users, 31%), Yahoo Chat (three users, 15%), Facebook Chat (four users, 21%), or MSN Hotmail Live Chat (one user, 5%).

**General Communication.** When asked about their main method of communicating with friends, 16 of the respondents (84%) reported that text messaging was the main method. Four of the girls reported their main method of communication was through the computer. Four of the respondents reported that they primarily use their phones to talk to friends, and the remaining respondents reported that their main method of communicating with friends is talking face to face. There were a few respondents that named more than one primary method of communication.

Respondents were asked to estimate how much time other peers their age spend on the Internet as a way to communicate with each other. Eight respondents reported that peers spend two to four hours on the Internet daily. Five (26%) respondents reported that peers spend five to eight hours on the Internet. Five (26%) respondents reported that peers spend more than eight hours per day on the Internet. Only one (5%) respondent reported that peers spend less than one hour on the Internet on a daily basis. One respondent, Crystal, age 15, spoke about how the amount of time her peers spend on their cell phones may interfere with daily living:
I know there's a lot of people that text when they're not supposed to, like when they're out at dinner. They'll have their phones underneath the table. Like, some people are texting freaks. They can't live without their phone and everything. So they use it all the time.

When asked about the amount of time the girls believed their same-aged peers spent on their cell phones and used the messaging capabilities on their cell phones on a daily basis, 17 of the respondents (89%) reported that their peers spend more than eight hours. Two of the respondents did not specify an exact number of hours or time span, but reported that cell phone use is a significant part of the day. Some of the responses included “All the time,” “Twenty-four hours,” and “All day, every day.”

**Impact on Relationships**

This segment of questions focused on areas specific to the various ways that technology impacts the relationships teens have with each other. The questions in this section were broken into three subsections: general knowledge about teens’ uses of technology, positive and negative aspects of technology use among teens, and finally, specific questions about what cyberbullying means to teens and their perception of the phenomenon.

**General knowledge of uses of technology.** Respondents reported that some of the ways that other adolescent girls use technology to communicate include texts (14 responses, 74%), Facebook and/or MySpace (seven responses, 37%), talking on the phone (five responses, 26%), email (three responses, 15%), and instant messaging (three responses, 15%). Texting was identified as the most popular method of communication
among adolescent girls (electronic or otherwise) by 12 (63%) of the respondents. Nicole, age 14, stated a reason why texting is a preferred method of communication for her:

Sometimes it might be easier to talk about some stuff that you might not want to say out loud, so you can say that. And sometimes, in class, if you want to say something, but you can’t say it out loud to the next person, you’ll send them a text even though they’re right next to you.

Lisa, age 16, discussed her frustration with the overuse of texting by her peers. In a sarcastic tone, she expressed the following:

Let’s see. Well, I see them texting in class all the time. So basically whenever they get a text message they’re like, “Oh, I have to answer,” I see them use phones all the time. I only use them if I actually need them.

Other respondents reported that the most popular methods of technology use were Facebook and/or MySpace (three responses, 15%), and talking on the phone (three responses, 15%). Only one respondent reported that face-to-face interaction was the most popular method of communication among same-aged girls. When respondents were asked how they use these same methods in their own interactions with their peers, 17 (89%) of the respondents reported that they use these methods for everyday conversations, to get clarification on homework, or to discuss TV or popular celebrities:

Usually, I don’t really like to have conversations texting, but usually information like where are we going to meet and what are we going to do, who’s going, stuff like that, stuff that is going to be short enough that you don’t need a call. (Sarah, age 15)
Julia, age 14, stated that she texts about “life, I guess, in general but I also text people homework if I have a question or need to get the assignment. So it kind of varies…just about everything pretty much.” Crystal, age 15 reported about specific topics of discussion via text messaging:

   Me and my best friend, when we text, we just text about shows that come on TV. We'll talk about Lil Wayne and how our school day was. And then I will talk to her about boys and stuff like that.

Gabrielle, age 15, spoke about how difficult it can be to communicate with peers when peers cannot access certain modes of technology that she commonly uses:

   If I have to talk to my friend and my phone is off I use Facebook. My boyfriend, he doesn’t have a phone, so we talk through MySpace and stuff like that. So if I have to talk to somebody that doesn’t have what I have, it’s complicated.

Participants were then asked about whether or not girls use technology to communicate with individuals that are only their friends and if not, to discuss how they may communicate with strangers through the use of technology. Fifteen (79%) respondents reported that girls often communicate with people that are not their friends via technology, while three (15%) respondents said that girls mainly communicate with friends only. One respondent reported that she did not know either way what was more typical of girls her age as far as communicating with non-friends. As one respondent, Gabrielle, a tenth grader, stated, “I have a friend. She has a boyfriend, but we don’t know him or anything. It’s just a boyfriend through MySpace, which is weird.” And Mary, a ninth grader, reported:
Well, you run into people that you don’t know every day on the computer…Me and my friends often run into those people that are just like “Hi, I saw your page and I thought I’d add you” [referring to adding as a Friend on Facebook] and we are like “uh, no.”

Respondents also answered questions about whether or not girls used technology to talk about peers. Eighteen (94%) of the respondents stated that girls do talk about other peers via technology, while one respondent reported that this happens some of the time. When asked to elaborate on their responses, the girls reported a variety of ways that girls talk about other peers through the use of technology including using it as a method to vent or “air out” a problem (seven responses, 37%), to gossip about others (eight responses, 42%), and to put people down for physical appearance (one response, 5%). Two (10%) respondents stated that they believed girls talked about other girls, but were unsure of how this activity occurs. Many of the respondents were willing to share specific aspects of how girls talk about others. Laney, age 14, stated:

I’ll give you an example. Like say you’re at school and something happened that day about – with somebody you didn’t like, you usually would just text your friend, tell ‘em about it and be like, oh, I don’t like that person. That’s like usually – that’s like what all girls, in my opinion, do.

Sarah, age 15, discussed how girls use electronic communication to process problems that occur with peers:

If you had a bad day or something, and someone said something you didn’t like, you’ll probably text it to your friend. If you’re really bold, you might send a
message on Facebook, so that the person can see it, but I don’t see that so much. Usually, it’s just texting to tell your friend or calling them about it.

Other responses included: “It’s kind of easy if they’re not there so you can just kind of text about people”; “Yes a lot of gossip goes around while texting and especially on MySpace;”; “[Texting] is the easiest way to not have other people hear what you're saying”; “Fifty percent of the time- [girls are] texting to get their anger out or to talk about the person bothering [them] behind their back”; and “Drama starts on MySpace most of the time, and, like, they write it on their status and that's how a lot of drama starts.” Crystal, age 15, stated a more specific scenario:

For an example, like, if a girl hears something at school, then she'll use her phone or go on the computer and, ‘Oh, well, yeah, you know this girl?’ And, ‘Yeah, she’s ugly, and I heard this – this, that, and the other about her.’ And then it just goes on. And then that person tells somebody else.

**Positive/negative use of technology.** The respondents were able to report multiple benefits for use of technology as a primary means to communicate with others. Six (31%) of the respondents reported that a major benefit is being able to stay in contact with friends or family who live far away. Sarah, a tenth grader, reported:

My friends? A lot of them go to a different school because I just came here this year, so this [Facebook] at least makes sure I can keep in touch with them during the day like I would have last year.

Other benefits of using technology reported by the girls included more comfort, meaning that people believed that they could express themselves more freely when they spoke to peers through texts or the computer (three responses, 15%); increased privacy, i.e. parents
do not have to see or read what the teens are doing (two responses, 10%); and practical benefits such as facilitating the coordination of social gatherings, minimizing the use of daytime phone minutes by texting instead of talking, and receiving help on homework (five responses, 26%).

The girls interviewed were also able to identify several drawbacks to technological communication. A significant drawback that six (31%) of the respondents mentioned was the impersonal nature of technological communication. One respondent mentioned:

My cousin is 19 now and she’ll take me out to dinner sometimes if she hasn’t seen me in a while but then we don’t really talk to each other and she’s just texting the entire time so I’m thinking, “why am I here if you’re talking to your other friend?” (Ryan, age 14)

Other notable responses related to the impersonal and disconnected nature of technological communication was reflected by participants:

It gets kind of impersonal when all you’re doing is texting, and you’re not actually seeing each other face to face. Sometimes when you’re texting, you can say things you would have never said to their face, so it can get kind of angry. (Sarah, age 15)

Lisa, age 16, stated that “they refuse to stop using it at any point in time and like, oh man, I just see people texting everywhere I go. Chances are the person is like 10 feet away from you.” Another drawback mentioned by five (26%) respondents was the lack of privacy and the speed at which information can travel from person to person within the
peer group. Alexis, age 15, stated, “stuff gets around like really fast, like even if it’s not
true, or it’s just it takes up a lot of time and you don’t get work done.”

Eight (42%) respondents also mentioned that there is often a great deal of
miscommunication in technological communication. This included difficulty in reading
emotions in texts and online communication. Of these respondents, they reported that it is
sometimes difficult to tell if the person texting them is making a joke or is serious and
since they are communicating via technology, it is also possible to take comments out of
context. The result is unnecessary “drama” with peers. Nicole, age 14 explained:

Sarcasm cannot be noted. Or when somebody sends you a text message, they
might say something that sounds mean, but they can be joking. And you’re not
going to write LOL [Laugh out loud] on every message, so you might not – you
can’t hear the person’s tone or see their face, so you don’t really know what their
meaning is.2

When asked about whether or not girls had heard of friendship problems as a direct result
of electronic communication, 17 (89%) of the respondents reported that they knew of this
type of issue and two (10%) respondents said they had not heard of friendship problems
stemming from technology usage. As one respondent reported, “Sometimes it breaks up
friendships, I guess especially over boys in a way.” Another respondent stated, “If an
incident happened at school, they write [about it] on Facebook or MySpace, and then they
may not mention your name, but you know who it is….Everybody sees what they write
and that’s how it starts.”

2 “Laugh out Loud”, or LOL is a phrase used in electronic communication to indicate the sender is being
humorous
In terms of other types of relationship problems that may stem from technological communication, fifteen (79%) of the respondents reported that they had heard of other problems, while four (21%) reported that they had not. Emma, age 14, stated, “If a girl has a boyfriend and he dumps her via text message, that’s not a good way to break up with somebody.” Nicole, age 14, also discussed that relationship problems can occur due to delayed response time with electronic communication. She stated “girls will freak out if they don’t get a text in five minutes after they send it or if a guy doesn’t call them. They’re like ‘what’s wrong with me?’ but it’s just girls freaking out.”

Most of the respondents that had heard of other types of relationship problems discussed problems related to romantic relationships between boys and girls.

When asked if the girls thought that what they say to their peers via electronic communications is kept private, seven (37%) of the respondents said that they do not believe that their technological communications are kept private. Laney, a ninth grader, summed up the general reason why these respondents feel their information is not kept private:

I know because I have friends that come to me and show me text messages that other people sent them, so I know if I’m saying something, I have to be careful about what I say if I don’t want it to cause a big problem.

Four (21%) of the respondents reported that they do believe that what they say is kept private. Seven (37%) respondents reported that they believed that sometimes what they say to others through technology is kept private, but that privacy depends on a variety of factors. One respondent who does not have a cell phone reported, “I haven’t texted in a
while and yet I know every single thing that they text about, because they talk about it all the time.” Only one respondent reported that she did not know whether what she communicates electronically is kept private.

**Cyberbullying.** The participants were asked several questions directly related to cyberbullying and the way that it is defined in the literature currently. Eighteen (94%) of the nineteen participants had heard of the term cyberbullying before. When asked what they had heard about cyberbullying, all of the respondents mentioned some form of bullying or harassment through the computer. Only two (10%) respondents mentioned texting or bullying via cell phones in addition to bullying through the computer. Seventeen (89%) of the respondents reported that their understanding of the definition of cyberbullying was “bullying over the Internet and through the computer.” Mary, age 14, further stated that cyberbullying was “basically a way that people can just get on the computer and butcher the life outta you just by saying rude things or spreading rude things…basically, ruin your life over the computer.” Other responses related to participants’ knowledge of the term cyberbullying included a variety of elaborate responses. Julia, age 14, explained that “it’s just through chat sites or texting, saying mean or hurtful things, like, almost threats in a way.” Alicia, age 15, echoed this explanation stating, “I’ve heard that kids over the Internet have been mean and cruel to other kids.” Sarah, age 15, offered a more detailed response of what she believed cyberbullying involved:

Kind of like what I said with Facebook. They’ll post something on Facebook for the other person to read, so it’ll purposely hurt them. They know that it’ll bother
the person when they see it, or changing their status and not directly saying it, but hinting at it, so that the person will know that they’re talking about ‘em.

Participants were asked why girls their age may use electronic devices to bully others. The reasons given were the following: the ease and speed of being able to get information about others (four responses, 21%), the possibility of increasing the bully’s own social status and power (four responses, 21%), boredom (three responses, 15%), fear of face to face conflict (five responses, 26%), and jealousy and insecurity (two responses, 10%). Several responses included reasons involving jealousy and fear. Nicole, age 14, stated that “jealousy [is] the main thing. A lot of girls are really jealous of other girls. And instead of trying to be nice and stuff, they’ll be mean.” Another respondent reported that the reason was that “they don’t have the guts to do it in person, and they think they’re so powerful when they do it on the computer” (Sarah, age 15). Julia, age 14, discussed another possible reason for this behavior stating that “it’s probably a pretty effective way of doing it but then why does anybody bully people? Pretty much – it’s pretty much their own problem that they project onto other people.”

Alexis, age 15, discussed the potential anonymity of a cyberbully:

Even though you know who it is, it’s like kinda secret, in a way, like you don’t know who could be messaging you, or it’s faster, so instead of somebody spreading a rumor, which might take forever to get to you, if somebody’s texting, forwarding it around, then you’ll hear it fast.

Fifteen (79%) of the respondents reported that they believe that girls are more likely than boys to use technological communication to bother or harass another person.
Only four (21%) respondents believed that boys would be more likely to cyberbully. Differing responses included the following:

Girls. Because I just think, like, girls are kind of afraid to say anything to someone in person where boys will just say how it is to their face and say what ends up – if like they end up in a fight or something about it, like, just gonna be done with from then on where girls will drag it on and they can through the Internet longer. (Julia, age 14)

Mary, age 14, offered a different response:

A few years ago, I would've said girls, mostly. But guys, they start getting on the computer and they start asking you for things. Like, they tell you to send them pictures and everything. And you're like, "Um, no." And they – guys have gotten worse.

Participants also responded to questions specifically related to rumors spread via technology and their personal reactions to these issues. Eighteen (94%) of the respondents reported that they have heard of girls spreading rumors via technology and one said she had not heard of this happening before. In terms of what respondents had heard about this, they responded that the rumors consist of regular gossip about the lives of peers (six responses, 31%), spreading rumors as revenge against a peer (four responses, 21%), forwarding messages that were intended to be kept private (four responses, 21%), making fun of the physical appearance of a peer (one response, 5%), relationship problems being made public (one response, 5%), and spreading lies about a peer (two responses, 10%). Alexis, a tenth grader, stated, “If something pops up, they’ll
just text somebody, and they’ll be like ‘This is what happened,’ and then the next person will text somebody because it sounds interesting. It just goes around.”

Participants also acknowledged boys’ use of technological communication to spread rumors about other peers. Thirteen (68%) of the respondents reported that they were aware of boys that have spread rumors about others via technology. Six (31%) participants reported that they had not heard of boys using that method to spread rumors. Of those that reported that they had heard of boys engaging in these behaviors, they reported that boys tend to spread rumors or start gossip in relation to sexual relationships with girls (10 responses, 53%), to make fun of another person (two responses, 10%), or to raise question about the sexual orientation of another person (one response, 5%).

When asked if they have ever received embarrassing or private messages from an electronic device and how they handled it, nine (47%) of the respondents reported that they had received embarrassing or private information about another same-aged peer that was not a close friend of theirs. Ten (53%) of the respondents reported that they have never received these types of messages about someone before. All of the respondents, who said they had received these messages, stated that they would not spread the rumor and one respondent added that she would try to confirm it with the person to see if it were true. Also, all of these respondents reported that their reaction was unlike what most girls their age would do and stated that other girls would probably spread the rumor. Dawn, age 15, stated, “They [other girls who receive these types of messages] probably sent the message to somebody else, or go back to school and tell somebody about it. That’s how rumors get around.” Nicole, age 14, agreed with this assumption and stated that “half of the girls might be like ‘oh my gosh I gotta show this to everyone.’” One respondent, Lisa,
age 16, stated, “to be honest, I think most people my age tend to always get into everyone’s business.”

Seven (37%) of the respondents reported that when cyberbullying incidents occur, they most likely happen outside of the school. Three (15%) respondents reported that the incidents occur in the schools, and nine (47%) reported that cyberbullying incidents occur both inside and outside of the school. Of those that reported this, they discussed that sometimes an interaction via technological communication may happen overnight or a verbal fight begins and then because of the effects of forwarding messages and texting, the fight continues into the school the following day and school officials may become involved. One respondent reported that she had reported issues like this to teachers before when a cyberbullying situation extended into what was to become a face-to-face physical altercation. Lisa, age 16, explained the problems related to school’s efforts to intervene:

Well since usually no one ever bothers to go to an adult because they’re not very smart like that, so yeah, school officials tend not to find out until it’s like a huge mess. So they’re like, “Stop!” And they yell at you and they might give you a detention and [girls] just go back and do it.

Julia, age 14, discussed in more detail how there is a bidirectional aspect to cyberbullying inside and outside of the school:

I think it happens outside of school but it kind of starts in school? If there’s an issue in school between two people and then it gets just taken further and outside of school because I think they can’t get in trouble then if they do it outside of school. They may keep them separated from each other. If they’re in a lot of classes together they may change one of their schedules so they’re not in classes
together, or even if it’s really, really bad they may suspend someone or something like that. After an incident there might be a problem on-line or through text messages at night and then they’ll come into school and tell their friends in school and then it just kind of gets out.

Many of the girls that endorsed that cyberbullying incidents occur inside and outside of the school concurred in their belief that, for the most part, staff/school officials are not privy to their occurrence until the issue has escalated. The normal methods of intervention appear to be standard modes of operation for many school sanctions such as rearranging schedules, detention, or suspension. However, since cyberbullying activity does not require a face-to-face interaction, these consequences handed down by the school may not result in a decrease of future incidences, simply because they may not be fully aware of what is occurring off school grounds.

The participants were then asked about the main reason why girls might have problems related to using technology to communicate. Seven of the nineteen (89%) respondents reported that using technology to communicate results in improper, impulsive, and/or immature communication that cannot be retracted as easily as a face-to-face communication. As Ryan, age 14, stated:

It’s so impersonal because…you send a message and then afterwards you think, “Oh, I should have reworded that, it sounded kind of mean the way I said it.” And they couldn’t hear the tone of [your] voice to know that you were kidding but you can’t take that back. And so people think that you insulted them or something but you didn’t mean it in a malicious way.
More specific to the improper/immature nature of the communication, Mary, age 14, elaborated about how technology impacts basic social skills:

That it's not a good way to be sociable with people. Like, just with technology, like over texts and stuff, how are you supposed to develop the social skills that you're supposed to have? Life shouldn't revolve around technology. Girls are so used to texting people that it's like all their social skills are flushed down the toilet. They're either not so sociable or they think that they can hide behind technology so that they won't get in trouble, so that they can just hide behind their cell phone and say whatever they need to and it's just not a good way to be.

Seven (37%) other respondents reported that there is a deep fear of face-to-face interaction, and it becomes more convenient to vent via text, chatting, or other methods of technological communication. Four (21%) of the respondents reported that a main problem is that using technology can result in exaggerating a problem and causes more gossip than usual. Alexis, age 15, described this in her statement about the speed of gossip via technology “It’s just so fast. Even if you didn’t mean to say it, the next thing you know, it’s everywhere and it’s blown totally out of context.”

One of the respondents noted that using technology to communicate can often cause problems in miscommunication and there are many rules about how quickly to respond to people, which can lead to hurt feelings among peers. Nicole, age 14, described what happens when technological problems delay message deliveries and receipts:

Sometimes you can be texting someone and sometimes the text doesn’t go through and the other person [will] be like “well why didn’t this person text me back?” Or “I’m not going to text you first if you don’t text me first.”
Participants were asked to describe their impressions of the types of girls who can be involved on different sides of cyberbullying situations. When asked to describe the types of girls that are often targeted by cyberbullies, eight (42%) of the respondents mentioned specific personality traits of targeted girls such as being weak, overly emotional, or different. Alana, age 17, elaborated on this description stating that victims are “weak people that are afraid to stand up for themselves.”

Seven (37%) of the respondents mentioned that a girl’s social status within a school’s hierarchy could result in them being targeted. In some cases, it could be because a girl is lower in the ranking order and is not as popular, but several respondents mentioned that popular girls may be targeted by cyberbullies as well. Six (31%) of the respondents also mentioned some aspect of a girl’s physical appearance making them a target for cyberbullying. Dawn, age 15, candidly described the types of girls typically targeted by cyberbullies “They’re ugly or they’re dumb or they’re too smart or they can’t dress. Just their looks, like on the outside.” Crystal, age 15, stated, “It could be the real pretty people and then people just hate on them because they're really pretty.” Another respondent also emphasized how appearances may result in a girl being targeted:

If they look wrong. If they talk wrong, what they like, who they like. It’s everything. If somebody dresses different than somebody else, [People say] “oh, yeah, you’re wearing this.” Or if somebody wears their hair a different way…[just] anything. (Laney, age 14)

Three (15%) respondents mentioned that if a girl is rumored to be sexually promiscuous, she may be targeted. As Mary, age 14, stated, “There [are] certain girls that are always targeted- like the girls that are called, sluts and skanks by people –the girls that do things
that girls their age shouldn't be doing. And they're just targeted more.” Another respondent mentioned that girls with low self-esteem are more easily targeted to be cyberbullied and described how low self-esteem can link to lack of popularity among peers “It’s usually some of the girls who might have low self-esteem or feel bad about themselves or are short or small or something. It’s pretty much those girls because they’re somebody who might not be popular.” For many of the respondents, more than one response was given and overlapped with other responses.

When further asked what impact cyberbullying has on targets, multiple responses were offered by participants. These responses included it lowering the self-esteem of the targeted girl (seven responses, 37%), depression and sadness (five responses, 26%), anger (three responses, 15%), violent reactions such as harm to self or others (five responses, 26%), refusal to use the computer to communicate (one response, 5%), and feelings of unwanted attention (two responses, 10%). With regards to anger, depression, and violence, respondents offered more insight on how they view the impact of cyberbullying on victims. Emma, age 14, stated, “I think it has a big impact because more and more people can try to put her down. Her life would be turned upside down and she could be depressed all the time.” Consistent with this response, Elena, age 16, explained how this the impact of being cyberbullied can result in negative emotions and thoughts:

> It probably gets them upset and [they] have bad thoughts in their head. Because if they keep on getting targeted, then they’re going to keep on getting lower and lower, then they’ll feel like, ‘Yeah, I don’t want to be alive anymore.’

Another respondent stated that girls who are bullied “feel even more out of place, and it seems like they’re the only people whose flaws are getting pointed at.” Julia, age 14,
stated the impact can affect a person’s use of the Internet: “They probably just don’t want
to use the Internet anymore. They feel like they shouldn’t or if they do they’re just going
to get hurt or bullied around on it.”

One respondent succinctly stated that the impact of cyberbullying on targeted
girls is that it makes them “feel weak and unimportant.” In terms of the emotional and
social impact five (26%) of the respondents reported that depression associated with
cyberbullying can lead to isolation. One of the respondents in particular referred to recent
news media about suicides that have happened as a result of bullying, and one respondent
discussed the damage that can occur to a girl’s reputation when a cyberbullying incident
happens to them:

With some colleges, there’s guys who get bullied a lot, and then they decide
they’re just going to kill everyone, and it’s really bad. You don’t want to keep
putting them down, then they’re going to get up and shoot you and everything.

(Nicole, age 14)

Participants described girls that are likely to be the ones perpetrating cyberbullying
episodes in numerous ways as well. The description of the girl who cyberbullies other
girls were that she is more physically dominating or viewed as more physically attractive
by other students (three responses, 15%); has a popular or higher social status in her
school (two responses, 10%); is a “drama queen,” “mean girl,” or a “stuck-up” type of
person (six responses, 31%); is cowardly or insecure (five responses, 26%), or could be
anyone in any position in the social hierarchy in a school (three responses, 15%). One
other respondent stated that she could not identify the characteristics of the girl most like
to be a cyberbully. Ryan, age 14, succinctly stated her beliefs about the profile of a
cyberbully stating that cyberbullies were “People with a kind of superiority complex a little bit to show they can control what other people do and how they react.” Dawn, age 15, stated, “They’re big and they know they can beat somebody up. Or they’re really, they’re conceited, so they think because they look good, they can just bully somebody else that’s ugly.”

Crystal, age 15, stated:

It's basically because they just enjoy making people miserable. There are some girls in this school that actually do that all the time. And they don't care how the other person feels or nothing. They just do it to get a laugh out of people.

When participants were asked to describe the bystander or “rumor carriers” involved in cyberbullying incidents, they described these types of girls as those that enjoy excitement and gossip (five responses, 26%), are mean and jealous drama queens (six responses, 31%), are cowardly (one response, 5%), are followers of the popular girls (two responses, 10%), are just average girls that become involved (one response, 5%), find themselves caught in the middle for unknown reasons (one response, 5%), or are instigators of drama (three responses, 15%). One respondent reported that she did not know the characteristics of the girls that are in the bystander role in cyberbullying incidences. One of the respondents, Laney, age 14, opened up about her own role as a bystander:

I know I’ve even done that. Even just yesterday, somebody told me something [via text message], and I told my other friend. I guess how I feel is that…you just want somebody else to know so you can talk about it.
Another respondent, Sarah, age 15, explained the duality of being the bystander during cyberbullying incidences: “[They] may be passive. They just like the excitement of the drama and the gossip. Maybe not bad people, but they like being involved and hearing all of it.”

The participants were asked to generate their own definitions for the term cyberbullying. All nineteen of the respondents stated in their definitions that the definition should include the degrading and negative personal characteristics of the bully in addition to the actual act of harassing someone online. Alicia, age 15, stated, “My definition would be someone who believes they can have fun messing with other people…through MySpace, AIM, and Facebook and stuff like that.” Gabrielle, age 15, included attributes of the cyberbully in her definition and stated, “People who have no life, on the computer, have nothing better to do, messing with other people’s heads.” Another respondent, Emma, age 14, stated that cyberbullying was “bullying through the Internet because they are cowards to not say it face to face.” Another notable response was one offered succinctly by Mary, age 14, who defined cyberbullying as “definitely technology abuse.”

Five (26%) of the respondents expanded their definition of cyberbullying to include text messages and/or technology in general. This was an expansion from the initial question of what they knew of the general definition of cyberbullying.

**Interventions and Adult Involvement**

Questions in this section of the interview asked participants to discuss their thoughts about how much adults in their lives were aware of the scope and nature of technological communication among teens. Questions also asked the participants to
reflect on what methods and advice are most useful in targeting cyberbullying problems amongst their peers.

When asked how much information they believed that the adults in their life (parents, teachers, and school administrators) actually know about the ways that teens use technology to communicate, five (26%) of the respondents said that adults are fully aware, two (10%) respondents said adults know nothing about it, and twelve (63%) respondents reported that they believed that adults know the basics, but not the full scope of how technology is used and how teens use it to communicate. Most of the respondents from the latter response indicated that adults are only superficially aware of how teens use technology, and are not as familiar with the intricacies of how teens use these methods to communicate. As Gabrielle, age 15 stated:

They probably know the normal, like MySpace and Facebook. They don’t know about blogs and all the instant messaging stuff that people do. I have a cousin who has two MySpace [accounts], one so her dad can see it, and another one so her friends can see it, so she can put pictures up.

Joanna, age 15, provided a general response relating to the nuances of technological communication that adults may not understand stating that “In general I think they have an idea but I don’t know if they know about all the different ways, like, Facebook comments and tagging people in photos, I don’t know if they know about all that.”

The girls were then asked how schools can be helpful in making sure that girls use technological communication in more positive ways. The girls offered myriad responses

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3 “Tagging” photos on sites such as Facebook is a function in which a user can attach a person’s name to a picture that is posted. Individuals can “untag” themselves, but it is possible for other site users to view the tagged picture of them until they “untag” themselves. The picture that is tagged does not have to necessarily be the person’s face, and in cyberbullying, it may be an unflattering picture of the person or even an animal or inappropriate “representation” of the person being tagged.
that included peer mediation groups and peer role models within the school (six responses, 31%), school assemblies to discuss cyberbullying and the way it affects teens (three responses, 15%), the enforcement of stricter rules in schools regarding cell phone and computer use (five responses, 26%), the enforcement of disciplinary actions such as suspensions, or detention for students involved in cyberbullying (one response, 5%), and informing parents when students are involved in cyberbullying (one response, 5%). Four girls (21%) stated that they believed the school can do nothing about the problem of cyberbullying. Several responses spoke of the multiple issues described above:

I don’t think the administrators can really help out and stuff. I think it depends on the older people to set examples for the younger people because a lot of times, when people are being bullied and stuff, peers are the ones that help out. The administrators can be like don’t do this; don’t do that or we’re going to give you detention. But that doesn’t really make you change or anything. It’s kind of, sort of, it helps out when your friends are the ones telling you set a good example, don’t do this. A lot of the seniors are great role models, and those are the people that we follow. (Nicole, age 14)

Joanna, age 15, stated:

Well they could be more strict about using cell phones in school because – I mean they are strict but they don’t really do anything if they see you with your cell phone. I think it’s mostly the parents that have to get involved.

Mary, age 14, stated:

I think that they should just basically sit the girls down and explain to them why it isn't a good idea to cyberbully, because there are so many more consequences to
cyberbullying than regular bullying in person. Like, if you're on the computer and you say something stupid like, "Oh, I'm gonna kill her," like, you could be sarcastic, but really, like, people are gonna take it serious. And it's gonna get worse and out of hand and people are gonna get hurt and in trouble. So I think they should just basically explain that to kids.

When asked how parents can be helpful to prevent teen girls’ negative uses of technological communication, eleven (58%) of the respondents stated that parents should monitor text messages and online accounts on a regular basis. Three (15%) of the respondents stated that parents should talk to their kids and inquire about whether or not the child is being cyberbullied or cyberbullying others. Two (10%) respondents said that parents should restrict usage of cell phones and computers at home. Lisa, age 16, referred to this as parents “removing their weapons” and stated, “Well if a parent finds out that their child is doing that [cyberbulling] I suppose they could start by removing their weapons; AKA- take away your computer, no more cell phone.” Finally, one respondent suggested that parents can go to the parents of the other girls involved in the cyberbullying episode.

One of the respondents summed up her comments about interventions by stating that adults “just see the outside of it, and they don’t actually understand. They’ll hear stories from the girls, but they won’t actually talk to the girls.” Another respondent stated that adults can be helpful if they “monitor what they say and stuff, cut down certain limits. Because I know my parents don’t read my text messages.” Emma, age 14, stated a suggestion similar to this: “They should check texts every once in a while to see if they
are being bullied or put down. Then they can stop it [cyberbullying situations] right then.”

For the final portion of the interview, the participants were asked to offer their best advice to girls that are targeted by cyberbullies, those that are cyberbullies, and those that are bystanders and/or perpetuate rumors via technological devices. To the girls that are cyberbullied, the participants offered many words of advice and comfort. The girls felt that victims should ignore it (eight responses, 42%), understand that the problem would pass and “keep your head up high” (five responses, 26%), get help from someone (four responses, 21%), stand up for themselves (two responses, 10%), and change their email address and stop using websites on which they were being bullied (one response, 5%). Dawn, age 15, stated that she “would tell them, pay that girl no mind. Don’t worry about her. Just let her talk. Let her say what she has to say about you and ignore her, and she’ll stop.” This sentiment was echoed by Emma, age 14, who stated, “Ignore all the rumors. The more they see you upset, the more they put you down. If they see that you don’t care, they’ll stop.” Laney, age 14, suggested to “go to an adult to help the situation.” Another respondent, Nicole, age 14, stated that she would tell a victim of cyberbullying to “Stand up for yourself. And if you can’t, you should.”

To the girls that are in the role of the cyberbully, the participants responded that other people should tell the cyberbully that it is wrong and cowardly (10 responses, 53%), ask the cyberbully how she would feel if she was in the role of being cyberbullied (six responses, 31%), ask her why she would do that to another girl (five responses, 26%), and beat the bully up on behalf of the victim (one response, 5%). Crystal, age 15, stated
that she would “tell her to put herself in the other person's shoes.” Alexis' comments also speak directly to the cyberbully’s decision to use technology as a weapon:

That it’s very low of them to bully somebody, period. And to use a secret source because you can always hide in your phone and you can always delete the calls or the text messages? So to not do it face to face –to do it, period, is bad, but to do it in such a manner is really mean.

Many of the respondents had similar comments regarding what they would want to say to the bystanders of cyberbullying incidents. The comments included telling bystanders to stop spreading the rumor (10 responses, 53%), asking the bystander why she is getting involved and telling her to stay out of it (five responses, 26%), and standing up to the bully (four responses, 21%). Dawn age 15, stated, “I would say to stop, because if somebody’s doing it to you, you wouldn’t want the rumor to spread.” Joanna, age 15, encouraged the bystander to be active in helping the situation stating, “maybe try to be a little stronger about it and not just stand by as much, try to get a little more involved to stop it.” Lisa, age 16, identified questions that she would ask the girl in the bystander role: “Do you even know what’s going on? Do you even have any idea what’s happening or are you just here to pick a side?” Alexis, age 15, mentioned why it is important for bystanders to do whatever they can to reduce cyberbullying incidents since the impact can be great when bystanders do:

Just try and help. Every little bit helps. I remember I heard a story, and a guy, was going to kill himself. He was going to jump off the bridge. And when they found the note in his house, it [said], “If anybody smiles at me on my way to the bridge,
I won’t kill myself.” And I guess nobody smiled, nobody tried to stop him or anything, and he jumped.

**Sexting**

At the close of the interview, participants were offered the opportunity to mention any other opinions about cyberbullying that was not covered in the questionnaire. Most declined to offer more, but there were several additional comments made about this topic. Many of the girls mentioned the topic of sexting, a term referring to people sending text messages or picture messages with sexy images or wording. Eight (42%) of the respondents reported that they had heard of situations when a girl their age has sent a sexy image or text to a boyfriend and the private message became public. Nicole, age 14, mentioned this issue at the end of the interview stating, “A lot of girls communicate with guys in bolder ways when they’re not in person.”

This was further mentioned among other respondents:

I remember once my friend sent me a picture, and she meant to send it to her boyfriend, and I got it. I just deleted it. She didn’t even know she sent it to me until I actually confronted her about it. She meant [for it] to go to her boyfriend, and she accidently sent it to ten people. (Laney, age 14)

Elena, age 16, also stated that:

There was this one boy or whatever who I was talking to, and he was like, “You do this for me, and I’ll do something in return.” And I said, “No.” And then all of a sudden, it came out to be that supposedly I did do it. He wanted me to take pictures for him. And then after I said no to him, he said that I did, and he was acting like it was my picture, and he was going around, showing other people, and
saying “Yeah, this is her,” and everything else. My face wasn’t in the picture. I basically went up to the person who did it, I went up to their parents, and I told their parents what happened, and they told him that he needs to cut it off or else he’s going to get everything taken away from him, his cell phone, the computer that he was getting on, and everything.

One respondent mentioned that after her friend ended a romantic relationship, she put her cell phone on speakerphone at a party so that all the attendees could hear the boy crying on the phone to her about the breakup. The boy on the phone was not aware that what he thought was a private call, was in fact made public by his ex-girlfriend. According to Gabrielle, age 15, “He [the boyfriend] was begging her to go back with him or something like that, and he was crying through the phone and she had him on speakerphone and everybody there was listening to him, and he was crying.”

Several respondents echoed that sometimes pictures that may be in a person’s phone may even be sent accidentally and can cause embarrassment. For example Alexis, age 15 stated:

There was one this year where a girl had taken a picture, and I don’t even think she sent it. I think it was just a picture on her phone or something like that. And somebody had got a hold of it and just sent it around, and they were all looking at it in gym class. I’m glad I didn’t see it because I wouldn’t want to seen it anyways, but, yeah, that [sexting] happens a lot.

In the following section, the themes that emerged from the responses will be discussed.
CHAPTER V
Discussion

This study examined several issues related to the use of technological communication in the lives of adolescent girls. These issues included the girls’ understanding and definition of cyberbullying; the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using technology as a primary communication tool among peers; the perceptions of how technology impacts peer relationships; and ways that parents, schools, and other peers can intervene in cyberbullying incidents. This chapter discusses themes which emerged from the adolescent girls’ responses to questions relating to the impact of technology on their relationships and their knowledge and experiences of cyberbullying. The themes that emerged from these interviews included the excess of access, drama among girls, the impact of technology on social interaction, the egocentrism of adolescence, social boundary issues, personal accountability, violent repercussions, the lack of awareness of adult figures, and feelings of helplessness. Limitations of the study and implications for future research are also discussed in this chapter. Implications for future research include relevant information for programming for schools, parents and families, and mental health providers.

Excess of Access

In this study participants discussed the relationship between time spent using the Internet and cellular phones as it relates to their connections with friends and family. For many of the participants, the overwhelming responses were that they and others their age
frequently spent more hours of the day connecting with others via technology versus engaging in other activities not involving technology. Phrases such as “24/7,” “all day every day”, and “all the time” indicated that the participants were aware of the extensive amount of time spent engaging in online and cell phone communication. While having increased opportunities to interact with each other and strengthen friendships, there may also be a risk of having an increased opportunity to engage in, and/or witness cyberbullying activities. This is consistent with the literature. One study (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007) spoke specifically to the issue of the increased vulnerability for teens to be victims, perpetrators, or witnesses to cyberbullying because of the unlimited access they have to each other via technology. This assumption; however, has to be viewed in two parts: the excess of access that results from texting and other cell phone usage, versus the excess of access that is the result of the Internet. Some studies have found that socially competent teens that use the Internet feel more comfortable disclosing more about themselves to others, which can often strengthen their relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). However, in other countries, studies have found that problematic cellular phone usage can increase risks for insomnia, depression, suicidal tendencies, and low self-esteem in teens regardless of age or gender (Yang et al., 2010). While the population of U.S. teens might be at risk in ways that vary from other countries, it is still important to consider the impact that being overly accessible to others across varied technological modalities has on adolescents.

The issue of access was further amplified by participants’ responses about who is around and/or monitoring them when they are using their cell phones or computers. All of the participants reported that they have access to computers on a regular basis and
many have their own computers in private spaces such as their room or a private home office. Furthermore, only two of the participants reported that their texts or messages are monitored by adult figures. There are several possible explanations for this lack of monitoring that can be found in the current literature. Blair and Fletcher (2010) found that for many parents, there is a sense of security that is felt when their child has a cell phone. It means that they can be easily reached and can connect with their child. Thus, a cell phone, for some parents, creates a sense of security about their child’s whereabouts. Furthermore, a prerequisite for an adolescent to be given a cell phone by parents often involves parents feeling that their teen is responsible enough to handle a cell phone properly, not lose it, etc. Essentially, the term responsibility was more linked to the maintenance of the phone, and not how the teen would actually use it (Blair & Fletcher, 2010). This may explain some of the reasons why many of the participants’ parents/caregivers did not seem to engage in monitoring the use of technology.

Additionally, none of the participants reported that there were any clear restrictions or boundaries placed on them by parents/caregivers as related to their use of technology. While some mentioned what schools have done to deal with the problem, it appears that the lack of limits and boundaries placed on teens regarding their cell phone use both at school and at home may leave them vulnerable to incidents of cyberbullying.

Another interesting dimension to the issue of monitoring, or lack thereof, is related to the assumed limited knowledge that adults have about how to use technology in order to effectively monitor and manage teens’ behaviors. As Nicole, age 14 stated:

Well, of course, they know about Facebook and MySpace and stuff like that, but my mom still doesn’t know how to hang up my phone. She’ll use it, and she’s like
how do you hang this thing up? …They know pretty much about stuff, but they
don’t really use it as much as we do, and so they don’t know the details and stuff.
Another respondent echoed this sentiment by discussing her thoughts about how
adolescent girls can deceive their parents by acting differently in front of them versus in
private:

I think they just know, “Oh, yeah, well, she's just texting her friend.” And they'll
probably see them taking a picture or two. Like, they'll probably take all little
girly pictures in front of their parents, but as soon as the lights go out, it's just,
“Oh, ____ take the picture with my shirt off, and I'm gonna send it to my
boyfriend.” I do stuff behind my parents' backs, because it's just stuff that I don't
want them knowing. So I know there's a whole lotta teenaged girls that do stuff
they're not supposed to because they don't want their parents to know.

Throughout the literature, it is noted that the level of involvement and support provided
by parents is linked to teen exposure to bullying situations, including cyber bullying
incidents. In fact, Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) found that parental involvement –
identified as helping their child when in need, being loving, understanding their child’s
worries and problems, and making an attempt to help their child’s mood to improve when
upset – is more of a protective factor against all forms of bullying than having positive
peer relationships. This finding, and others like it in the literature, support the notion that
parental involvement is key to protecting teens from bullying situations. Indeed the
participants in this study overwhelmingly identified that the main area of assistance that
parents can provide to avoid cyberbullying issues is to monitor their technology activity
in a more active way than many currently are.
Bystander Drama

In response to a variety of questions in the interviews, the respondents mentioned the term “drama.” Anecdotally, it is evident that drama is thought of as the process of a minor problematic interaction becoming a major problem for multiple role players within a group of girls. The major players in the instigation of drama seem primarily to be the bystanders in a cyberbullying incident. These are the individuals that may receive or send messages but are not the target or initial perpetrator of the cyberbullying incident. Kowalski et al. (2008) have suggested that it is likely that bystanders of cyberbullying are more likely to take part in the bullying than bystanders of traditional bullying incidents. This is consistent with the responses of the participants in this study as they referred to bystanders as being instigators, selfish, and the type of girls who enjoy the excitement of drama, are passive, or, engage in the spread of rumors simply to avoid being the next target.

To further operationalize what is meant by drama and how it is linked to cyberbullying, it is important to identify the types of activities that can be viewed as drama by teen girls. As evidenced by the responses, the following types of behaviors qualified as drama: spreading rumors via phones, forwarding text messages received if they are humiliating for a particular person or inappropriate, name calling on social networking sites or chatrooms, creating status updates on Facebook or MySpace that indirectly target an individual or group of individuals, and other behaviors that result in an escalation or maintenance of hostile interactions between girls. This is consistent with many research findings about the indirect and/or relational types of aggression displayed by adolescent girls. However, the involvement of bystanders is more fluid in
cyberbullying incidents because if someone receives a forwarded text message that contains embarrassing information about another girl in her school, two things have occurred: first, she has become an involuntary bystander; and second, she finds herself at a decision point as to whether to forward the message to another friend, delete the message, or report the message to an authority figure. Unlike traditional bullying when a bystander may voluntarily walk up to an ensuing altercation or pass along a rumor verbally, with cyberbullying it is more likely that a bystander will initially be included involuntarily (i.e. receive a forwarded text, picture, or view a Facebook page) and subsequently either become involved in the perpetration of bullying or cease to act in defense of the victim (Kowalski et al., 2008). The unique role of the bystander of cyberbullying means that she has more of an opportunity to make a greater impact for better or for worse. As many respondents stated, they believe that most girls their age would pass on information to keep the drama going in a cyberbullying incident. The discrepancy between how respondents say they would respond and what they actually do will be discussed in a later section of this chapter. This is a debatable topic that relates to this issue of bystander impact in cyberbullying.

Impact on Social Interaction

Many aspects of the interview drew responses that related directly to the impact technology has on social interaction. Positive aspects included having increased methods of keeping in touch with friends from other schools, towns, and countries. Other positive aspects included being able to access information related to school assignments or coordinating places to meet up with friends. The benefits for girls being able to communicate via technology are very important in terms of maintaining social
connections with their peers. Lodge and Frydenberg (2007) discussed the role of technology in the lives of adolescent girls as being a tool that can promote friendships and that can also act as an agent for inclusion in peer groups. Pierce (2009) found that for socially anxious girls, the option to communicate via socially interactive technologies provides more comfort in developing and maintaining relationships. These types of benefits acknowledged by the literature are consistent with the responses provided by participants in this study as mentioned above. Also, respondents acknowledged that for many girls, it may be preferable to communicate via technology if they have reservations about saying things face to face with a person. It would be interesting to explore how the social hierarchy among adolescent girls is impacted if they do not have the same level of access to technology as their same age peers. There was only one participant who did not have her own cell phone, but it was unclear whether that affected her social standing amongst her peers. There was nothing found in the literature regarding how social interactions are impacted by a lack of access to technology among adolescent girls. This is an area for future research.

Surprisingly, some of the drawbacks of using texting and Internet technologies as a primary means of communication that were offered by respondents were not found in the literature. Many research studies (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Kowalski et al., 2008; Ybarra, Diener-West, et al., 2007) identified the 24/7 nature of engaging in technological communication among adolescents; however, hardly any mention some of the specific drawbacks outlined by participants in this study such as a decreased ability to communicate in face-to-face interactions and the loss of small talk among adolescent girls. As one participant stated:
It's easier to talk to people over texts. So if you're so used to texting a person and just
talking to them over the computer, you're not gonna be used to being social with them
talking with them face to face…Girls [are] so used to texting people that it's like all
their social skills are flushed down the toilet. (Mary, age 14)

There was no literature found that directly addressed this phenomenon of depreciating
social skills as a direct result of the increased usage of texting and online communication.
Yet for many of the participants in this study, there were statements and clusters of
information provided that addressed this issue of girls not being able to embody the same
social skills in face-to-face interactions as they do with technological communication.

Another aspect of communication changes based on technology usage that was noted
by the participants and was not found in the literature is how the expectation around
response time to texts and instant messages is important in reading social cues from
others. As stated by several participants, the expectation is that they will receive
immediate responses back from texts or comments made via the Internet. When there is a
delay the result is concern that there is a problem in the relationship or hostility. This was
viewed as a drawback by some participants because even though they are aware that there
are many life situations that may preclude a peer from immediately responding to a text,
there is still an expectation that when a text is received, the person should immediately
respond. The literature does not speak to this issue directly; however, there have been
studies in other countries (Yang et al., 2010) that have acknowledged that the
preoccupation with checking cell phones and having to access cell phone messages on a
regular basis can interfere with quality of life for adolescents. This has been attributed to
the notion that extended interpersonal contacts and ongoing exciting cell phone activity
leaves an adolescent vulnerable to conflict with others via technology. Although this is loosely tied to the issue of expected response time to technological messages, it does connect the issue of the types of expectations that teens have of each other regarding technological communication.

The rules of engagement, or pragmatics of language, changes dramatically when interacting with technological devices. The nonverbal heuristics that are used in face-to-face interactions such as body posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, inflection, or use of laughter is nonexistent in a text message or online posting. The use of emoticons, icons that can be used on a computer to suggest the tone of the text (such as a smiley face, sad face, wink, etc.), has helped to improve this issue, but for many participants in this study, the difficulty of fully understanding what a sender of a text is actually saying was a salient issue. Even the use of acronyms such as “LOL” for “laugh out loud” were noted by one participant to be excessive to type after every sentence of a text just so the receiver knows that their peer is joking.

**Egocentrism of Adolescence**

The questions in this study were primarily framed from a third person perspective asking each participant to discuss what they have heard or seen of their same-age peers. Some questions were asked in first person so that they could offer some information about their personal behaviors with technology. A specific sequence of questions posed to the girls was the following:

*Have you ever received messages from other girls your age via any electronic device (cell phone, computer) and the message was embarrassing, or private information about another girl or boy your age that was not your friend?*

*If so, what did you do with the information?*
Do you think your reaction was like most girls your age? How?

This sequence offers the participants a unique opportunity to reflect on their behaviors in comparison to their peers and is one of the few sequences of questions that asked them to reflect on their own behavior. Overwhelmingly, the respondents indicated that although they may have received negative and/or embarrassing messages, their behavior was unlike most girls their age. This is not a surprising trend, but one that illustrates that the key issues that developmental psychology addresses in the adolescent stage are alive and well. The idea of the personal fable in adolescence is that an adolescent believes herself to be so unique from her peers, that she is either protected from bad things happening, or is the only one in the world who is experiencing misfortune. The idea that “I do not engage in that behavior, but everyone else does” emerged in this study repeatedly. These findings are not surprising, but it is interesting that so many studies about cyberbullying in the literature focus on having adolescents talk about their personal behaviors. The approach in this study was designed to override the tendency for adolescents to be more perceptive about what others are doing, and less insightful about their own behaviors. This method seemed to yield more information than was found in studies that either surveyed or interviewed adolescents. It is evident from the current study that there may be a tendency for many adolescents to be more forthcoming with information about others than they are about themselves. Future research would benefit from designing protocols in a way that addresses this issue and provides more useful information about teens’ cyber behaviors.

The use of picture messaging and sending of picture messages of adolescents also ties into the naïveté of this developmental stage. In instances of sexting, where people
send pictures of a sexual nature through cell phones, several respondents discussed how
they had seen these types of messages or heard of girls their age that sent pictures to a
boyfriend, and shortly thereafter, the pictures were publicized. For adolescents, there is a
belief that it is impossible that their teen boyfriend would betray their trust. At this stage
of development, adolescents tend to lack the foresight to consider consequences if the
fantasy world they created should fall apart. Also, there is a great deal of peer pressure
and it is possible that boys pressure girls to send sexy pictures, and when the relationship
dissolves, those images are in cyberspace for all to see. As some respondents that had
knowledge of this issue reported:

   It actually involved the same girl that the rumor went around that she was
   pregnant, at my old school. She sent a picture to her boyfriend. And her boyfriend
   went and sent the picture to his friend, [and said] “Oh, yeah, look what my girl
   sent me. She just sent me this picture. Check it out.”  So then he sends it to his
   friend. And then his friend….sends it to his friend. And then everybody starts
   receiving the picture. (Crystal, age 15)

Alexis, age 15, described a similar situation:

   There was one this year where a girl had taken a picture, and I don’t even think
   she sent it. I think it was just a picture on her phone or something like that. And
   somebody had got a hold of it and just sent it around, and they were all looking at
   it in gym class. That happens a lot.

   The issue of sexting is an emerging topic in the literature. For the most part;
however, the current literature is mostly focused on the legal issues that have occurred as
a result of sexting, as many states have begun to identify sexting between minors as a
form of child pornography (Lenhart, 2009). It is important to acknowledge the interface between adolescents’ ability to disclose too much of themselves via technology and their developmental limitations with regard to thinking through consequences and having a realistic understanding of the immature use of technology among their peers. This is another area in which further research is needed.

**Boundaries of School/Home**

Another theme that emerged from this study is the idea that cyberbullying is transient in nature. That is, it can happen on school grounds and off school grounds at home. It also has multiple vessels for being prolonged over a period of time because of the forwarding features on cell phones and the permanency of Internet pages and blasts. As participants mentioned, a cyberbullying incident can occur before school resumes the following day and then the drama finds it way into the school day in some capacity. This is one of the hallmark differences that is outlined in the literature and summarized by Kowalski et al. (2008) in the book, *Cyberbullying*. In it, they describe how cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that it is inescapable because in a traditional bullying situation, the bully cannot come home with his or her victim. There is a nightly reprieve from the harassment. This is not the case in cyberbullying and that is echoed by the participants in this study. Some of the girls mentioned the impact of this constant exposure to being bullied including Elena, age 16 who stated:

> It probably gets them upset and have bad thoughts in their head. Because if they keep on getting targeted, then they’re going to keep on getting lower and lower, then they’re [feeling like], “Yeah, I don’t want to be alive anymore.”
Taken together with the fact that many of the participants are isolated when on their computers or phones because they are not being monitored by adults, it is easy to make the assumption that without the guidance of adults to offer support, teens can feel that they are in a situation that cannot be controlled or that they cannot be protected from. At the time of writing this study, there was a nationally covered case of an older adolescent in college whose privacy in his own dormitory room was violated and broadcast to strangers via a web camera, resulting in the student dying by suicide (Foderaro, 2010). This theme is consistent with the literature to the degree that cyberbullying creates a situation for adolescents that is inescapable. As Patchin and Hinduja (2006) stated:

There is no clean separation between the two realms [of home and school]and so specific instances of cyberbullying….against a person make their way around the interested social circles like wildfire.

Surprisingly, the research that is currently focused on cyberbullying has not yet examined the ideas that were raised by participants in this study about how much adolescents are connected and want to be connected to each other, despite their vulnerability to being bullied or teased by peers. Several research studies peripherally mention the importance of social connections in the lives of adolescence (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007), but none specifically discuss the fact that there is an attraction to staying connected even when they are being targeted by cyberbullies. None of the participants suggested that a teen who is being cyberbullied should stop using the technology, but rather, they suggested that victims should ignore it, retaliate, report it, or change settings so that they cannot be contacted by certain persons. These methods may seem useful, but it is clear that in
conjunction with participants’ responses that most teens are on the Internet “all day, every day.” Thus, these solutions may be helpful, but ultimately may be ineffective if all the pieces of the problem (victim, bully, bystanders, school officials and parents) do not come together- to resolve a multi-systemic issue that crosses boundaries from home to school and back again on a regular basis.

Personal Accountability

The issue of personal accountability is a theme that emerged particularly in the area of the bystander effect. Respondents had fairly negative views of the types of girls that may receive and forward messages about other people. These girls were also identified in the interview as girls that either do nothing to stop the spread of rumors or continue the spread of rumors. Many of the respondents offered similar descriptors of the type of girls that are bystanders in cyberbullying scenarios. Alana, age 17, summarized them as being “instigators.” Sarah, age 15, also identified the instigative nature of bystander behaviors stating that these types of girls are “passive. They just like the excitement of the drama and the gossip. Maybe not like bad people, but they like being involved and hearing all of it.”

Conversely, other respondents identified girls that are in the bystander role as being far less aggressive. An example of this perspective was Mary, age 14, who stated that bystanders are “scared that they're gonna be victims of it next, because rumors can be made up right away.” Lisa, age 16, spoke about an additional reason for why she sometimes falls into the category of bystander:

I think I’m probably one of those girls. I just maybe try to get into it so that way you can communicate with other people because maybe you don’t get to talk to
people often. So this is your chance to talk to people so, ‘Did you hear about so and so…’

A running thread in what many participants noted is that for bystanders, there is a level of involvement in the perpetuation of cyberbullying incidences, but clearly, there are different motivating factors according to the responses in this study. The literature on cyberbullying has few elements of research related to the profile of the bystander and the various motivators that get them involved. Some literature (Kowalski et al., 2008); however, does identify how bystanders in a traditional bullying situation differ from those in a cyberbullying situation. Bystanders in cyberbullying situations are more likely to shift from the role of bystander to bully since they forward messages, gossip about cyberbullying incidents, and perpetuate the duration of exposure to negative images or messages about the victim. Thus the bystander in a cyberbullying situation has a far greater impact on the victim than in a traditional bullying incident or in cases of relational aggression (Kowalski et al. 2008). It was striking; however, that participants focused specifically on the motivation of the types of girls who are bystanders in a cyberbullying incident. This was noteworthy given the finding that no literature currently exists to support these ideas, despite extensive research on traditional bullying and the emerging literature on cyberbullying.

Another aspect of personal accountability is the findings from this study regarding why girls may feel more comfortable being more aggressive through cyber activity via cell phones and the Internet. Several respondents reported that girls feel more confident and may act more aggressive through a text or online post, than they would ever do or say in face-to-face interactions. This is suggestive of what Kowalski et al. (2008) refer to as
the anonymity factor of cyberbullying interactions and the power in having that anonymity among cyberbullies. The respondents in this study offered comments that indicate their awareness of the power of hiding behind technology and how that can increase one’s confidence in inflicting harm on peers via technology.

In this study, many of the participants reported that their understanding of cyberbullying was specific to the Internet and did not mention cell phone use as being included in the definition, as they know it. This is alarming because their primary methods of communication are through texting on cell phones, according to the participants in this study. This discrepancy was also found in the literature, as many studies have focused primarily on cyberbullying via the Internet, and few have examined both cell phones and the Internet as being tools for cyberbullying to occur. It is evident that since the participants in this study define cyberbullying as being limited to Internet interactions only, they may not view their negative behaviors with cell phones’ text and picture messaging capabilities as making them cyberbullies. The definition of cyberbullying needs to be clarified and dispersed in a manner that will begin to redefine adolescents’ understanding of all that encompasses cyberbullying.

**Violent Repercussions**

According to findings in this study, respondents are aware that the impact of cyberbullying can be violent outcomes for their peers. Several participants mentioned these issues specifically, including Nicole, age 14 who stated:

If you’re being bullied or something, or you have really low self-esteem, and people are bullying you more and putting you down more, that makes you feel bad. With some colleges, there are guys who get bullied a lot, and then they
decide they’re just going to kill everyone, and it’s really bad. You don’t want to
keep putting them down, [and] then they’re going to get up and shoot you and
everything.

Crystal, age 15, also stated that “[girls that are cyberbullied] hold it inside. And then
that's how people commit suicide.” Gabrielle also echoed this concern about self-harm as
a result of cyberbullying, stating that for victims, “the self esteem goes really down.
People don’t think of other people’s feelings, so that’s why they end up killing their
selves”

These comments demonstrate awareness that some of the participants have
regarding the dangers that are associated with excessive bullying over time. The
increased media coverage of teen suicides related to cyberbullying and traditional
bullying may also be contributing to participants having more sensitivity to the violent
repercussions of cyberbullying. More research would be helpful to identify if there is
increased awareness by adolescents, in general, due to the rise in mass media coverage of
teen suicides linked to cyberbullying.

**Limited Knowledge Among Adults**

Findings from this study generated a general theme of adults having fairly limited
knowledge about the various positive or negative ways that teens use technology. As
respondents reported, some adults are dismissive. One respondent stated, “Every time I
say something to my mom, she says ‘I did it all before.’” However, this statement is
dismissive in a sense because the types of technologies available today to adolescents far
exceed any other type of communication that most adults had access to even one decade
ago. Even if the parents of the participants in this study were very young upon becoming
parents, they still would not be able to understand what cyberbullying is like for adolescents in this current time in history. In the case of this respondent, she felt that her mother’s statement to her made her feel as though her mother did not care to understand how the respondent was using her technology.

Other respondents indicated that other adults view their use of technology as fodder for jokes because of the shorthand methods of text languages that is often employed by teens using technology. In general, participants identified that the vast majority of adults in their lives are either unable or unwilling to understand or take interest in how adolescent girls are using technology.

The technology that teens use is constantly changing. Over the course of this study’s development and progress, several new forms of cyberbullying methods have developed such as Formspring (the equivalent to an online bathroom wall where individuals can anonymously ask targeted questions to a specific account holder, which can lead to embarrassing situations such as “Isn’t Kristen such a slut?”), and Twitter (a social networking site where people can update the world on their activities all day, every day if they desire). It is imperative for adults that interface with children everyday, be it in a parenting role or educational/health role, to understand the intricacies of how cyberbullying can occur and to become more familiar with the “weapons of choice” that are used to carry out these incidents. Simply knowing that LOL means laugh out loud is not enough to build confidence in teens that the adults in their lives will be of any help to them should they fall victim to a cyberbully. Again, the participants in this study indicated that they want to be monitored and believe it to be necessary in order for adults to be helpful in reducing incidents of cyberbullying. Technological savvy on the part of
adults interacting with children regularly must go beyond superficial knowledge and to a deeper understanding of the patterns of behavior associated adolescents and technology use.

**Feelings of Helplessness**

One final theme that arose from this study was the feeling of helplessness expressed by some of the respondents and how they expressed their thoughts about how to reduce cyberbullying incidents. Essentially, many participants did not speak about whether or not cyberbullying could be stopped, but rather indicated that it cannot be, so their peers that are victimized should just ignore it and wait for things to blow over. To some degree, some of the participants suggested that the best method of coping with cyberbullying is to detach from the very source of how adolescents stay connected. In this age of digital communication, social connectedness among teens ties directly to whether or not they can access their peers at the same excessive levels as others. This notion is further supported by research that discusses the social connections and hierarchies that are linked to technology access among teen girls (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Thus, avoidance of cyberbullies may mean decreasing use of cell phones, social networking sites, and chat rooms, which is a significant part of their daily existence. One would assume that this may leave a victim of cyberbullying feeling helpless to solve the problem as adults are only minimally aware of how to intervene and the victim cannot always tell which peers are on their side and which ones are perpetuating the cyberbullying action.
Limitations of the Current Study

The small sample used in this study results in the importance of taking caution in generalizing the findings from this research to the general population. Also, the use of adolescent girls, specifically in the ninth and tenth grade is, at best, only a small portion of a snapshot of the experiences of adolescent girls as they relate to cyberbullying. Another limitation of this study is that the location of this study was in areas where the participants were attending school in lower middle to upper middle class areas in the New Jersey school system. This further suggests that the findings from this study cannot be expected from all adolescent girls in all areas because it is possible that there could be other factors such as location, grade, socioeconomic status, etc. that may account for differing experiences of adolescent girls in other regions. One other limitation is that this study obviously did not include adolescent males in the sample. As stated before, the reasons for using adolescent girls for this study were linked directly to the literature. However, it is still important to note that the results from this research may not speak directly to the impact that technology has on adolescent boys specifically, but it is possible that there may be some overlap.

A final limitation of this study is investigator bias as a result of the researcher being the designer of the instruments and the conductor of all interviews and data analysis. Also, the researcher has great deal of interest in the subject matter. The degree of involvement in the conceptualization, design, implementation, and analysis of the information may relate to investigator bias and should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings of this study.
Implications

Implications for future research. Due to the relative newness of cyberbullying as a phenomenon affecting many teens and adults, the implications for future research are abundant. Specific to the findings in this study, it would be useful for researchers to begin to focus their efforts in understanding the context of cyberbullying and the role of all participants, including bystanders. By and large, the studies specifically related to cyberbullying focused on bullies, victims, bully-victims, and non-involved peers. However, there were two studies that managed to address the caveats of this approach as a method of measuring cyberbullying occurrences (Li, 2006; Sutton & Smith, 1999). In these studies, the authors suggest that research on bullying, including cyberbullying, needs to examine the process of how multiple participants beyond just bullies and victims are playing a role in cyberbullying. The findings from this study suggest the same need, as respondents were able to identify the importance of more knowledge and understanding on the part of schools, families, and individual students in order to effectively manage cyberbullying incidents. Solid research on the process of cyberbullying would provide guidelines for how these entities can intervene effectively with teens.

Another area for future research is beginning to synthesize a specific definition of what cyberbullying is and what it is not. In the traditional bullying literature there are consistencies regarding what bullying is and it can be operationalized based on type, frequency, and intensity of intimidating behaviors. The solid definition of traditional bullying has paved the way for significant research and anti-bullying programs to be created. Many research articles define cyberbullying in different ways and there is a need
to synthesize these definitions and provide a more operationalized definition of what cyberbullying is along a continuum of behaviors. This relates back to the matter of understanding cyberbullying as a group process and not merely just a series of actions between a victim and a perpetrator. There are clearly behaviors taken on by role players that place them in a much more powerful position in a cyberbullying incident in comparison to a traditional bullying incident.

The issue of cyberbullying can be likened to a moving target. Just during the course of conceptualizing this study (2 years) the development of new social networking options such as Twitter and Formspring launched and have created new forums for interacting. Thus, the study of cyberbullying should be including more research that keeps up with the changing face of the weapons of choice for more teens to bully each other. The lag in research that can provide guidelines and support for the development of treatment modalities, assessment, policies, and laws is costly in the sense that the mainstream news media reports more frequent teen suicides stemming directly from cyberbullying incidents. Researchers need to focus on the agents of cyberbullying and help adults and teens understand the ways to counter these negative impacts.

In general, future research needs to take a step back and make better usage of qualitative approaches in which the adolescents are placed in the role of the “expert” because, in this case, they really are the experts. Many preliminary studies on cyberbullying (Li, 2006, 2007) in the literature provide teens with questions mentioning specific behaviors or events using the term cyberbullying without a clear definition provided. The process of having conversations and interviews with teens may offer a greater depth in understanding the process of cyberbullying and the impact that
technology has on the day-to-day lives of adolescents in a digital world. As Prensky (2005) stated, teens today are digital natives, and thus, it is advantageous for them to be the tour guides in helping researchers to understand the phenomenon of cyberbulling and to receive their input on what intervention strategies may work best for them.

A further area of research that needs to be done is on adaptation of the Olweus (1993) anti-bullying model that is implemented in many schools across the world as the premier program. Olweus’ work has mainly focused on traditional bullying and although the same interventions for traditional bullying may work for cyberbullying issues, no research was found on how Olweus’ model addresses cyberbullying incidents, specifically. It is possible that the model is a catch-all for multiple forms of bullying, but there was no research found to support this hypothesis. The responses offered by participants in this study illustrate that the unlimited access that teens have to each other via technology makes the nature of cyberbullying much different than traditional bullying. Thus, it would be useful for research to begin to understand anti-bullying programs that have specific components related to cyber behaviors of students.

Finally, future research needs to look at the impact of cyberbullying as it increases as a method of choice for many adolescents in the U.S. As many respondents in this study mentioned, the impact of being cyberbullied may inflict deeper wounds on adolescents who are already vulnerable and the results can be, and have been, violent and deadly for many teens that have been victimized. The responses from the current study participants are consistent with literature that has identified that the developmental impact of cyberbullying is worth continuing to study because social acceptance is such a key part of
this developmental stage. Cyberbullying can create a great deal of damage to victims on social, emotional, and psychological levels (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

**Implications for schools.** The findings from this study illustrate that schools face an unprecedented predicament as far as how to intervene when cyberbullying incidences occur off school grounds, but find their way into the schools later. As many of the girls in this study mentioned, cyberbullying incidents were identified as occurring both inside and outside of the school. This is consistent with literature that states that cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in that cyberbullying can be experienced on and off school grounds (Kowalski et al., 2008). That is, the exposure to the bullying source can cross the boundaries of a school day. With this in mind, it is necessary that schools begin to develop policies that will specifically identify when they are responsible or not responsible for cyberbullying incidents and how they should be expected to intervene. With more cases of cyberbullying receiving mass media attention, many schools have begun to create and address policies related to this issue, but without uniformity across states and districts, the rights of students will vary, ultimately leading to major safety issues for students.

Furthermore, the comments made by participants in this study identify the type of girls that may be vulnerable to bullying. Their comments are consistent with the literature such as the social status of the victim, physical appearance, and social awkwardness (Ponsford, 2007). Schools in general have a good idea of the profile of the type of girl that may be targeted. Thus, it behooves schools to take a more preventive approach, instead of waiting for an incident to occur and then having to intervene and mediate for the students involved in cyberbullying incidents. The ideas offered by the participants in
this study such as peer role models, stricter rules relating to technology use in schools, more stringent sanctions for cyberbullying, and school assemblies aimed at educating students about the severe outcomes of cyberbullying are just some ideas that schools can integrate into their current practices so that they can be more effective at addressing cyberbullying. The fact that some of the participants mentioned that the schools cannot do anything speaks to the lack of confidence that some individuals have about how much schools can do. However, due to the nature of cyberbullying (i.e. that it can occur in and out of schools), it is important for school officials to take a closer look at how they are enforcing policies and whether a lack of sanctions for this type of behavior results in lapses in the security of students’ rights.

This study’s participants reported that schools and school officials seem to not be aware of a cyberbullying problem unless a student makes a report. Then, in most cases, action is taken. This issue speaks to the need for schools to have an ongoing conversation with students in order to be able to be more effective in responding to and understanding the events leading up to cyberbullying incidents. This is consistent with literature that has used focus group approaches to gather student’s perspectives on cyberbullying. Agatston, Kowalski, and Limber (2007) found that adolescent girls, in particular, spoke about their school’s lack of discussion about cyberbullying, despite the fact that it was a major problem in their schools.

A final issue is that many schools in the U.S. have implemented the Olweus Anti-Bullying Model (Olweus, 1993), which is a whole-school approach to decreasing bullying incidents. The implementation of this model has been shown to be effective in schools in the areas of traditional bullying; however, there is not a great deal of research
to suggest that it effectively addresses cyberbullying issues. According to research, the mere adoption of the Olweus model does not diminish the need for helping students to develop healthy cyber-behaviors (Sourander et al., 2010). This indicates that schools can implement the Olweus model, but should take care to add in components that specifically speak to the cyber behaviors of their students in realistic manner. The input from students on what aspect of cyber behaviors are most salient to them is a key part of school interventions, as adolescents are the experts on the new ways that technology is used to inflict harm on their peers. Thus, they should be included in the process of developing school approaches that will suit the school culture and the specific challenges they face.

**Implications for parents and families.** The participants in this study overwhelmingly stated that the most effective way that parents can increase their awareness of and be helpful in eliminating cyberbullying, is by monitoring a child’s texts and Internet communications. This by and large, seems to be the most expected method for parents to be aware of what is happening in their children’s lives so that they can more effectively manage and correct problematic behaviors. Research has found that many parents want their children to be connected with their friends via technologically, but are not engaging in the specific type of monitoring that would allow them to know if their child is a cyberbully, is being cyberbullied, or is a part of the large group of bystanders in a cyberbullying interaction (Blair & Fletcher, 2010).

The type of monitoring necessary for parents should go beyond just looking at their monthly phone bills to see how many minutes have been used or how many texts their child has sent or received. Some of the respondents specifically mentioned that parents can be too cursory in their monitoring and are not really taking the time to find
out in depth what their child may actually be saying when they text or chat with each other via the Internet. As one respondent reported, her mom just “pops in on me and tells me to log in.” This type of strategy may result in a child knowing that their parent is going to keep a close eye and is not just going to ask what their child is doing, but will actually look to ensure that their child is practicing appropriate communications via technology. Also, this type of monitoring style may also send the message to the child that her parents are watching and have expectations that she will use her technological freedoms in positive ways. Thus, through increased parental monitoring, it is possible that there could be a promotion of healthy and safe cyber behaviors. Though this method may not be foolproof, it is better than having parents do nothing to communicate to children that they are expected to use their access to each other for good and not evil.

Parents should also pay attention to the signs that their child is being bullied or spending too much time on their phones or the Internet. This relates to the idea of excess of access. As some research in other countries (Yang et al., 2010) has noted, adolescents that have been overexposed to cell phone use may have more sleep issues or become anxious or depressed. Parents need to take more care in noticing the subtle changes in their adolescent, and continue to ask questions. As many respondents mentioned, it is not just about parents removing the cell phone or Internet, as it is about parents having a relationship with their child that facilitates communication about what is happening in their child’s life. As Gabrielle, age 15, stated, “If they talk to their kids and have a good relationship,” it is expected that the child would be more forthcoming when a cyberbullying incident is occurring.
**Implications for mental health providers.** The findings from this study indicate that adolescents’ access to each other is limitless in the midst of the digital age in which society is currently entrenched. In fact, in response to questions about usage, the respondents’ answers were consistent both with their estimations of their own technology usage and that of their same age peers. This was unlike other lines of questioning in the interviews when respondents indicated that their behaviors related to technology were different than that of their peers.

This discrepancy indicates that adolescents seem to be fairly comfortable disclosing the degree to which they overuse technology, but may be less insightful about how healthy their technological interactions are with their peers. For mental health providers that specifically work with adolescent populations, this has potential implications for domains of assessment. As discussed earlier, there have been several studies that have linked specific mental health issues to adolescents who engage in excessive cell phone and Internet use (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007; Yang et al., 2010). Mental health providers can feel confident that assessing technology usage and access early on in treatment may provide indicators for sources of presenting problems such as social anxiety, insomnia, parental and/or peer conflicts, depressive symptoms, or school avoidance. As the emphasis for psychologists and mental health providers has progressed to diligence to provide evidence based treatments to clients, it is imperative that technological usage be considered when gathering information early on in treatment. There have been enough studies producing information such as that done by Yen et al (2009) related to negative technology use and emotional/interpersonal problems to support this idea.
The findings from this study have underscored some of the mental health issues documented in the literature as evidenced by comments from respondents about the types of girls that are targets for cyberbullying and the impact cyberbullying may have on victims. Other studies have shown that adolescents report somatic problems and physiological problems as well. Thus, the implications for practice are that an awareness of an adolescent client’s usage of technology may provide information about their interactions with others and their risk of experiencing social difficulties as a result of their use.

The findings from this study support the notion that the precipitation, onset, and impact of cyberbullying is one that should not be ignored by those that provide mental health services to adolescents. In addition to an initial assessment of the technology usage of adolescent clients, mental health providers can also identify personal and tertiary experiences of cyberbullying episodes with their adolescent clients. As was mentioned by respondents in this study, they are more accustomed to adults making fun of their digital prowess and constant need to connect to their Facebook page or chat room. However, some respondents specifically identified that adults are not putting forth an effort to understand the nuances of their use and how things can go awry very quickly over technological interactions. Sarah, age 15, stated:

Like for texting, they always make fun of girls, how to be like LOL and all the abbreviations, but I don’t think they know what actually goes on when girls text each other, or go on Facebook. They think it’s just – oh, you have 500 friends. You don’t even know any of them.
This speaks to a general feeling of being dismissed by the adults in their lives when it comes to their primary method of communicating with their peers.

Mental health providers may find that rapport can be built by merely asking adolescent clients about their technology usage and how they use it, and by looking for the covert and overt signs of cyberbullying. In doing so, clinicians will acknowledge the importance of technological communication in the lives of their adolescent clients.

**Implications for policy.** This study’s findings indicate that adolescents are aware of what their schools can do to be more effective in reducing the number of cyberbullying incidents and more proactive in preventing them altogether. Many of the respondents recommended actions such as school assemblies and harsher policies regarding inappropriate technology use. However, many respondents also discussed how ineffective their schools have been. Lisa, age 16, was so convinced that schools were powerless that her statement painted a dismal picture:

Honestly I just think that it’s probably not gonna stop. We always had stuff like this going on and it’s like first when we didn’t have technology it was just people trying to stop the words. That didn’t work, now we have technology and that’s just another way of doing it and I honestly don’t think it’s gonna stop.

In many ways, this statement illustrates the lack of confidence that some adolescents have because most attempts that have been put in place to stop traditional bullying have not been effectively done in ways that children feel protected and supported. In order for schools to be effective, they must first understand the needs of their students and then implement policies with those needs in mind.
As has already been reported by multiple mainstream media outlets, many schools have developed policies specifically addressing cyberbullying related issues. As far back as July 2004, the American Psychological Association included language about cyberbullying and its negative impact on children, in a resolution on bullying among children and youth (APA, 2004). Another study found that educators need to understand and recognize when Internet harrassment is a possible cause for classroom and school disruption (Worthen, 2007). This same study emphasized the need for schools to be consistent and commited to the policies that they implement. Schools holding assemblies once a year on the topic may not be adequately addresing the issue if their school is rampant with cyberbullying problems.

The three aspects of policy development in this area as indicated by the respondents in this study included awareness, fluency, and timely interventions. The respondents in this study make it clear that the adults in their lives have limited understanding of the intricacies of the way technology can be used to harm others. Some even indicated a lack of parental interest in wanting to know about technology. School districts and lawmakers would benefit from including adolescents on task forces to develop more stringent policies on technology use, the role of the schools in cyberbullying incidents, and the identification of vulnerable students – both those that could be victims and those that may bully.

In 2008, thirty-five states had anti-bullying legislation; however, there were few that clearly defined the problem or made reference to the health risks to those affected by bullying. Srabstein and his colleagues argued for states to require the implementation of prevention programs, as well as funding for these activities, since bullying is rapidly
becoming a public health issue (Srabstein, Berkman, & Pyntikova, 2008). In 2010, during the writing of this study, New Jersey became the state with the toughest antibullying legislation in the country, mandating schools to implement prevention programs and to develop school safety teams that deal with all reports of bullying on or off school grounds.

**Implications for adolescents.** A striking aspect of this study was the degree to which the respondents were unwilling, or unable, to acknowledge their own negative technological behaviors, but were quite confident in identifying the bad behaviors of their peers. Only a few participants identified personal experiences when they were targets of cyberbullying and how they felt in response. The existence of egocentrism among adolescence is not a new concept. However, the magnification of this developmental issue by the role of technology in the daily life of adolescents is one that cannot be ignored. From an ecological perspective, technology has changed the face of the adolescent developmental stage in that the boundaries around them, which foster the development of identity, are much more fluid than they have ever been. Advances in technology have provided opportunities for people to have new patterns of relationships. However, the increased access that people have into the lives of one another, whether directly or vicariously, have changed the landscape of how parents engage their children, and how adolescents interact with each other (Gergen, 2000).

Prior to the technological advancements of the Internet, television, and the telephone, the lives and interests of adults and children had clear boundaries and could remain separated. Adolescents are developmentally at a stage in life where the formulation of intimate relationships is very important to them and many of them are
using the Internet as a means to maintain their social network (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). The threat of cyberbullying arises because adolescents have become more skilled than the adults around them, in navigating the Internet and using digital media and it is this role reversal that leaves adults unaware of the type of involvement their children have online (Willard, 2007).

The rise in technology use and its impact on how people interact is referred to by Gergen (2000) as “bending the life forms.” Teens, through the use of online social communication and media sharing, can in a sense become actors and are often thrust into new patterns in their relationships. Their lives can be made private by choice, not by circumstance, which was the case when all of these technological advances were unheard of. The trend towards the adoption of quasi anonymity (by way of screen names or MySpace profiles) brings individuals more power to inflict emotional harm and creates less boundaries around the victim. However, it may also decrease the sense of responsibility for negative online behavior.

The inability to infer tone, intent, inflection, and mood of communication over electronic media and email can take on a life of its own and can set teens up for the misinterpretation of what the other person may be thinking and feeling (Gergen, 2000). From a developmental standpoint, teenagers are at a cognitive stage where they feel that they are unique and that bad things will not happen to them. It is easy for them to feel removed from the consequences that could arise from inappropriate online communication. The ultimate result is that teens have a lack of social and cognitive maturity to effectively manage problematic technology interactions.
Overall, the implications for adolescents based on this study is that teens are not averse to talking about, exploring, and redefining how they use technology with adults. Because they are in a position to educate the adults in their lives, they need to be empowered to take on leadership roles when schools and communities decide to develop programming that aims to prevent and/or reduce cyberbullying incidents. The approaches to encouraging healthy cyber behaviors in adolescents should not only be in the form of policy changes, but also in the empowerment of adolescents to use appropriate rules for engaging with each other socially on and offline.

Conclusions

This study sought to offer adolescent girls an opportunity to openly talk about how technology impacts their relationships, with a specific focus on cyberbullying and how they understand it. The method of asking a significant number of questions in the third person offered participants the comfort of being able to freely explain all of the benefits and challenges that they may face when they use technology to communicate. Although many of the respondents offered information that was consistent with the literature that is currently available, it is evident that there are still many gaps in the research related to identifying the process of cyberbullying and how adult members of society are currently addressing the problems faced by digital natives.

Although this is a small study that cannot be generalized to the majority of adolescent girls, it is clear that the participants in this study are aware of the need for their peers to be involved in strategies aimed at reducing cyberbullying incidents. There was a general lack of confidence in adults being able to adequately understand the nature of cyberbullying because they are not as fluent in the use of technology as teens are in
today’s world. In a world where infants and toddlers have toys that require connections to
computers and TVs in order to function, and Apple Ipods have touch screen applications
specifically for babies, the adolescents of today are much more aware of how to navigate
and troubleshoot technology. Thus, schools, parents, and policy makers would be remiss
if they did not include panels of adolescents on their advisory committees when rules and
sanctions are being created related to technology use and cyberbullying.

A final conclusion is that a striking aspect of this study was the realization that the
teens of today are interacting in ways that are drastically different from the teens of just
seven to ten years ago. It has become the norm for privacy to be more translucent over
time. This tendency of change in the overall culture seems to be having its biggest impact
on adolescents, for better or for worse. The same vehicles that help people to reconnect
with classmates from 30 years ago are the same vehicles that contribute to cyberbullying
among people as well. The participants in this study were able to acknowledge that there
are both benefits and drawbacks to having cell phones and the Internet to connect with
their peers. However, for adolescents, the need to be connected seems to be paramount
despite the threat of to one’s privacy.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Background Form:

Subject Initials: _________________

Age: ___________

Grade:_________

School Name: ______________________________

Race:____________________________

Interview Protocol

** In this interview, the terms technology, electronic means, and technological means is used interchangeable throughout the questioning. These terms include email, instant messaging, social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, Twitter, text and picture messaging, etc. If you need me to

Part A- Usage (What access do you have to technological devices?)

1. Do you have a cellphone? What type? What are its capabilities (email, text, pic msg,etc?)

2. Who bought your phone?

3. Are your calls/texts monitored by anyone? Whom?

4. How often do you talk on your phone?

5. How often do you text on your phone?

6. Do you use a computer? How and where do you use it?

7. Do you have Internet access outside of school?

8. How many hours a day do you think you spend on the Internet?

9. What is the main way that you communicate with your friends?
10. Do you have a FaceBook or MySpace account? Which one and for how long have you had it?

11. How many hours a day do you think you spend on F/B or MySpace?

12. Do you use any instant messaging programs on the computer? Which one and for how long have you used it?

13. How much time do you think most kids your age spend using the Internet to communicate with each other?

14. How much time do you think most kids your age spend using their cell phone and its messaging capabilities to communicate with each other?

**Part B: Impact on Relationships**

**General Knowledge**

15. What are some of the ways that girls your age use electronic/technology to communicate with each other?

16. In your opinion, what is the most popular method that girls your age use to communicate with each other?

17. Do you ever use these methods? If so, how?

18. Do girls your age use electronic/technological communications to talk to kids that are only their friends? If not, how is it used in other ways?

19. Do you think girls your age use these electronic ways of communicating to talk about other kids? If so, how?

**Positive/Negative Aspects of using technology to communicate**

20. What are the benefits to being able to talk to girls your age using electronics and technology?
21. What are the drawbacks to being able to talk to girls your age using electronics and technology?

22. Have you ever heard of girls your age having friendship problems in relation to an electronic communication?

23. Have you ever heard of girls your age having other relationship problems in relation to an electronic communication?

24. When you communicate with girls your age using technological means, do you think that what you say is kept private? If so, how?

Cyberbullying

25. Have you ever heard of the term cyberbullying? If so, what have you heard about it?

26. When you hear the term, “cyberbullying,” what do you think it means?

27. Why do you think girls your age might use electronic/technological devices to bully other people?

28. Do you think boys or girls are most likely to use electronic means to bother/harass another person? Why?

29. Have you ever heard of girls your age using electronic devices to spread rumors about others (boys and/or girls)? If so, what have you heard?

30. Have you ever heard of boys your age using electronic devices to spread rumors about others (boys and/or girls)? If so, what have you heard?

31. Have you ever received messages from other girls your age via any electronic device (cell phone, computer) and the message was embarrassing, or private
information about another girl or boy your age that was not your friend? If so, what did you do with the information? Do you think your reaction was like most girls your age? How?

32. When negative experiences occur such as cyberbullying among girls your age, do these encounters happen inside or outside of the school? If inside, how does the school personnel at your school handle it? If outside of school, then does the conflict ever find its way into school? How?

33. What do you think is the main reason why girls your age might have problems related to using technology to communicate?

34. How would you describe the types of girls your age that are targets for being teased or bullied via technological means?

35. What impact do you think this has on girls that are targets?

36. How would you describe the types of girls your age tease or bully others via technological means?

37. How would you describe the types of girls your age spread the rumors or do nothing to stop the spread of rumors via technological means?

38. Have you ever known of girls who have put embarrassing pictures or videos of other girls online or sent through text/picture messaging? If so, what have you heard?

39. Have you ever heard of girls’ messages or pictures to boyfriends or romantic partners being made public to other people outside of that private relationship? If so, what have you heard?
40. If you could create your own definition of the term, “cyberbullying,” what would your definition be? What would be a good word or phrase that describes what happens when teens use these methods to tease or harass other teens?

41. When this type of thing happens to girls, how do you think it affects them emotionally or socially?

**Part C: Intervention and Adult Involvement**

42. Do you think adults in your life (parents, teachers, school administrators) know about all the ways girls your age use technology to communicate with each other? If so, how much do you think they know?

43. How can your school be helpful in making sure girls your age use technological methods of communication in mostly positive ways?

44. How can your parents be helpful in making sure girls your age use technological methods of communication in mostly positive ways?

45. If you could say anything to help a girl your age that is being teased or bullied via technological means, what would you say?

46. If you could say anything to help a girl your age that is teasing or bullying another person via technological means, what would you say?

47. If you could say anything to help a girl your age who is neither the bully/teaser nor the victim, but rather the person continuing the spread of information, or not stopping the spread of it, what would you say?

**Miscellaneous**

48. Is there any additional information that I did not ask you related to how girls your age use technology to communicate and how it affects relationships?
49. Have any of these this ever happened to you? If you feel comfortable sharing, could you tell me more about that?

50. Is there anything that you would like to ask me?

Interview Wrap-up

Thank you so much for your participation in this interview. This information will be very helpful to me and will hopefully help to inform future research about how teens communicate in the ever-increasing technological world. Remember, all information that you have shared will be kept confidential and your name will be assigned a code that only I will know about. Please feel free to contact me with any questions related to this study in the future. My information was included on the parental consent form signed by your parent. Have a wonderful school year!
Dear Parents,

My name is Kelly N. Moore and I am a student in the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers University. In order to complete my degree requirements, I am required to conduct a research study and your daughter’s school has allowed me to contact you to request permission for your child to participate in the study.

**Purpose:** The purpose of my research project is exploring how technology (email, cell phones, cyberbullying, instant messaging, MySpace/Facebook, etc.) influences the relationships between adolescent girls and their peers. This study is in response to many research studies that have been done recently that talk about the rise in teens using technology to create and maintain relationships. My interest in this topic stems from working with middle school students for two years as a doctoral student and listening to the girls talk about how they talked to each other and also how technology sometimes made their relationships with girls and boys challenging.

**Participants:** I will specifically be interviewing 9th and 10th grade girls. I will be attending an assembly at the start of the 2009-2010 school year with the ninth and tenth grade girls in order to explain the study to them. Only those girls that return a signed parental consent form will be considered for participation in the study. There is a cap on the number of students that can participate, as this is a small study, so the acceptance into the study is on a first come, first serve basis. That is, the first ten girls that return their signed parental consent form will be offered the opportunity to participate in the study.

**Procedure:** The young ladies who participate will be interviewed individually during a designated time at school and will be asked questions about how girls their age communicate using technology and how technology affects their relationships with others. Each student will have only one interview lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. It is my goal that the interviews will take place during an optimal period of the day so as to minimize time away from class instruction. If the student indicates at any time that they want to stop the interview, they will be thanked for their participation, and will return to their class.

**Risk/Benefit:** There are minimal risks associated with your child’s participation in this study. One is that some aspects of the interview- specifically those dealing with cyberbullying and negative use of technology to communicate—may result in psychological distress for the interviewee, depending on her involvement with that problem. Another risk is that if your child were to reveal any information related to abuse, neglect, or violence, then the proper school authorities would have to take action. If that were to happen, this researcher would ensure that proper support personnel in the school would be available to work with the individual, should they indicate any distress over discussing the topic. Counter to this, it may seem that your child will not benefit directly from participation. However, the data collected may lead to adults’ increased awareness of how technology influences adolescents’ relationships. Also, the responses of the participants will add to the current information that is in the psychology field, but due to the ever changing world of technology, teens are really the perfect source and it is useful to empower them as the expert on this phenomenon.

**Confidentiality:** This research is confidential. Confidential means that the research records will include some information about your child such as her age and grade, but your child’s identity will remain private by having each child be linked with a code number so that their interview responses are kept confidential. I will keep this information confidential by limiting individual's access to the research data and keeping it in a secure location. The research team and the Institutional Review Board at Rutgers University are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results are presented at a professional conference, only group results will be stated, unless you have agreed otherwise. Also, these interviews will be recorded in order to ensure that all of the information given by your child is gathered to maximize the findings of this research. The audio recording
will be done digitally, so as to decrease the need to hold onto a number of tapes. Once this study is complete, the recording will be erased. At the end of this consent form, you will have the opportunity to agree or decline the interview be audio taped. Your child may still participate if they are not audio taped.

**Limits to Confidentiality:** The following circumstances constitute the need to break confidentiality: if the participant informs the interviewer about any sexual or physical abuse, neglect, or domestic violence; and if the participant indicates that she intends to harm herself or someone else. In the event that either or both of these situations occur during the interview, the interview will immediately discontinue the interview and allow the school to carry out its protocol procedures for these types of occurrences in the school. Please contact your child’s school administrators if you have any questions about their procedures.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me, Kelly Moore at (856)-261-6590 or email me at kellyw1908@hotmail.com. You can also contact my dissertation faculty chairperson Dr. Nancy Boyd-Franklin at boydfrank@aol.com

If you have any questions about your child's rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at:

**Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects**

**Office of Research and Sponsored Programs**

3 Rutgers Plaza
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Your child's participation in this study is completely voluntary. Please sign and return the attached permission slip if you are willing to have your child participate. Your child will also be provided with a form asking if they would like to be a part of the study and informs them that they must have parental permission to participate. Your support is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Kelly N. Moore, PsyM

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___________________________________________ has my permission to participate in the research study, about how technology impacts relationships among adolescent girls.

___________________________________________ Date ________________

Signature of Parent or Guardian

___________________________________________ Date ________________

Signature of Witness

___________________________________________ Date ________________
Do you agree to your child’s interview being audio taped? (Please check one) Yes___________ No___________

**Please remember that the recorded information is also confidential and will be destroyed once the study is complete.

________________________________________________________      Date ________________
Signature of Parent or Guardian
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM

How Technology (such as cell phones, Internet, cyberbullying, MySpace/Facebook, etc.) Impacts Relationships Among Adolescent Girls.

You are invited to take part in a research study about how technology (e.g., cell phones, Internet, cyberbullying, MySpace/Facebook, etc.) impacts relationships among adolescent girls. This study is being conducted by Kelly N. Moore, who is a student at Rutgers University. She is doing the study in order to complete requirements for a doctoral degree.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sit for an interview with Kelly at your school which will take about 45-60 minutes. The interview will be recorded, if your parents agreed to that on the parental consent forms. The recording is only for the purposes of writing the study. Your name will NOT be made public at any time.

Your grades will not be affected in any way by your decision to participate or not participate in the study. The benefit to being a part of this study is that you will be sharing your knowledge about how girls your age are affected, both positively and negatively, by using technology to stay connected to each other.

You may skip any questions that you are not comfortable with answering during the interview, and you may decide to stop participating at any time without any penalty to you. This study is entirely voluntary. One of your parents will also be required to provide permission for you to participate in the study, and they will be given a phone number for Kelly Moore, in case you or your parents have any questions about the research. They will also have a phone number for the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Rutgers University, in case there are any questions about your rights as a research subject. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

In the event that you tell me that you plan to harm yourself or someone else in anyway, or if you tell me that someone is abusing you in some way, then we will stop the interview and speak to the school administrators to get help for you.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign below:
Student signature ___________________________  Date __________

Student name (printed) ___________________________  Date __________

Investigator signature ___________________________  Date __________