

*‘The Silence Phenomenon’*

**An Exploration of the Factors Influencing Irish  
Gifted Adolescents’ Resistance to Report their  
Experiences of Cyberbullying Behaviour**

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***DECLARATION***

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of a degree of Doctor of Philosophy is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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## ***PUBLICATIONS DEVELOPED FROM THE THESIS***

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O'Higgins Norman, J. and Connolly, J. (2011). 'Mimetic Theory and Scapegoating in the Age of Cyberbullying: The Case of Phoebe Prince'. Published in *Pastoral Care in Education: An International Journal of Personal, Social and Emotional Development*, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2011 Special Issue: International Associate Editors, pp. 287-300.

Connolly, J. (2004). 'An Understanding of the peer-to-peer concept in 2nd and 3rd Level Education Systems in England, Ireland and the USA'. Published in the *National Center for Guidance in Education (NCGE) Journal*, Spring 2004 (Issue 20).

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Connolly, J., and Hussey, P. (2014) 'Technology-Enabled Bullying & Adolescent Resistance-To-Report: The Need to Examine Causal Factors'. Proceedings of the *12th International Conference on e-Society*, 28 February - 2nd March, Madrid, Spain. ISBN: 978-989-8704-03-0. **(Winner: Outstanding Paper Award)**

Connolly, J. (2012). 'Technology-Mediated Bullying: Understanding the Factors that Influence the Resistance-to-Report Phenomenon', *International Conference on Bullying and Cyberbullying: The Interface between Science and Practice*. Vienna, Austria, 19th October.

Connolly, J. (2012). 'Cyberbullying & The Silence Phenomenon: The Need for An Improved Understanding', *Proceedings of the IADIS International Conference on ICT, Society and Human Beings 2012*. Lisbon 17-23 July, pp. 83-89.

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## Abstract

### **An Exploration of the Factors Influencing Irish Gifted Adolescents' Resistance to Report their Experiences of Cyberbullying Behaviour.**

Whilst non-reporting response amongst adolescents who have experienced either traditional bullying or cyberbullying is widely acknowledged in the literature, the reasons for such non-reporting remains undetermined and require further research. Successful intervention and prevention of bullying incidents is to a large degree dependent on such incidents being reported to an adult caregiver. However, early research shows that adolescents who have experienced cyberbullying tend not to inform parents or teachers, despite having previously stated their intention to do so should they experience such behaviour. Despite this fact, little attention has been paid to understanding the factors underlying adolescent reporting resistance.

The aim of this study was to explore Irish gifted adolescents' resistance to reporting their experiences of cyberbullying behaviour. A qualitative design was selected as most appropriate for this study. To that end, three focus group interviews comprising 59 participants were conducted using a sample of gifted adolescents. Participants were drawn from those attending the Centre for Talented Youth (Ireland) and comprised male and female adolescents aged between 13 and 17 years.

The findings indicate differences in interpretation regarding what constitutes cyberbullying. The key reasons for adolescent non-reporting were identified. These include the framing of decisions and the influence of prior reporting of experiences to adults, as well as the influence of gender and age on reporting response. The focus group interviews provided depth of contextualisation for the reasons for non-reporting, as well as providing insight into the impact of cyberbullying on female adolescents and the ways in which adolescents more generally respond to cyberbullying experiences.

The study results provide insights that will assist parents, teachers, and all those involved in the formulation of anti-bullying school policies in their attempts to increase adolescent reporting and thereby counter cyberbullying behaviour.

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## **CHAPTER 1           INTRODUCTION**

### **1.0    Introduction**

This study examines Irish gifted adolescents' resistance to reporting their cyberbullying experiences to parents and teachers. It investigates the cyberbullying experiences of this group, the impact of those experiences and their perspectives as to the efficacy of school or parental interventions aimed at countering cyberbullying.

The dissertation is structured as follows: This chapter outlines the rationale for the research and the contextual imperative for conducting this research in Ireland. The primary research aim and objectives are proposed and the choice of study setting and sample is discussed. As cyberbullying shares many commonalities with traditional bullying, an overview of what is known about traditional bullying is presented. This leads to an introduction to cyberbullying and in particular what we know about cyberbullying experienced by gifted adolescents. The non-reporting of cyberbullying, the focus of this study is then examined. This provides the overall background to and rationale for the current study.

Chapter 2 reviews the theoretical literature from which a theoretical model that guides this study is developed. Theories of social aggression and the theory of planned behaviour are proposed as being most useful. As cyberbullying requires access to, familiarity with and usage of communications technology, chapter 3 provides a contextual analysis of technology usage generally, and by adolescents, in Irish society. The choice of methodology for this study, the data collection and analysis protocols that were employed and the ethical review that was conducted are described in chapter 4. Following this, the study findings are outlined in chapter 5. Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the main findings, related to the previous empirical and theoretical literature presented earlier in the thesis. Chapter 7 highlights the key study findings, implications for theory and practice, recommendations for teachers, parents and policy makers, the limitations of the research study and directions for future research.

## **1.1 Background to the Research**

The widespread adoption of information and communications technologies (ICT) has brought with it many social and educational benefits. Many schools have enthusiastically embraced communications technologies, particularly as it has been found that increasing access to such technology has the potential to increase students' social interaction and enhance collaborative learning experiences (Beran and Li, 2004). Thus, both at home and at school, adolescents have grown up surrounded by ubiquitous technologies, with use of mobile phones, email, live chat applications and social networking websites now forming an intrinsic part of adolescent communication and social life. However, while the pervasive adoption of communications technologies confers obvious advantages, these have been paralleled by an increase in electronically-mediated bullying, more commonly known as cyberbullying. Such behaviour, (cyberbullying) has been defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) as "wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices" (p.5).

Effects of cyberbullying behaviour have been studied in-depth at an international level and, though the form of bullying differs from its traditional counterpart, the effects can be similar in nature. Studies have shown a correlation between cyberbullying and low self-esteem, school attendance, academic performance, frustration, anger, depression, poor physical well-being, suicidal ideation and, in quite a few cases, death by suicide. (Gamez-Guadix et al., 2014; Gamez-Guadix et al., 2013; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Bauman et al., 2013).

Comparatively speaking, in relation to traditional (face-to-face) bullying, research on cyberbullying is in an embryonic stage with much of the extant focus examining the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying. In Ireland, whilst research is ever-growing into the nature and impact of cyberbullying behaviour (O'Moore 2013; Corcoran et al., 2012; O'Moore and Minton 2011; Minton, 2010), empirical research on cyberbullying is limited and there is no extant research on adolescent non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour. Further concern arises regarding the lack of knowledge regarding a distinct population within this adolescent group, namely gifted adolescents, whose experiences and response to cyberbullying behaviour have yet to

be understood. This research project seeks to address this gap in knowledge about this issue, specifically focusing on non-reporting.

In 2006, the Department of Education and Science issued a template to post-primary schools to assist in the creation of anti-bullying policies. However, there has been a surge in the acquisition of mobile devices by adolescents in the past few years and technology has evolved rapidly since then. The same department's *Action Plan on Bullying* (published January, 2013) makes reference to cyberbullying and advises promoting a positive school culture and climate, incorporating the term 'cyberbullying' into the generic definition of bullying under the new national guidelines and providing schools with a standard template from which schools can formulate school codes of behaviour and anti-bullying policies. A report commissioned for, and on behalf of the Irish Department of Education and Health Service Executive, (Gleeson, 2014) found that cyberbullying is linked to suicidal ideation, depression and social isolation. Similarly, the (2013) report of the Anti-bullying working group to the Minister for Education and Skills emphasised that negative experiences on the Internet can have deep and long-lasting effects on the well-being of Irish adolescents. Such effects include distress, loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, academic difficulties, poor concentration, high absenteeism and poor physical health.

Of equal concern is the growing reported incidence of cyberbullying behaviour in Ireland. A comparative study by O'Neill and Dinh (2013) of 25,142 children across 25 European countries revealed that experience of cyberbullying behaviour is amongst the highest in Europe for Irish 9-16 year old children. This detailed study involved random stratified survey sampling of 1000 children per country who use the Internet. It consisted of face-to-face interviews, which were conducted in the children's homes, along with a self-completion survey designed to capture sensitive questions. The study measures focused on **Internet access and use, activities and skills, risks and harm, parental mediation and safety**, psychological vulnerability, social support and safety practices and **national policy implications**. Two rounds of cognitive testing were employed in order to check children's understanding of and reactions to the questions. Findings from the report revealed that Irish teenagers experienced a far greater impact from cyberbullying than their European

counterparts<sup>1</sup>. According to this Irish sample of 990 children, 26 per cent were “very upset” by the experience. Fourteen per cent stated that they had been “deeply affected” by cyberbullying behaviour. This is in direct comparison to the European equivalent of two per cent. Eight per cent of the Irish sample reported lasting trauma for a few weeks. Putting this figure in perspective, the European average is 2 per cent. The report also revealed that more than two-thirds of Irish parents (68%) did not know their children were cyberbullied, while just 29 per cent did know (p.9). A more recent HBSC (2016) study, based on the participation of 42 countries from Europe and North America, found that Ireland ranked amongst the lowest four countries with regard to children reporting high family support. The same study found that Ireland, based on reported peer support for Irish adolescents aged 13 and 15, was ranked in the bottom one-third of countries.

Earlier research by O’Neill and Dinh (2012) had revealed that 9 out of every 10 teenagers have a social networking profile with Facebook being the most popular (57%). It is fair to say the rise in social media usage brings with it many opportunities, but equally it brings many risks for the younger Irish demograph. Whilst many adolescents avail of the opportunities the Internet provides for social communication, others perceive it as a medium for harassment and intimidation.

The apparent rapid growth in social media and communications technologies has been paralleled by a growth in cyberbullying behaviour. Awareness of the phenomenon led to the first National Conference on Cyberbullying in Dublin Castle on 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2014 and the Irish Government’s action in trying to tackle the problem within every Irish school nationwide. However, whilst a non-reporting response amongst adolescents who have experienced either traditional bullying or cyberbullying is widely acknowledged in the literature and the media, the reasons for that non-reporting and the factors that could potentially increase adolescent reporting behaviour (and therefore potentially increase successful intervention to address the bullying behaviour) remain undetermined and therefore require further research.

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<sup>1</sup> Twenty-five European countries (including Ireland) were involved in this study, as follows: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom.

Aligned with this concern of non-reporting amongst the general adolescent Irish demograph is an equally troubling issue. Previous research has predominantly focused on general aspects of cyberbullying behaviour and the general population of adolescents, little empirical research has been conducted into the experiences of high-achieving talented (or gifted- do you clearly state what this means near the start?) adolescents. As Estell et al. (2008) state:

Most research on bullying and victimization focuses on general school populations. Little work explicitly examines the involvement of students with exceptionalities (p.137).

In light of the fact that cyberbullying is a relatively newly-evolved phenomenon, it is understandable that researchers would seek initially to examine this behaviour and its associated dynamics from a general youth population perspective. However, the absence of attention to gifted youth as a specific population meriting attention is particularly perplexing in light of the fact that the literature provides repeated evidence that bullying and harassment of gifted adolescents is a frequent occurrence (Pelchar and Bain, 2014; Hyatt, 2010; Peterson and Ray 2006a, 2006b; Cross, 2001; Gross, 1998; Kerr & Cohn, 2001). Researchers have not ignored this fact, but their focus in relation to this issue has remained broad and focused broadly on multiple predictors of negative life events for gifted youth (Peterson et al., 2009). For example, researchers within the gifted youth domain (Cross, 1996, 2001; Cross, Cassady, & Miller, 2006; Delisle, 1986; Dixon & Scheckel, 1996; Ellsworth, 2003; Hayes & Sloat, 1990) have attempted to explain the reasons for suicidal ideation amongst gifted adolescents. This has been achieved through the use of psychological autopsies (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996; Cross, Gust-Brey, & Ball, 2002) following the suicide of a gifted adolescent. While providing extremely valuable insights, that research has by its nature embraced a broad focus, exploring the psychological, emotional and environmental factors that contributed to those suicides of those gifted adolescents rather than focusing on the specific experience of cyberbullying amongst this population and its influence on outcomes. Consequently, gifted adolescents' experience of cyberbullying, the impact of that experience on this population, and specifically the reasons for non-reporting of cyberbullying remain under-researched.

## **1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research was to explore the factors influencing gifted adolescents' non-reporting of cyberbullying experiences to adult caregivers. The objectives were to identify the following:

- (i) Participants' understanding of cyberbullying behaviour;
- (ii) Contextual issues behind the personal and observed experiences of cyberbullying behaviour;
- (iii) The impact resulting from these experiences;
- (iv) The rationale behind non-reporting of these experiences to an adult caregiver;
- (v) Behavioural responses to cyberbullying behaviour;
- (vi) The rationale for choice of reportee (if any).

## **1.3 Study Setting and Sample**

As highlighted above, one specific group, gifted adolescents, are the focus of this study. The Centre for Talented Youth (Ireland), based at Dublin City University, caters for the educational needs of high-achieving students at both primary and secondary level education, through the implementation of academic summer courses. Since its inception in 1992, the Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI) is the only dedicated establishment in Ireland that caters to this unique group of young people, both during the academic year and with summer courses. Students of both genders, from rural and urban backgrounds and aged from 13 to 17 inclusive, attend these summer courses. In addition to mainstream school subjects, the CTYI also provides university style courses. The subjects available are geared towards ability and interest rather than being limited by age.

The choice of the focus of the current study and the choice of this sample was determined by three main factors. Firstly, the literature indicates that high achieving adolescents are frequently targets of traditional bullying behaviour (Hutcheson and Tieso, 2014; Richard et al. 2011; Thomson and Gunter, 2008; Peterson and Ray, 2006; Woods and Wolke, 2004; Oliver and Candappa, 2003). However, research on cyberbullying in Ireland has tended to focus on identifying prevalence of cyberbullying amongst differing age categories and groupings (Cotter and McGilloway, 2011; O Moore & Minton, 2012; HSBC 2012) or examinations of

consequents, such as impact on self-esteem and quality of friendships (Healy, 2013) amongst the general adolescent population. The gifted youth population has not received similar attention. Consequently, whether and to what degree gifted youth experience cyberbullying, the nature of that experience and its impact on them remains a matter of speculation.

Secondly, in relation to reporting response, the limited extant research on this issue (Holfeld and Grabe (2012; De Lara, 2012), has focused on the general adolescent population and consequently our understanding of the factors that influence that the reporting response of gifted youth remains inadequate. Correspondingly, the perceived effectiveness of interventions by parents and teachers in addressing cyberbullying experiences remains undetermined.

Finally, it is worth noting that the extant research on adolescent non-reporting has been conducted in the US (Holfeld and Grabe (2012; De Lara, 2012). Therefore, the choice of an Irish sample of adolescents provides opportunity for comparative analysis. Given that the students who were attending CTYI summer camp came from a variety of rural and urban backgrounds they provide a broad national geographical and spatial spread, whilst sharing other characteristics. This particular sample of adolescents therefore provides a smaller representation of a less-studied group with regard to the relatively new and complex phenomenon of cyberbullying behaviour.

#### **1.4 Defining and Understanding Bullying and Cyberbullying**

Whilst this study focuses on cyberbullying as distinct from traditional bullying and these forms of bullying differ in significant ways, they also share many similar traits in relation to intent and impact. These distinctions and similarities point to a number of significant considerations in the context of this study and are now outlined.

##### **1.4.1 Defining Bullying**

Numerous definitions of bullying exist, but regardless of semantic diversity there is general consensus that it is a behaviour that involves intimidation and attempted domination by one party or parties of another individual or group of individuals. Bullying is frequently conceptualised in terms of physical intimidation, possibly because it is the easiest form to identify. However, it also includes non-physical

forms such as verbal aggression (e.g. derogatory personal remarks, insults or teasing); extortion; indirect forms of bullying such as social exclusion, and untraceable technology-enabled character assassination, threats or insults. The list of practical examples is diverse and transcends cultural and social boundaries including religion, gender, background or age.

Because bullying has so many diverse forms and can manifest in many subtle ways, it is important that what constitutes bullying behaviour is clearly defined. One of the main characteristics of bullying is that it is a repeated behaviour. Thus, Farrington (1993) defines bullying as: 'repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful one'. Defining bullying in terms of repetitive behaviour is valuable as it enables the distinction of bullying from other intentional or more reactive aggressive behaviours. For example, one 'flare up' incident of physical violence (pushing, punching, etc.) or psychological violence (taunting or disparaging remarks) does not necessarily constitute bullying, particularly where there has been no prior nor subsequent similar expression of aggression between the two parties.

For Rigby (1999), another defining issue in the characterisation of bullying is premeditation. He makes the distinction between malicious and non-malicious bullying, where the latter is not premeditated, contains no gratuitous element and is a one-off event. With malicious bullying, the fact that the oppression is repeated suggests the intent is deliberate, considered and is not a random act of violent behaviour between two equal parties. Thus, it would appear that bullying behaviour should be defined in terms of actions that are continued over a period of time and may be repeated in various other forms.

Whilst Olweus (1999) acknowledges the repetitive nature of bullying behaviour, he extends his definition to include the power imbalance dynamic that is inherent to bullying interactions. Thus, he characterises bullying as (1) intentional 'harm doing' (2) which is carried out repeatedly and over time (3) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power (pp. 10-11). This is consistent with Rigby's (1996) emphasis on the power imbalance associated with bullying behaviour. Whether or not, the conscious desire to hurt (as opposed to intent to hurt) should be a defining characteristic of bullying behaviour has been debated in the literature. For

example, Tattum and Tattum (1992) define bullying as ‘... the wilful, conscious desire to hurt another and put him/her under stress’. But this definition would appear to suggest that ‘desire’ alone is sufficient to “qualify” as a bully. As a person may experience a desire to hurt another individual at some stage of his or her life (e.g. as an act of revenge against an oppressor) – but refrain from acting on this ‘desire’, it would appear that to define bullying in terms of desire to hurt has limited value in characterising the behaviour.

#### **1.4.2 Causal Factors for Bullying**

Contextual and social factors can also predispose some adolescents towards bullying behaviour more than others. For example, Morrison (2004) contends that family, peers, the educational establishment and society in general plays a pivotal role in the development of the bully. At the primary level, she sees two domestic variables as being highly influential in the developmental nature of the bully: (i) parenting style and (ii) family disharmony. In the former, she distinguishes between ‘*authoritarian*’ and ‘*authoritative*’ parenting, both of which have completely different outcomes for the child. The former method suggests discipline through punishment and control is enforced through domination; the latter method suggests respect for the individuality of the child, balanced with clearly defined boundaries of what is acceptable moral behaviour. Morrison’s findings are supported by others (Rican et al., 1993; Rigby, 1993) who argue that children from authoritarian backgrounds are more likely to become bullies whilst children from harmonious and authoritative backgrounds - (where a good parent-child bond or relationship exists) - are less likely to engage in bullying or anti-social behaviour. In fact, Ahmed, et al., (2001) contend that children from dysfunctional family backgrounds model the only conflict resolution style that they understand and to which they have been exposed. Therefore, the domestic pattern of control through violence becomes the norm both within the home and elsewhere. Generally speaking, there is evidence in the literature to suggest that many children who bully others have been “nurtured” in homes where hostility, neglect, dominance and excessive and harsh punishment is considered the norm.

This however does not explain why some adolescents from positive family backgrounds may still engage in bullying behaviour, particularly if they know that their actions are untraceable as is the case with technology-enabled bullying. The

explanation may simply lie in the fact that regardless of social evolution, the struggle for dominance remains an inherent aspect of human nature. However, it is worth noting that even if the struggle for social dominance is an inherent aspect of human nature, it does not determine our behaviour. In fact, what distinguishes us from other species is our ability to overcome such instincts and to empathize with those weaker and less fortunate than us as human beings. In other words, we can *choose* to reflect, reason and feel pity for those deemed to be “weaker” than us both individually and collectively as a society. Bearing that in mind, it is likely that the cognitive and emotional maturity of the individual will also influence their behavioural responses. Support for this is provided by O’Moore et al.’s (1997) study of Irish adolescents, which shows a fluctuation in bullying behaviour according to age and gender – the lowest level of bullying behaviour being found in males in their final year of school, which may be due to greater emotional and cognitive development of the student.

The characteristics of those who engage in bullying behaviour are now discussed in more detail.

### **1.4.3 Characteristics of the Perpetrator**

Olweus (1990, 1994) contends that bullies, despite presenting an apparently tough exterior, have low self-esteem and are deeply insecure and anxious. However, his contention is based on data gathered from student testimonies and he did not employ empirical evidence or self-esteem measurement tools in support of this perspective. Nonetheless, the findings of Salmivalli et al. (1999) provide strong support for his contention. Using a sample of three hundred Finnish students, these researchers asked students to rate themselves in terms of self-esteem and various other traits. Results from the survey revealed a strong correlation between those adolescent students who bullied others and defensive high self-esteem. This supports the theory of Baumeister et al. (1996) that ‘Inflated, unstable or tentative beliefs in the self’s superiority may be most prone to encountering threats and hence to causing violence’ (p.5).

### **1.4.4 Characteristics of the Target**

Whilst it is not possible to determine with absolute certainty which individual will or will not experience bullying, the literature identifies a number of characteristics that

may increase the likelihood of becoming the target of such behaviour. Olweus (1978) identified two types of victims: the *passive* or *submissive* victim and the *provocative* or *bully-victim*. Passive (submissive) victims are deemed to be anxious and insecure, the recipients of unprovoked attack. Provocative (bully) victims, on the other hand, are deemed to be hot-tempered, restless, and anxious, and ones who will attempt to retaliate when attacked. Discussing the ‘passive/submissive’ victim category, Olweus (1978) characterizes these individuals (both boys and girls) as being more anxious, insecure, cautious, sensitive and quieter than others in their behaviour. He notes that (in the lower grades) they usually react by crying and by withdrawing from others. Their self-esteem tends to be low and they tend to view themselves negatively and feel stupid, ashamed and unattractive. In terms of social status, they are often lonely and abandoned at school with few (if any) friends. In the case of boys, they are most likely to be physically weaker than boys in general and they tend to have closer contact with parents (especially the mother) than would normally be the case for boys. It is important to note that these individuals do not encourage or provide an excuse for attack by perpetrators of bullying. Instead, Olweus contends that they send a ‘signal’ to others regarding their vulnerability and he describes them as individuals ‘who will not retaliate if they are attacked or insulted’.

#### **1.4.5 Bullying Consequents**

Research shows that the consequents of adolescent bullying can be devastating with many studies pointing to a link between bullying and suicide. Kaltiala-Heino et al. (1999) found a correlation between bullying, depression, and severe suicidal ideation among adolescents aged 14-16 in Finland. Their study showed that bullied students were four times more likely to become depressed and twice as likely to experience *severe* suicidal ideation, than those who did not experience bullying. Another interesting facet to their study was the observation that this increased risk for depression amongst targets of bullying is also experienced by the perpetrators and suicidal ideation was found to be more common among bullies. The results from this study conclusively found a correlation between depression and severe suicidal ideation – interestingly, feelings that are shared by *both* the perpetrator and the victim. This points to the need for intervention by school staff not only to help the victim but also to respond sensitively to the perpetrator when evidence of bullying becomes apparent.

According to Rigby (1999), victims of consistent bullying are, at least, twice more likely to consider suicide than those in their peer groups, whilst Klomek, Sourander and Gould (2010) also found a correlation between victims of bullying, depression and suicide. Details of their extensive research on this subject also show that a higher percentage of these victims, who suffer depression or suicidal ideation, are girls. They argue the point that the traditional forms of bullying (such as physical aggression and intimidation) are seen as a social norm amongst males – (the “boys will be boys” adage). For girls, however, bullying, depression and suicide ideation is more closely linked to ‘relational victimization’ - damaged relationships (one-to-one) and alienation from social groups - rather than physical intimidation. There is a need to allow expression to the voices of those who have suffered bullying. As Sullivan et al. (2004) note, regardless of how statistical, descriptive, or quantitative research is, ‘it cannot address individual stories, which are the crux of the issue’ (p.3).

### **1.5 Social Factors related to Bullying**

Much attention has been paid in the literature to the social economic status of the victims of bullying (eg. Sentse et al., 2007; Pernille et al., 2009; Caravita et al., 2009; Cerezo and Ato, 2010; Gavin, et al., 2013). In particular, a Danish comparative study of 35 countries by Due et al (2003) found that children from the lower socio-economic group were far more exposed to bullying, thereby highlighting the need to incorporate socioeconomic and macroeconomic factors into examinations of adolescent bullying.

The contributory influence of other social factors such as social policy, education, the economy and health status are also important considerations. O’Moore et al., (1997) found that children at primary and secondary level education who attended a disadvantaged school were significantly more likely to bully others than children who attended an advantaged school. Nevertheless, contrary findings in a recent study in the US point to the need for more extensive research in relation to this issue. For example, a study of private colleges by the Josephson Institute Centre for Youth Ethics comprising a sample of over 43,000 students, found that boys at public schools were the most likely to say that it was o.k. to hit or threaten a person who makes them very angry, whilst boys at private religious schools were just as likely to say that they

had actually done so. It also found that boys at religious private schools were the most likely to say that they had bullied, teased or taunted someone in the past year and were most likely to say that they had used racial slurs and insults in the past year as well as mistreated someone because he or she belonged to a different group (Blow, 2010). The question as to whether private colleges may be laying the foundation for bullying by subliminally reinforcing the concept of superiority remains undetermined and requires further research.

### **1.5.1 The School Context**

Good school culture can contribute to a significant reduction in school bullying, whilst conversely, weak leadership on how to deal with this issue (at Principal or school board level), non-existent or unenforced school policy, unclear processes for dealing with reported incidents, or non-empathic attitudes from teachers can exacerbate the vulnerability of adolescent targets of bullying.

While many schools have developed policies for dealing with bullying, the degree to which these policies are enforced in practice or the extent to which bullying behaviour is addressed or ignored is dependent on the principal and teachers who constitute part of the school community. It is clear therefore that a top-down whole-school approach to dealing with adolescent bullying is necessary and is more likely to experience greater success than disparate groups or individuals seeking to address the problem on their own (Charach et al., 1995). However, in order for a whole school approach to be successful, it is a fundamental prerequisite that all involved with the care of adolescents share a similar understanding of what constitutes bullying behaviour. This is particularly important, as although positively disposed to eliminating bullying in their school, there is evidence that teachers often differ in their understanding of what constitutes “bullying” and this influences their responses. For example, Boulton (1997) found that 25% of teaching staff did not perceive the spreading of rumours, name-calling or intimidating behaviour (such as constant staring or taking other students’ property) as bullying. This limited perception of bullying behaviour naturally extends to interventions. Thus, a Canadian study by Pepler et al (1994) found that while 85% of teachers claimed to have intervened “often” or “nearly always” to prevent bullying behaviour, in marked contrast, only 35% of students in the same study claimed that teachers had actually intervened to counter bullying

behaviour. Similarly, a later observational study conducted by Craig and Pepler (1997) found that school supervisors addressed only 4% of bullying behaviours. It would appear therefore that a clear disparity exists between the perceptions of school staff and students in relation to what constitutes bullying behaviour. One consequence of this is that by unintentionally ignoring such behaviour, symptoms of bullying may be normalized and become more embedded and accepted into the school's culture. A second consequence is that adolescents within such schools who are targeted by bullies will have little or no confidence in reporting their experience of bullying to teachers, thus enabling the bullying behaviour to continue and widen in scope.

### **1.6 Non-Reporting of Traditional Bullying**

Significant differences exist between schools in relation to the reporting of bullying incidents by students (Rigby, 1996), but one thing that is consistent is that non-reporting by targets of bullying remains low regardless of national boundaries. For example, Rivers and Smith (1994) found that 30% of victims stated that they would rather suffer in silence. Similarly, a large scale study by O'Moore et al., (1997) in Ireland found that a significant number of Irish post-primary students do not report bullying behaviour to teachers or family members more so than primary students. For example, of the 3,089 pupils within her sample who reported having been victimised in primary schools, 65% stated that they had not told any of their teachers. The reluctance to tell was even greater among post-primary pupils. Out of the 1,660 victims within that category, 84% claimed they had not told their teachers of their victimisation. In fact, only one in five students who suffered frequent bullying had actually notified a teacher. In many cases, the victim feels it futile to raise the issue with a teacher because they sense nothing will come of it or because it may make matters worse once the bully or bullies are exposed and measures are taken against them. Telling parents may cause the problem to escalate when they want it to disappear. This fact is not exclusive to Irish schools and is consistent with the findings of research conducted in schools in the U.K. For example, Whitney and Smith (1993) found that 50% of pupils acknowledged that they had not informed a parent or teacher that they had been a target of bullies, whilst Smith and Shu's (2000) study of 19 schools in the UK found that 30% of victims had not informed anyone of their harassment experiences. Similarly, Ortega and Mora-Merchan (in Smith et al,

1999) found that few Spanish adolescents reported the fact that they had been bullied to their teachers or to their families.

While O'Connell et al. (1999) suggest that non-reporting may be partially influenced by the fact that adolescents are not always aware of the fact that they are a target of bullying behaviour, as such behaviour is not always explicit (e.g. social exclusion), another factor influencing non-reporting of bullying may relate to the perceived school culture. For example, Askew (1989) found that certain schools encouraged stereotypical male values (e.g. competitiveness, independence, and dominance. Such schools, she contends, encourage the macho-aggressive personality and dissuade perceived emotional "weakness". Consequently, in such schools, pupils would be all the more inclined to refrain from reporting being bullied.

Support for this is provided by the work of Olweus (1993) who found that 'almost 60% [of bullied students] in secondary/junior high school reported that teachers tried to "put a stop to it" only "once in a while" or "almost never"' and when aware of the situation, teachers 'make only limited contact with the students involved in order to talk about the problems' (p.20). He lays emphasis on the fact that these results are representative of 'main trends in the data' (p.20).

Similarly, Cowie and Olafsson's (2001) research indicates that many adolescents who are subjected to bullying do not appear to have confidence in an adult (parent or teacher) to resolve the matter successfully and would rather observe what has been termed the "code of silence". That lack of confidence appears to stem from the fear that reporting would lead to an escalation rather than diminution of the problem. As Olweus (1993) states:

Frequently, he/she [the victim] has also been threatened with more bullying if he/she should get any idea of tattling. Undoubtedly, such threats cause many victims to decide to suffer quietly for fear of getting "out of the frying-pan into the fire".

Thus, there is a need for vigilance to ensure that the victim is protected against further harassment. This need for such vigilance is underscored by the work of Smith and Shu (2000), which found that one of the reasons why victims withhold coming

forward is because they feel that school staff cannot guarantee their protection. The embarrassment for the adolescent of having to admit to another person that he or she is a target of bullying may additionally contribute to adolescent non-reporting. For example, Naylor and Cowie (1999) found that one of the things that stops pupils asking for help was fear of the bully with a second factor being the shame associated with asking for help. This fear and shame dynamic would appear to be a key factor in perpetuating the “code of silence”.

Adolescent non-reporting is not limited to the school environment, with Olweus (1993) finding that only 35% of secondary school students acknowledged that “somebody at home” had talked with them about their bullying problem and he therefore concludes that ‘parents of students who are bullied and, in particular, who bully others, are relatively unaware of the problem and talk with their children about it only to a limited extent’ (p.21). Similarly, in an Irish context, O’ Moore et al., (1997) found that as many as 46% of primary school pupils and 66 % of post-primary pupils did not tell anyone at home that they were being bullied at school (p.154). This may, in part, be explained by the effectiveness of the adult response in resolving the issue. As Holfeld and Grabe (2012) state:

A message continually given to youth involved in bullying is to report the incident. Even though many youth reported the incident when they were affected, many did not receive the information they desired to terminate the behaviour. Surprisingly, adults (teachers and parents) were not more effective in helping than peers (p.410).

It is hardly surprising that failure by an adult to resolve a bullying issue can lead to a general lack of confidence that is perpetuated as the adolescent progresses through the school system. As a result, the adolescent can either turn to a peer for help and support or remain silent regarding the issue.

A study in Italy (Fonzi et al., in Smith et al., 1999) found that: (i) Both primary and secondary level students tended to choose a parent to confide in rather than a teacher when bullied; (ii) Secondary school students were less likely to tell an adult than primary school children about being bullied; (iii) Secondary school girls were more likely than boys to tell someone at home about their being bullied. Of major concern

was the fact that, in the same study, ‘around half of the victims do not report their experiences to someone at school or at home and, ‘with age, there is a decrease in confidence that adults will help to tackle the problem’ (Ada Fonzi et al., in Smith et al., 1999, p.149). The table below shows an actual data representation of the results.

Percentages for telling teachers or anyone at home about having been bullied.							
		Primary			Middle		
		Boys	Girls	Total	Boys	Girls	Total
Teachers		53.0	48.8	51.0	37.8	33.9	35.5
Family		62.4	68.8	65.4	46.1	55.8	50.9

Table 1.1. Reproduced from Ada Fonzi et al. (in Smith et al., 1999; p.149).

A further concern relates to the fact that in an Irish context, there is evidence (O’ Moore et al., 1997) that teacher intervention is predominantly confined to primary schools whilst secondary level victims were usually dependent on other pupils to intervene. This is particularly of concern because the data also showed that, of those students who witnessed bullying, less than half acknowledged intervening and the majority who did intervene were final-year students. In fact, studies (e.g. Craig and Pepler; 1997; O’Connell et al: 1999, 1997; Rigby and Slee, 1992) consistently show that interventions by other students who have witnessed bullying are consistently low. Realistically, as bullying always involves a power differential, self-preservation concerns may restrict the adolescent observer from intervening to stop bullying of others, as they would then risk becoming the next target. Thus, their silence may indicate concern for themselves more than acquiescence with the behaviour. Other research (O’ Connell, Pepler and Craig, 1999) found adolescent hesitancy to intervene was predominantly explained by a lack of adequate social skills allied to a lack of personal confidence in the adolescent’s ability to deal with bullying, a finding that is supported by later research conducted by Hamilton and Flanagan (2007).

### **1.7 Research on Bullying in Ireland**

Research on adolescent bullying in Ireland is limited. Those studies that do exist tend to focus on rates or forms of bullying amongst different age groups and genders,

school policies, mental health or social issues. Such information, while essential and useful cannot be used to determine who will become a victim or a bully, nor the types of setting where bullying is most likely to occur. This is all the more surprising as the work of O'Moore et al. (1997) found that, at post-primary level, one in fifty Irish students have been victims of frequent serious bullying by their peers. This suggests that at least 7,400 secondary-school students in this country are at risk of suffering bullying.

An Irish study by O'Moore and Hillery (1989) of traditional (or face-to-face) bullying found that 43% of students admitted to bullying other students occasionally whilst 3% stated they bullied other students at least once a week. The bullies were predominantly boys and the aggressive behaviour was either physical or verbal. Of this same sample, it was observed that 12.5% (boys) and 5.6% (girls) claimed to have been frequently been bullied by their peers.

The first nationwide study of traditional adolescent bullying in both primary and post-primary schools in Ireland was conducted from 1993 to 1994. The sample total (20,422) included 9,599 primary and 10,843 post-primary students. The results showed that 31.2% of primary and 15.6% of post-primary students stated they had been subjected to bullying during the previous 3 months (O'Moore, Kirkham and Smith, 1997). A later large survey of 2,312 primary and 3,257 post-primary students conducted between 2004 and 2005, though not nationally representative, found that 29.2% of primary and 22.9% of post-primary Irish students reported being bullied within the previous 3 months (Minton and O'Moore, 2008). These figures for post-primary students have remained remarkably consistent and show no sign of decrease. For example, a report conducted on behalf of the HBSC, (Gavin, et al., 2013) found that 24.3% of schoolchildren in Ireland report having been bullied (25.5% of boys and 23% of girls). This figure has remained stable since 2006 (24.5%). These figures would suggest an even spread across both genders of those being targeted by bullies in face-to-face bullying.

In summary, bullying amongst adolescents in Ireland is widespread and takes many forms. Because the behaviour manifests in diverse ways, some of which are subtle, it is essential that what constitutes bullying behaviour is clearly defined and agreed by

those who seek to examine it. However, there is broad agreement in the literature that bullying is a *repeated, aggressive and intentionally harmful behaviour* [italics mine] that involves a power differential between the perpetrator and the target. Contextual and social factors such as authoritarian parenting styles and family disharmony have been shown to have some explanatory power in relation to why some children engage in bullying behaviour, as children from dysfunctional family backgrounds tend to model the only conflict resolution style to which they have been exposed. However, other factors also play a role in explaining why some adolescents engage in bullying behaviour with the literature indicating that age and gender can also influence bullying behaviour. Moreover, adolescents' social goals will influence their behaviour, particularly if their goals have instrumental motives such as power or affiliation, the former being a dominant motivator for boys whilst the latter being a more powerful motivator for girls.

The literature indicates that bullies tend to have low self-esteem, are deeply insecure and anxious. The targets of bullying behaviour have been categorised in the literature into passive/submissive victims, provocative victim or bully-victims. The first category may unintentionally send signals regarding their vulnerability, whilst the second category of victim tends to attract attention to their behaviour. The third category may experience bullying and equally may bully others.

The school is critical to the intervention and elimination of bullying behaviour. However, there is an urgent need for teachers to have a common understanding of what constitutes "bullying" as this influences their awareness of the problem and their responses as well as student confidence in the school to deal with reported problems. That reporting of bullying experiences remains remarkably low regardless of national boundaries. In Ireland, there is evidence to show that a significant number of post-primary students do not report bullying behaviour to teachers or family members and this evidence is in line with research in the UK and other countries. The reasons for this non-reporting are not clear. They may relate to self-preservation concerns or an aggressive school culture. Equally, interventions by other students who are witnesses to bullying remain consistently low and decrease with age. Fear of reprisal and the need for social acceptance may serve as explanatory factors.

## **1.8 Research on Cyberbullying**

Unlike its traditional counterpart, research on cyberbullying is in an embryonic stage and tends to be mainly descriptive in nature with a lesser focus on model building (Holfeld and Grabe, 2012). Of the extant literature, the majority of empirical studies have focused on US samples and consequently the generalizability of the study findings in an Irish context is not assured. However, what is incontrovertible is that the findings of these studies point to the prevalence and escalating seriousness of the problem. For example, in 2004, i-SAFE America (a non-profit foundation endorsed by the US Congress and dedicated to the Internet safety education), surveyed 1500 US students in grades 4-8. Data suggested that 42% had experienced cyberbullying, and one in four of these students had experienced it more than once. In addition, just over half (53%) of the students in the sample admitted that they had “cyberbullied” others and one third of them had done so more than once (i-SAFE, 2004). Similarly, Ybarra and Mitchell’s (2004) study of US students found that 15% of their sample identified themselves as cyberbullies. A 2009 study by Wang et al., of over 7,000 US adolescents found that the prevalence rates of having bullied others or having been bullied at school for at least once in the last 2 months were 20.8% physically, 53.6% verbally, 51.4% socially or 13.6% electronically. Boys were more involved in physical or verbal bullying, while girls were more involved in relational bullying. Boys were more likely to be cyber bullies, while girls were more likely to be cyber victims. Another notable feature in this research was the disparity between the three classes of student pertaining to cyberbullying – the “bully”, “victim” and “bully-victim. In this context, the report identified 27.4% as bullies only, 40% as “victims” only, and 32.6% as “bully-victims” (p.371). It confirmed that cyberbullying has a distinct nature from traditional bullying. A recent study by Bauman (2012) of cyberbullying in the US involved 221 students in a poor rural community in southeaster Arizona and found that cyberbullying occurs even in locations where access to technology is somewhat limited and even among cohorts of disabled students.

Research by Mnet (2001) has shown that one-quarter of young Canadian Internet users report having experienced receiving online messages that made hateful comments. This finding has proven consistent with further independent research on the prevalence of cyberbullying in Canada (Li, 2007) finding that over a quarter of the

students were cybervictims and almost 15% were cyberbullies. Moreover, over 40% had no idea who the predators were. More recent Canadian research by Li and Fung (2012) questioned whether gender, school life, student beliefs and other related factors played a major role in cyberbullying. From their sample of 254 students aged 11-18 years, they found that students' beliefs about cyberspace and their understanding of responsibilities in relation to cyberbullying strongly impact their behaviour, either as cyberbullies, cybervictims, or bystanders. The more positive a student's beliefs about cyberspace, the less likely this student would cyberbully others. In terms of predicting actions after being cyberbullied, they found that the more positive the belief a student holds about cyberspace or their responsibility of cyberbullying, the less likely they are to be passive victims or adopt deviant behaviours. Such students are more likely to act appropriately by informing others, directly confronting the cyberbully, or getting away from the cyberbully. In addition, the frequency of student engagement in extracurricular activities (e.g. sport teams) predicts their behaviours after cybervictimization. The more often the students engage in such activities, the higher the odds that they would inform friends about the cyberbullying incidents, and the less likely they would fight back by bullying other students. The researchers conclude from this that those students, having more friends and a busier life, may have a better chance of being distracted and recovering from cybervictimization. They also found that physically stronger cybervictims are more likely to tell friends about such incidents.

The problem of adolescent cyberbullying is equally prevalent in Europe. For example, a study conducted by Smith, et al. (2006) of 92 students from 14 different schools across the UK, found that 22% of the sample had been targeted by cyberbullies at least once, with 6.6% of the respondents stating that they had been cyberbullied frequently. A large scale study of cyberbullying and cybervictimization among 17,627 Finnish children and youth (Salmivalli and Pöyhönen, 2012) found cyberbullying and cybervictimization to be relatively rare among Finnish children and youth with only 2% of the sample reporting being bullied via the Internet or by mobile phone. However, the frequency criterion they used to define cyberbullying was 2-3 times per month or more and they only asked about bullying via the Internet or by mobile phone, thus leaving out other forms and devices. They found that

cyberbullying tended to become more common among boys when entering secondary school.

Research in Australia (Cross et al., 2012) used a cross-sectional quantitative survey of 7,418 school students aged 8-14 years from 106 schools gathered from all education sectors, states and territories of Australia. The authors found that 27% of students reported being bullied (any form including cyber) and 9% reported they bullied others in the previous 10-week school term. 6% of students reported they were cyberbullied every few weeks or more often, and 23% reported being exposed to cyberbullying behaviour once or more often in the prior term. An additional 3% reported that they had cyberbullied others every few weeks or more often, and 18% reported that they engaged in cyberbullying behaviours at least once in the previous term. Interestingly, they found that girls were more likely to be cyberbullied than boys and were also more likely to report exposure to cyberbullying behaviours that occurred at least one in the previous terms at school. As reported by students who were victimized, these behaviours included being sent nasty messages on the Internet or via mobile phone, or being deliberately ignored or left out of things over the Internet.

An analysis of prevalence of adolescent cyberbullying in Japan (Aoyama et al., 2012) sample consisted of 487 students aged 13-15 years old in a metropolitan city in Japan. As the results indicated that 12% of the respondents spent over five hours a day using the Internet, it is therefore not surprising that 33% of the participants reported some involvement in cyberbullying.

Research in South Korea (Tippett and Kwak, 2012), using a sample of 416 adolescents aged 12-15 years who were attending two secondary schools in Seoul, showed that 67% of victims reported being targeted through the use of text messages. Whilst phone call (28%) and video texts (8%) were also used, it was to a lesser extent. Amongst victims of Internet bullying, chat rooms were found to be the most common source of bullying, with 31% of victims harassed in this way. A further 15% of victims reported being bullied through online messaging sites, whilst smaller proportions had also been cyberbullied through emails (8%), chat rooms (8%), and social networking sites (4%). Half of mobile victims and 46% of Internet victims did not know who had bullied them. In terms of coping strategies, the most common

coping strategy for mobile bullying was to report the incident to a friend, parent or teacher; this approach was used by over 50% of victims. Among Internet victims, only 24% had chosen to report the bullying to another person. Approximately a quarter of mobile victims and 16% of Internet victims had simply chosen to ignore it and hope that the cyberbullying would stop. However, the results showed that bullying through online games was notably high at 46%.

From the above, it is evident that bullying patterns and peer dynamics can vary according to culture. In addition to differing behavioural patterns, the nomenclature is equally important as the term “bullying” or “cyberbullying” often does not have an equivalent word to describe exactly the same idea in another language (Smith et al 2002). For example, Aoyama et al., (2012) point to the fact that the word “ijime”, which in Japanese is the closest translation of the word “bullying”, often takes psychological and indirect forms. They therefore stress the need to examine cultural characteristics and their influence on the interpretation of what constitutes cyberbullying behaviour and their influence on outcomes. For example, Aoyama et al (2012) report on a cross comparative analysis of 142 students from a school in Tokyo, Japan with a sample of 133 students from one school in Texas. In terms of socio-economic status, the schools were reasonably similar. They found that Japanese participants reported less experience of cyberbullying than was found in the US. Originally the authors had hypothesized that because cyberbullying is indirect, that the Japanese students were more likely to be involved with cyberbullying than US students, but the results, however, did not support this hypothesis. It may be that Japanese participants were less likely to seek help from their parents than US participants and the authors suggest that in a collectivist culture like Japan, adolescents may believe that online victimization would embarrass their parents and are therefore reluctant to report any cyberbullying incidents. However, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions in relation to this issue, as the sample was limited. Therefore, the authors consider that the real gap between the two cultures may not be as clear-cut as the data suggests and recommend further analysis.

### **1.9 Gifted Adolescents and Cyberbullying.**

Whilst research shows that studies on cyberbullying behaviour in relation to gifted students is limited (Smith et al., 2012), research by Richard et al. (2011) provides

evidence that higher-achieving students are at greater risk of being victims of verbal/relational bullying than mainstream students. They state:

Higher achieving students may be particularly at risk in lower achieving schools in which students reported more overall verbal/relational bullying than in higher achieving schools (pp. 277-278).

Similar related research by Rothson et al. (2011) found that social support from family and friends help protect bullied adolescents against declining academic achievement, but not against mental health issues.

Whilst attention has tended to focus on ethnicity (Qin, Way and Rana, 2008; Seals and Young, 2003; Hanish and Guerra, 2000), differing physical appearance (Thomson and Gunter, 2008) and gender as predictors of bullying, the literature also identifies academic ability as a predictive factor for adolescents being targeted by bullies. However, when the issue of ability (or lack thereof) has been discussed in the literature, it tends to have a negative orientation focusing on poor academic achievement relating to disability (Rose, Monda-Amaya and Espelage, 2011). Scant attention has been paid to adolescents who are high achievers, despite the fact that there is evidence to suggest that this differentiating factor may be an equally relevant predictor of why an individual becomes the target of bullying. For example, Oliver and Candappa (2003) found that academic high achievers were likely targets of bullying, whilst the work of Thomson and Gunter (2008) also refers to academic high achievers and found that this aspect of bullying was more common in the definitions provided by junior pupils. More attention on this issue is merited, as understanding the experience of high-achieving adolescents who have experienced bullying would provide a more balanced insight into the nature and dynamics of bullying, in general. Moreover, no attention has been paid to this issue in an Irish context.

Research in America by Peterson and Ray (2006) of 432 high-academic achievers from 11 different schools showed that such students are targeted for being intellectually different to the majority of students. Of this sample, 67% had been subjected to insults and name-calling (such as “geek” and “nerd”) based on their academic achievements and appearance. Conversely, the same study found that 28% of this identified sample of highly intelligent adolescents had also participated in

bullying behaviour. This supports earlier research by Sutton, Smith and Sweetenham (1999) that theorized that “ring leaders” in bully groups display high social intelligence and are skilled in manipulating their peers in a group setting. An earlier study in the U.K. by Woods and Wolke (2004) found in a sample of 1,016 adolescents that these academically gifted students were more likely to be subjected to social exclusion by their peers than students with average academic ability.

Another explanation for why the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals may be overlooked is based on what Peterson (2009) terms a ‘myth’ that such individuals are quite capable of coping without intervention from a significant other. He points to the fact that gifted and talented individuals tend to fit with positive stereotypes based on images of confident and motivated students, which may lead educators and others to not recognise or address the social and emotional needs of these students (p.80). As even moderate giftedness may lead to a poor initial fit in school, the social and emotional discomfort experienced by these gifted students is likely to increase throughout their school years. He suggests that this is likely to be particularly the case for gifted female adolescents as they place a greater emphasis on social acceptance over personal achievements (p.281).

Whilst educational achievement is a worthy cause in itself, adult caregivers need to realize that a fine balance needs to be struck between catering to the personal needs and academic aspirations of the adolescent. Whilst traditional concepts of schooling focused on educational attainment, modern approaches need a more holistic approach and a greater understanding from the individual adolescent’s perspective. Although such approaches have been achieved in many cases in mainstream education, greater understanding is required by adult caregivers where emotional and social development of gifted adolescents is concerned. Such developmental differences are exemplified by researchers such as Fornia and Frame (2001) who posit that gifted children may experience inner tension caused by the fact that their advanced abilities in one area (e.g. cognitive) are not matched in other areas. Such other areas may include social skills, particularly with those less cognitively attuned to their way of thinking. Silverman (1993) also notes that gifted children are vulnerable due to the fact that, whilst seeming emotionally advanced at times, they are also prone to be emotionally immature. A major concern arising from this is that ‘educators, parents,

coaches, and even counsellors may miss indications of distress. Lack of opportunity for gifted students to discuss concerns related to social and emotional development potentially contributes to vulnerability' (p.282). Therefore, caregivers must not assume a "one size fits all" approach to dealing with troubling and sensitive issues of gifted children. Neither must they assume that an adolescent with greater academic intelligence than that found in mainstream education can cope independently and does not require adult intervention. Both awareness and methods for intervention and addressing these issues must be incorporated into school-plans and educational policy.

In certain cases, students may face social marginalization when they are considered "superior" in talent and different in terms of sexual orientation. A study by Hutcheson and Tieso (2014) found that adolescent students who are both academically gifted and are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender in orientation often struggle in their immediate school environment and are 'doubly-marginalized' (p.356). They found that 82% of students in a nationwide sample of LGBTQ students were verbally harassed at school for being "different". One of the key problems in the research to date is the lack of research for this marginalized group of students. According to Hutcheson and Tieso (2014):

Students who are both gifted and LGBTQ are different from their peers in multiple ways. Past research has examined the social coping strategies used by gifted students, but little or no research has investigated the way that double different – gifted and LGBTQ – students have coped with their social differences' (pp. 355-356).

This study revealed important implications for educators who work with these doubly-marginalized students and the different experiences and multifaceted identities of gifted students who belong to more than one minority group. One key finding from this study was the need to create safer school climates by establishing policies and classroom cultures that promote compassion and respect for all. This, in turn, is dependent on good educational practice. Such practice can be seen in the work of the group 'Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted' (SENG) which actively promotes the education and support for schools to ensure the safety of such students and promote an environment where gifted and LGBTQ students can thrive (Keener, 2013).

### **1.10 Cyberbullying Consequents**

Given that cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon that has significantly increased in prominence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, further research is required to identify the impact this form of bullying has on those who suffer from such experiences, and how the experience for adolescents compares to traditional or face-to-face bullying.

Research by Hinduja and Patchin (2009) suggests that a significant sample of those who claimed to have been cyberbullied experienced mixed levels of anger, sadness and frustration, though 35% of the sample from their research stated the experience did not affect them. Other research has shown that adolescents experienced suicidal ideation, poor concentration levels at school, social avoidance, low self-esteem and a desire to avoid attendance at school (Tokunaga, 2010; Cassidy, Jackson and Brown, 2009; Beran and Li, 2007; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004).

Though such symptoms may be typically associated with face-to-face bullying, very little research to-date has shown the gravity and psychosocial effects of cyberbullying in comparison to face-to-face bullying. The unique characteristics of cyberbullying are variables that may increase or reduce the effects on the intended target. For example, the ability by the perpetrator to remain anonymous has been considered to create a disinhibiting effect, which removes traditional social barriers restraining the desire to be cruel and provides the bully the freedom and opportunity to vent their natural negative expression to the full (Suler, 2004). This is supported in further research by Hinduja and Patchin (2009), who revealed that 37% of adolescents admitted that they had said things against others online, which they would never do in a face-to-face situation. Another variable that affects impact on adolescent targets of cyberbullying is the exponential size of virtual witnesses. In comparison to face-to-face aggression (where a limited number of spectators are present at that moment in time), cyberbullying allows the target to be humiliated further as information about a particular posting is passed to others for viewing and comment. This can increase a sense of shame and humiliation for the target, gradually eroding their self-esteem on a daily basis.

Though empirical research on the impact of cyberbullying is limited to-date, nonetheless, the significant impact of such bullying can be seen in certain studies to

date. One such study, undertaken by Allison Schenk at West Virginia University revealed that from an exclusively adolescent female sample of 799 students, 9% had claimed to experience being cyberbullied more than once; the significant observation from this statistic is that, from that 9%, four students had stated that they had attempted suicide. Others reported depression, paranoia, and deep levels of anxiety.

Other studies have found that indirect bullying is more harmful than its direct form (Bauman, 2010; Bauman and Summers, 2009; Baldry, 2004; Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Sharp, 1995). Given this observation, it is imperative to study this phenomenon not merely in terms of the forms of cyberbullying but, as with face-to-face bullying, a distinct emphasis must be placed on the psycho-social effects resulting from cyberbullying and linked constructs (Wang, Nansel and Ianotti, 2009).

Research by Bauman and Newman (2012) found that perceived levels of distress associated with cyberbullying (for all sub-scales measured) were significantly higher among adolescent females than their male counterparts. However, their research also found that incidents of face-to-face (conventional) and cyber forms of bullying were more similar than different. Key findings from this study showed the following:

- i. No overall differences in distress by form (conventional or cyber) of victimization, contrary to expert expectations; and,
- ii. Principal components analysis identified a three-component structure that was based not on form of victimization, but on the nature of the incident.

(Bauman and Newman, 2012, p.33).

In relation to the second point (above), it is important to understand that the *context* in which the target experiences cyberbullying can have a significant impact on the individual concerned. Whilst classification helps to identify different variables (such as form of technology used), each individual case differs, and the stress and impact caused by differing use of technologies must consider the context and environment in which it occurs. Consequently, Bauman and Newman (2012) contend that the emotional distress caused by victimization is a function of the *nature* of the specific incident, rather than the *method* of its delivery. In short, they suggest that it may not be the *type* of bullying, per se, that explains the differences in emotional responses,

but rather the *context* of the particular incident and the victim's gender (p.34). This supports the findings of Eslea (2010) who found that there was no notable difference in the impact experienced between the forms of bullying. However, though this latter study equally observed no notable difference of impact between forms of bullying, it did not identify any gender difference pertaining to stress levels amongst the sample of secondary students. This may be due to the use of different measurement instruments, the individual school culture and/or policies observed within the school environment.

One feature unique to cyberbullying, which must not be overlooked, is the influence of perception by the target, which can play a significant part in determining his/her levels of stress. A perpetrator may casually remark about an individual online or via text in jest (without unintended nastiness), may seek to undermine or humiliate the target, or may be more openly aggressive and direct regarding their feelings towards the intended target. The nature of cyberbullying is such that it does not allow the adolescent target to read subtle signs that can identify the intent of the perpetrator (such as facial gestures, tone of voice, etc). This notable difference between the two forms of bullying is significant because the personal "attack" may be open to individual interpretation but the result is the same. Bauman and Newman (2012) observe that '... victims perceive comparable amounts of distress, regardless of whether the intent of the bully is direct harm or more subtle humiliation' (p.34).

Beyond the differences in the forms of bullying and gender comparisons, what has been identified by Bauman and Newman (2012) as the most significant stressor is distribution of sexually-explicit pictures amongst peers which usually starts out as "sexting" or sending personal (nude/semi-nude) intimate photos or video clips to a trusted peer. This exposure can be further broken down into (i) a betrayal of trust by a significant other and (ii) public humiliation. This observation has also been identified by Smith et al. (2008) who found that bullying using video-clips of the target, though more rare than other forms of cyberbullying, had the most negative impact on the cyberbullied adolescent.

Ringrose et al. (2013) found gender inequities and sexual double standards in teens' digital image exchange by drawing on a UK qualitative research project on 'sexting'.

Their findings show that teen girls are called upon to produce particular forms of ‘sexy’ self display, yet face legal repercussions, moral condemnation and ‘slut shaming’ when they do so. On the contrary, boys accumulated ‘ratings’ by possessing and exchanging images of girls’ breasts, which operated as a form of currency and value. Girls, in contrast, largely discussed the taking, sharing or posting of such images as risky, potentially inciting blame and shame around sexual reputation (e.g. being called ‘slut’, ‘slag’ or ‘sket’). However, such abuse of adolescents is not exclusive to girls as the recent suicide of male adolescents such as Daniel Perry (reported by Lee, 2013), brought about by blackmail through sexual images transmitted online. Similarly, a same-sex encounter videoed and posted online by a room-mate was considered responsible for the death of a ‘gifted 18-year-old violinist’ Tyler Clementi (Pilkington, 2010).

### **1.11 Non-Reporting of Cyberbullying**

Although early research in this field (e.g. Olweus, 1993) has pointed to the fact that the successful intervention and resolution of bullying incidents is to a large degree dependent on such incidents being reported to an adult caregiver, the extant literature consistently shows that adolescents who have been bullied tend not to inform others of their experiences (e.g. Petrosino et al., 2010; Black et al., 2010; Mishna and Alaggio, 2005; Naylor and Cowie, 1999; Charach et al., 1995). For example, Ybarra et al (2006) found that 33% of victims of cyberbullying in their study did not tell anyone about the incident. Smith, et al.’s (2006) study of 92 students across the UK found that almost one-third of students who acknowledged being targeted by cyberbullies chose not to speak about their experience when it happened. This figure is close to the findings of the NCH (2005) study, which revealed that 28% of those targeted by cyberbullies chose to remain silent rather than seek help in resolving the problem. Slonje and Smith (2008) state: ‘Cybervictims most often chose to either tell their friends or no one at all about the cyberbullying, so adults may not be aware of cyberbullying’ (p.147).

As is the case with victims of traditional bullying, cybervictims are not likely to tell adults about the mistreatment they are receiving. Statistics show that 58% of those who are bullied online do not tell an adult/parent or others (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). This unwillingness to tell is not only due to the fact they feel adults may not respond

appropriately, but because they fear their Internet usage may be taken by those who are trying to protect them.

Technologies can be used aggressively in different ways and therefore it is worth considering whether the type of communication media might influence the decision to report experiences of cyberbullying (e.g. that victimization via some media might have less impact on the target). However, early research in this area by Smith et al., (2008), who conducted a dual-survey on adolescents (aged 11-16), found that the type of media used against a target of cyberbullying had no significant influence on their decision to report the incident. From a sample of 92 adolescent students, the first study showed that 43.7% reported telling no-one about the experience regardless of the media through which they had been victimised. Of the 56.3% who did report the experience, 26.8% told friends, 15.5% told parents/guardians, and only 8.5% told a teacher or member of school staff, whilst 1.4% reported telling someone else. However, the second study of 533 students focused on conventional or face-to-face bullying. The results from this study showed that reporting this form of bullying was significantly higher (70.2%) than cyberbullying (58.6%). However, there was considerable disparity between the samples sizes used in this dual survey, so further research is needed to confirm the generalizability of these findings.

Much of the existing literature related to cyberbullying relies mainly on student self-reports of cyberbullying. However, it has been widely acknowledged in research related to traditional bullying (Cornell & Brockenbrough, 2004) that important differences occur between self-reported and peer-nominated bullies and victims. Considering the close ties between cyberbullying and traditional bullying (Li, 2007), further research is recommended to investigate cyberbullying through the lens of peer-nominated vs. self-reported cyberbullying.

### **1.11.1 Gender Differences & Non-Reporting of Cyberbullying**

Research by Li (2006) in Canada found that female adolescents who were subjected to cyberbullying tended to inform an adult caregiver more so than was the case for their male counterparts. There is no definitive explanation that can explain these gender-based differences. Some light is thrown on the issue, however, by Tannen (2004) who reveals subtle social differences between the two genders, which may

influence an adolescent's decision to talk about their bullying experience such as cultural and social expectations impressed upon children from an early age. These expectations are carried through into adolescence and adult life. Previous research by Tannen also suggests that girls tend to socialize in pairs where the concept of "best friend" is a female peer with whom secrets can be shared. Social harmony is achieved when all in the group feel accepted as equals by downplaying status and focusing on connecting with peers. Thus for girls, communication with peers is of critical importance, whilst for boys activities with their peers are more significant. This emphasis on the importance of verbal communication being used as a form of bonding amongst girls may, in part, explain why female targets of cyberbullying are more inclined to discuss with their peers and/or adults about their experiences. On the other hand, boys tend to naturally socialize in a hierarchical manner and more emphasis is placed on physical activities and outward gestures rather than on verbal communication. Tannen (2004) astutely summarizes this distinction as one where boys put effort into proving that they can 'top each other', whilst the girls put an equal amount of effort into proving that they're the same.

Just as with face-to-face bullying, male adolescents may not consider it "macho" or "manly" to tell when they are being harassed or bullied online; i.e. their decision not to report may be based on their perception of what society expects of them. Telling a significant other may leave them open to feelings of weakness and a fear of being labelled a "sissy". Tannen (1995) alludes to this when she says that 'men are more likely to be aware that asking ... for any kind of help, puts them in a one-down position' (p.24). On the contrary, for women, "troubles talk" is seen to unite the friendship – 'bond troubles-talk is something that would be a very good kind of talk for women and a very peculiar kind of talk for many men' (Tannen, 2004). Though referring to adults in this context, the ingrained sense of shame and inadequacy can equally be experienced by adolescent males. Therefore, the natural assumption is that, from a cultural perspective, young adolescent males learn not to ask for help or inform others about their problems or troubles. To do otherwise, is perceived to be a sign of weakness.

Gender differences have also been identified in young adolescents' experience related to cyberbullying in Canada. For example, research by Li (2006) found that male adolescents were more likely to intimidate their peers both face-to-face *and* online.

### 1.11.2 Cultural Variations in Reporting Behaviour of Cyberbullying

Compounding the problem is the fact that variation appears to exist between cultures. For example, a cross-cultural comparative study by Li (2008) showed that 9% of Canadian students reported their cyberbully experience to adults and less than one-fifth of those aware of a cyberbullying incident reported the issue to an adult. In comparison, 66% of Chinese students who experienced cyberbullying informed an adult and 60% of 'bystanders' reported the phenomenon to an adult (p.7).

Behaviour	% Canadian (n=157)	% Chinese (n=197)
Adults intervene	67	73
Victim tells adults	9	66
Bystanders tell adults	19	60

Table 1.2. Percentages of students reporting behaviours combating cyberbullying. (Taken from Li 2008, p.7).

The reason for this significant difference in reporting behaviours between both countries and cultures may result from a combination of sociological and philosophical reasons deeply ingrained in the respective cultures. One explanation for this difference may be the cultural differences between the two countries. For example, Li suggests that traditional Chinese culture, being heavily influenced by Confucianism throughout the past 2,500 years, emphasises that children should respect and obey adults, including parents and teachers, at all times and therefore the relationship between teachers and students, in traditional Chinese schools, is consequently similar to the relationship between parents and children. In addition, teachers in China often have more authoritative powers over students than teachers have over students in Canada. In Western societies teachers and students may have relatively informal relationships, and teachers are often concerned to empower students and promote students' independence. All these factors may contribute to the observed differences (p.231).

This suggests that social cohesion between parents, adolescents and teaching staff may have a significant influence on a student's decision to report or not to report. A developed triadic relationship may foster this trust in the ability of teachers and parents to deal with problems, thereby increasing reporting of cyberbullying experiences.

Though Li does state that the majority of such cyberbullying incidents occurred less than four times, this observation does not detract from the fact that there is a definite willingness of such students to speak with an adult caregiver. Indeed, given this fact, the inference is that instances of reporting would be proportionally higher when more frequent and sustained occurrences of cyberbullying occurred.

Table 1.3 presents the main (national and international) studies of cyberbullying behaviour, the focus of each study and the discipline from which they emerged.

<b>Author</b>	<b>Discipline/ Focus</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Methodology</b>
Holfeld and Grabe (2012)	Psychology	USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Sample of 383 students from four middle schools (city)</li> <li>• Focus: experience and consequents</li> <li>• Only 4 non-reporting items</li> <li>• Measures not validated or tested for reliability</li> </ul>
De Lara (2012)	Social Work	USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative only</li> <li>• Four schools in the NY region</li> <li>• 12 focus groups 97 students</li> </ul>
Cotter and McGilloway (2011)	Mental Health & Social Research	Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• 122 adolescents from two secondary schools in the South of Ireland.</li> <li>• Focus: Prevalence/ experience</li> <li>• 1 question on non-reporting – responses obtained from only 25 students</li> </ul>
O' Moore & Minton (2011)	Child & Educational Psychology	Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Focus: prevalence/ experience</li> <li>• Identified adolescent resistance to report but did not address underlying causal reasons</li> </ul>

HSBC (2012) report	Health Promotion	Ireland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Focus: frequency &amp; experience</li> <li>• General item on reporting – not causal reasons for non-reporting</li> </ul>
Hinduja & Patchin (2006)	Criminal Justice	USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Focus: nature of cyberbullying</li> <li>• Captured non-reporting but did not explore causal reasons</li> </ul>
Li (2008)	Educational Technology	Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Focus: cross cultural (Canada/ China) differences in experience</li> <li>• Confirmed non-reporting but did not address causal reasons</li> </ul>
Juvonen & Gross (2008)	Psychology	USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus: Bullying experiences</li> <li>• Confirmed non-reporting but did not address causal reasons</li> </ul>
Ybarra et al (2006)	Psychology/Ment al Health	USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Focus: Social factors influencing cyberbullying &amp; distress outcomes</li> </ul>
Smith et al (2008; 2006)	Psychology	UK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quantitative only</li> <li>• Explored prevalence/ experience of cyberbullying</li> <li>• Confirmed non-reporting but did not address causal reasons</li> </ul>

Table 1.3. Main Cyberbullying Studies with inclusion of non-reporting item(s).

### 1.11.3 Peer Reporting of Cyberbullying

The problem is further compounded by the fact that when an adolescent target of cyberbullying chooses to speak about the experience to a friend, that peer confidante, being removed from the experience themselves, may or may not appreciate the gravity of the experience. According to Slonje and Smith (2008): ‘Most often victims turn to their friends (non-victims) for help, and if their friends underestimate the impact of cyberbullying, victims may find it hard to receive adequate support’ (p.149). This same Swedish study of 360 adolescents (aged from 12 to 20) found that 50% of those cyberbullied stated that they had not reported the experience; 35.7%

confided in a friend; 8.9% told a parent or guardian and 5.4% spoke to someone else. Of equal concern in this lack of reporting is the fact that not one student from the entire sample reported speaking to a teacher. This raises concerns in tackling the issue of cyberbullying, since, for effective measures to be implemented, awareness is key in understanding and dealing with the problem. This is acknowledged by Slonje and Smith (2008) who point out that ‘teachers as well as parents need to be aware of the various kinds of cyberbullying, and of what actions can be taken’ (p.153).

Similar research in Canada (Li, 2006) found that 30% of students who were aware of peer cyberbullying incidents were prepared to consult with an adult; again, there was no gender difference in the number of students prepared to reveal this information (Li, 2006, p.8).

But, whatever the individual reasons, the research clearly highlights a lack of confidence in reporting experiences of cyberbullying. While some adolescents may fear reprisals for reporting their experiences, fear of being perceived as weak or a lack of hope in an adult caregiver successfully resolving the issue, others may find that proving a cyberbully is targeting them to be too problematic:

Do adolescents have the perception of not being believed by adults if they have no proof to show, or are adults perceived as unsuccessful in giving support, if proof is lacking? Either way, this aspect should be investigated further, especially given that very few cybervictims had actually told an adult about their suffering, and none of our sample said they had told a teacher  
(p.154).

#### **1.11.4 Lack of Confidence in School Personnel related to Cyberbullying**

Li (2006) suggests a lack of trust in teachers successfully intervening is a significant factor in students not reporting instances of cyberbullying. In his research, over one-third of students expressed this belief: ‘Because of this belief that adults in schools would not help, many students, feeling either scared or powerless, chose not to report cyberbullying instances’ (p.166). This figure is significant and would suggest a culture of despondency existing in certain schools where students feel they cannot relay their negative experiences or feel that such action will either amount to nothing or, even worse, bring further reprisals. The fact that this research showed such a significant number of students lacking faith in school staff to address the

cyberbullying problem is of major concern. With regard to experiencing cyberbullying behaviour, the results of this research showed that only 64% of students believed that adults in schools tried to stop cyberbullying when informed. There was no significant gender difference in this opinion amongst the students partaking in this research.

Just as bystanders and targets of cyberbullying through inaction facilitate such behaviour, likewise cyberbullies can perceive the school environment as being either being strict or passive towards such behaviour – regardless of stated school culture and policy. Pellegrini and Bartini (2000) observed a correlation between adolescent perceptions of their school environment and their bullying related experience and behaviour. Further research by Smith et al. (2006) and Slonje and Smith (2008) confirms that an adolescent's perception of the school culture and perception of teachers' ability to deal with the problem of cyberbullying has a significant impact on a student's decision in choosing to remain silent about their experience of cyberbullying. Similarly, Agatston et al (2007) contend that non-reporting results from the fact that students feel that school staff are not effective in dealing with the problem

Another interesting perspective is that proposed by Li (2008) who theorises that an adolescent's level of self-esteem may influence their decision to report or refrain from reporting their experience to an adult caregiver. Though an initial lack of trust in an adult successfully resolving the issue is a significant factor in non-reporting, Li suggests that increased self-esteem can have a positive influence in an adolescent's decision to report such behaviour.

Cross et al. (2012) state that given the multi-causal nature of all forms of bullying and the apparent overlap between cyber and other bullying behaviour, it appears clear that cyberbullying needs to be nested within a whole-school effort to encourage positive social behaviour online and offline (Rigby and Slee, 2008), and that cyberbullying intervention elements may be limited if implemented in isolation.

### **1.12 Extant Research on Non-Reporting Behaviour**

Despite the fact that many studies have found that adolescents do not report their bullying or cyberbullying experiences, there is a dearth of empirical work examining the reasons for same. Two studies deserve particular mention. The first is a quantitative study by Holfeld and Grabe (2012), which replicated earlier descriptive research on the prevalence of cyberbullying and examined why students do not report cyberbullying. Using a sample of 383 students from four middle schools in a North American city (with average student age of 13.5 years), and using a subset of self-developed measures to capture non-reporting (4 questions in relation to own experience and 3 questions in relation to reporting of peer experiences), they found that 16% of students reported being cyberbullied in the previous year and, of those, 62% were cyberbullied at least once or twice in the last 30 days. Only 11% of students reported cyberbullying others at least once in their lifetime, and 9% in the last year. Cell phone cyberbullying was the method used most frequently. As a key point of that study concerns the reporting aspects of cyberbullying, the findings show that almost 30% of students who were cyberbullied in the past year did not report the incident. When asked to explain their reporting behaviour, 57% of the respondents stated that they didn't feel it was a big deal, or they felt they could handle it on their own. 29% of students considered that reporting would make it worse, or were scared to tell. Whilst this study provides an empirical attempt to understand the issue of non-reporting in more depth, Holfeld and Grabe's work is limited in the sense that the number of questions used to capture non-reporting comprises a small number of self-developed measures that are not validated or tested for reliability and the study was purely quantitative in nature and not followed up by in-depth exploration of the issue. It is likely that our understanding of the factors that influence adolescent non-reporting would benefit from a triangulated approach to data collection.

A second study that has sought to bring greater clarity to this issue is that of De Lara (2012). Using a qualitative approach, she studied the non-reporting problem in four schools (two rural and two urban) in the New York region. The sample comprised twelve focus groups (three in each school, comprising ninety-seven students) and fifty-one individual interviews (with some cross-participation between students being involved in both focus group and individual interview) of which 52% were female

and 48% male adolescents. A significant finding of this research is that the reasons for non-reporting appear to be multifactorial with the results indicating that the adolescents in this sample did not report their experiences due to the ubiquitous nature of bullying; a sense of helplessness; concerns over inappropriate adult action; self-reliance; shame; parental omniscience; and a different definition and understanding of bullying than that used and perceived by adults (De Lara, 2012: 288).

Interestingly, students in the research considered bullying to be the norm or something to be expected, whilst witnesses to such behaviour also perceived it as a normal rite of passage in school. They were despondent about the potential for successful adult intervention, as they feared that parental intervention could make things worse or, at the other extreme, that adults would not take the concern seriously enough. It was of particular concern that some reported being told by teachers to deal with the problem themselves – an obvious flaw in the duty of care by individual teaching staff. When adolescents seek help from an adult and the bullying continues unabated despite reporting the issue, the research shows that they are likely to withdraw from communicating the issue further to the adult caregiver (DeLara, 2008; Garbarino and DeLara, 2002). This confirms the findings of Petrosino et al. (2010) and Pepler et al. (2008) whose research shows that between 40-65% of adolescents never report their experience of bullying to an adult.

DeLara also found that some female students found sexual harassment too embarrassing to discuss with adults; other students revealed that sometimes school staff made them feel badly about the decisions they made to protect themselves against bullying behaviour; and some felt that to inform an adult caregiver would give the impression of being weak and needy, thereby encouraging the bullying behaviour further. Some of the factors identified (above) are supported by other recent research, which has shown that as children develop there is less tendency to report being bullied (Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse, and Neale, 2010; Mishna and Alaggia, 2005). This may, in part, be due to a lesser sense of trust in adults and a sense of shame in depending on an adult for assistance

An indirect finding of DeLara's work that may also provide insight as to the reasons for non-reporting relates to the interpretive difference that adolescents and adults

attribute to the term “bullying”. For example, she found that many of the students in her sample, when asked to define bullying, described it as: ‘when someone is *mean* to me’ [italics mine]. However, “mean” behaviour is not reflected in current descriptions of bullying in the literature. This difference in interpretation was previously highlighted by Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefsoeg (2002) who found that adolescent perception of what constitutes bullying could differ remarkably from that of adults. For example, a student experiencing sexual harassment may not be aware that they are being bullied. It follows, therefore, that if students’ understanding of bullying differs from adult understanding, the chances of reporting and intervening in such bullying behaviour are reduced. This is of significance in implementing anti-bullying policies, educating students as to what constitutes “bullying” and thereby encouraging them to come forward to relate their experiences to a significant caregiver.

Key to overcoming hesitancy in self-reporting experiences of bullying is the need for a whole-school approach in showing adolescents that the school’s anti-bullying policy is effective and practical. Anything less will merely facilitate the sense of helplessness and despondency by those targeted by bullies. As De Lara (2012) aptly points out: ‘Anti-bullying programs face insurmountable odds if adolescents believe there is very little hope for prevention’ (p.299).

Whilst the work of De Lara (2012) is valuable in that it represents an attempt to examine the issue of non-reporting, it was limited to four schools (two urban and two rural) within the New York region, the sample was small and therefore the generalizability of its findings remains uncertain. It is possible that local and cultural factors may have impacted the reasons for non-reporting behaviour. However, whether this is the case, can only be determined by additional research on this issue in other and broader contexts. Further study in an Irish context would be particularly valuable not only in providing insight into this issue in relation to the factors that predict Irish adolescent non-reporting, but also as a comparative measure to establish the cultural independence of these factors.

### **1.13 Irish Cyberbullying Research**

Despite heightened public awareness of a considerable number of adolescent deaths in Ireland that have been related to cyberbullying (most notably Lara Burns, Erin Gallagher, Ciara Pugsley and Leanne Wolfe), empirical research on this issue remains remarkably limited. The death by suicide in America of another Irish adolescent, Phoebe Prince (in 2010), brought worldwide attention to the gravity of the problem but the factors linking cyberbullying and death by suicide need deeper research.

Whilst there is a dearth of empirical research on cyberbullying in Ireland, concern about this issue is widespread and would appear to be justified. Research data provided by the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at Trinity College Dublin in 2008 revealed an unsettling picture of the growth in online and mobile phone intimidation among secondary school pupils and showed that children as young as twelve are being targeted through mobile phone calls, text messages, e-mails, internet forums, chat rooms and social networking sites. Research on the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying was conducted by Cotter and McGilloway (2011) and comprised a sample of 122 adolescents from two secondary schools in the South of Ireland. The findings showed that although cyberbullying within that sample appeared to be less prevalent than traditional bullying, the adolescents concerned considered it to be worse than traditional bullying, with the exception of email.

#### **1.13.1 Evidence of Irish Adolescent Non-Reporting of cyberbullying**

In Ireland, the issue of non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour was initially identified by O' Moore & Minton (2011) who found that a distinct contradiction exists between intent and actual practice in terms of Irish adolescents reporting their cyberbullying experiences to adults. For example, they reported that whilst 14.6% of pupils stated that they *would* inform an adult at school if they were cyberbullied, *in reality*, only 6% of these pupils had actually reported their cyberbullying experience. Instead, they found that pupils were over twice as likely to do nothing at all, five times more likely to send an angry message back, and five times more likely to talk to a friend.

Recent research by Cotter and McGilloway (2011) of 122 adolescents from two schools in the South of Ireland found that one quarter of victims did not confide in anybody. However, as only 25 respondents answered the question about whether they would report their experience or not to another individual, a broader sample of respondents is needed in order to have confidence that these results provide an accurate reflection of the general adolescent response pattern in relation to reporting cyberbullying.

The recently published HBSC report - 'Health Behaviour in School-aged Children' (Walker et al, 2012) – found that statistically significant differences exist by gender and age group - with more boys reporting having being bullied compared to girls and younger children more likely to report ever being bullied as compared to older children. These findings are particularly of concern in light of consistent evidence that girls tend to suffer more cyberbullying experiences than boys and that cyberbullying experiences tend to increase during adolescence. Whilst valuable in that it highlights age and gender distinctions regarding the self-reporting of bullying experiences in general, the HBSC measurement instrument does not provide the level of granularity necessary to determine the factors that are influencing adolescent resistance to report their cyberbullying experiences. Similarly, whilst providing evidence of adolescent resistance to report cyberbullying, O'Moore and Minton's (2011) study does not provide insight as to the causal reasons for that resistance. The authors speculate that the explanation for adolescent non-reporting may be a perception of greater self-efficacy than teacher efficacy in dealing with online problems or a lack of confidence in the school's abilities to deal with bullying (2011, p.40). However, neither study progresses our understanding of the factors underlying Irish adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences, nor provide insight as to whether individual or situational characteristics influence that resistance.

This deficit in understanding emanates from the fact that research on cyberbullying is in an embryonic state. The limited extant literature focuses predominantly on the nature of the bullying experience or on school policies to counter cyberbullying behaviour. The lack of attention that has been paid to understanding the factors that influence adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences is all the more remarkable as there is evidence that this issue transcends cultural boundaries. For

example, a cross-cultural comparative study by Li (2008) showed that less than 9% of Canadian students reported their cyberbullying experience to adults and less than one-fifth of those aware of a cyberbullying incident reported the issue to an adult. However, yet again, the study did not provide any insight as to the factors that influenced such resistance to reporting, but simply confirmed existence of the phenomenon.

As previously noted, adolescent resistance to reporting is equally prevalent in the traditional (face-to-face) bullying context with evidence (Smith and Shu, 2000; Whitney and Smith, 1993) to show that 30-50% of pupils do not inform a parent or teacher that they had been a target of bullies. The influence of age on reporting behaviour is evident in Rigby and Slee's (1993c) study which found that whilst approximately half of Australian students aged between eight and twelve stated that they would like to help prevent others being bullied, as they increased in age, they became more reluctant to confide in or seek adult intervention. However, the reasons underlying adolescents' reluctance to seek adult intervention or discuss the bullying experiences remain undetermined. Similarly, the degree to which gender, age or other variables apply in the case of Irish adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences has yet to be established.

#### **1.14 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the rationale for this study, the primary research aim and the choice of study setting and sample. The background context and research relevant to both to (traditional) bullying and cyberbullying has been provided. The key research evidence about on-reporting of bullying and cyberbullying has been analysed and it is clear that this study about non-reporting is required due to the lack of research in this area that is specifically focused on gifted adolescents and their particular experiences and motivations related to non-reporting.

Cyberbullying is a form of aggressive behaviour that exists within a social context and is open to multiple influences. The literature on social aggression provides significant insight into the dynamics and causal factors that influence such behaviour. Moreover, the theoretical frameworks have significant explanatory power that is relevant to our understanding of cyberbullying. Therefore, in the next chapter,

adolescent social aggression and the theoretical underpinnings of this study are discussed in detail.

## **CHAPTER 2: ADOLESCENT SOCIAL AGGRESSION: REVIEW OF LITERATURE & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, the purpose and rationale for this study was discussed. The background to cyberbullying behaviour was presented and both national and international studies supporting the rationale for studying the issue of non-reporting cyberbullying behaviour were presented. The following chapter provides a backdrop to studying cyberbullying behaviour and non-reporting by examining the various forms of adolescent social aggression linked to cyberbullying behaviour and incorporates the theoretical framework used to advance this study. The components of this chapter are illustrated in Figure 2.1.

### **2.1 Search Strategy**

The literature reviewed for this study was collected from 2009 to 2016 and information was sourced from online databases (such as PsycINFO and SAGE journals online, Scopus, EBSCO, Academic Search Premier, ERIC and Wiley Online Library), literature from DCU library, Dublin City libraries and purchased materials from the Internet (both journals and books). Journals included the ‘Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology’, the ‘Journal of Educational Computing Research’, the ‘British Journal of Educational Psychology’, the ‘Irish Journal of Psychology’, ‘Developmental Psychology’, ‘School Psychology International’ the ‘Journal of Adolescence’ the ‘International Journal of Behavioural Development’ the ‘Journal of Personality and Social Psychology’, the ‘Journal for the Education of the Gifted’. Data was also sourced from the Internet using combined key words pertaining to this dissertation, such as “non-reporting behaviour”, “gifted youth”, “impact”, “adolescence”, “adolescents” and “cyberbullying”. Key-word searching became more focused and refined as the study progressed using Boolean operators (‘and’ and ‘or’), and the latest findings were obtained using online searches with these operators.

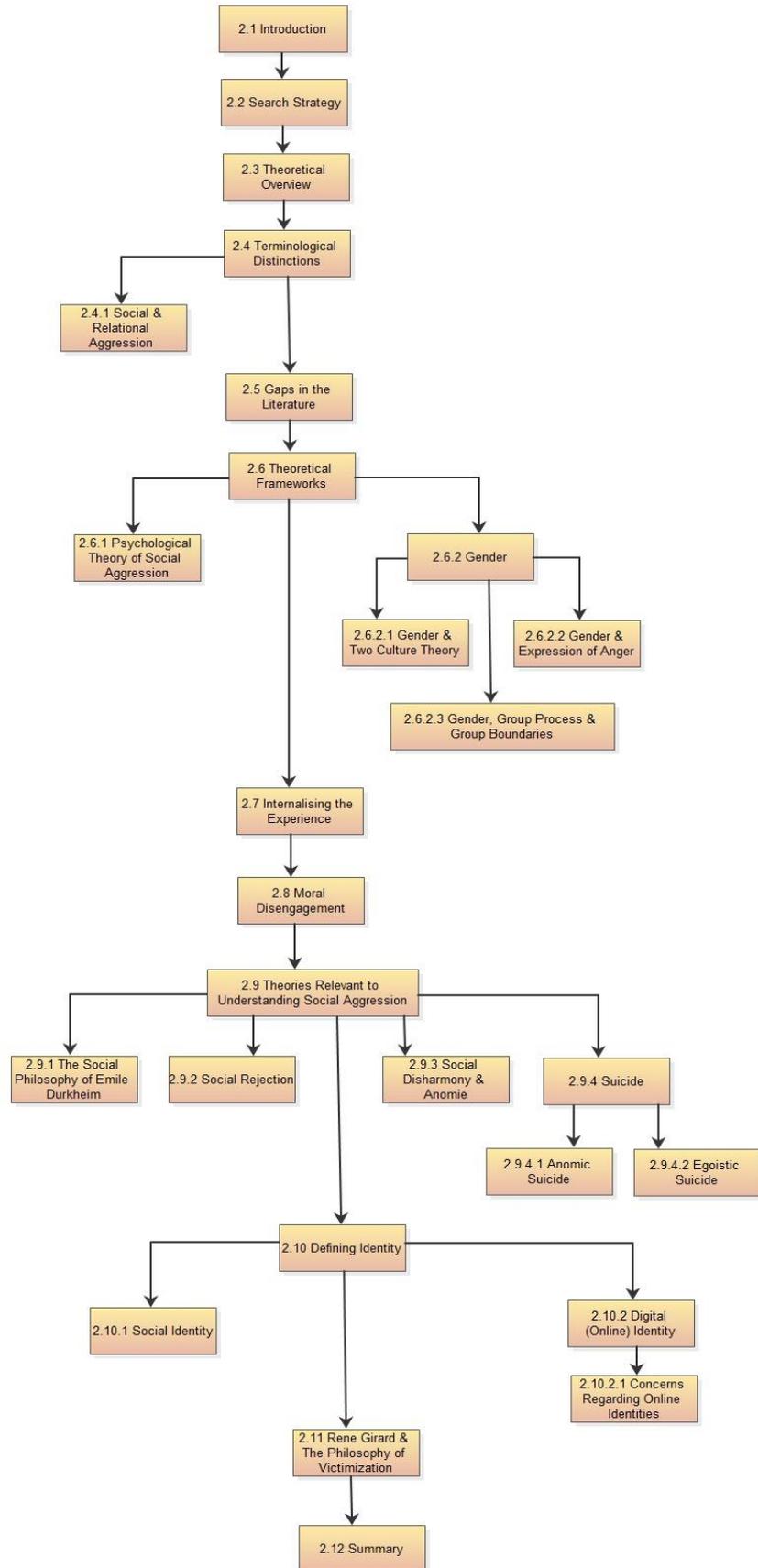


Figure 2.1 Chapter Structure.

## **2.2 Theoretical Overview**

As has been previously stated, cyberbullying has been defined as: ‘wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices’ (Hinduja and Patchin, 2009, p.5). It is a form of socially aggressive behaviour. Therefore, a discussion of social and relational aggression, and the causal factors that relate to this behaviour are indicated. Moreover, the work of key social theorists such as Durkheim, which are repeatedly referenced by other researchers, including Collins (1977), Craib (1997), Simpson (1963), Lukes (1975), Hilbert (1986), Thompson (1990), Sennett (2006), and Girard (1977, 1986), can provide a useful framework within which to understand why socially aggressive behaviour occurs in the first place, why certain individuals or groupings engage in such behaviour and the factors underlying their choice of a particular target for their aggression. Consequently, these theories can situate an understanding of cyberbullying behaviour in a wider framework and therefore they are helpful in contributing valuable insight into the social dynamics that surround the technology-mediated communication environment.

To provide clarity prior to an in-depth discussion of aggression amongst adolescent youth, this chapter opens with a discussion of the various terms that are used interchangeably in the literature to describe socially aggressive behaviour. These terminological distinctions require consideration in order to ensure consensus and clarity as to precisely what form of aggressive behaviour is under consideration and in order to ensure that comparisons can be drawn with confidence across different studies. As there is some evidence to suggest that girls may be more socially or relationally aggressive than boys, the reasons for this are considered in terms of two-culture theory, expression of anger and group boundaries (e.g Maccoby, 1998; Crombie & Desjardins, 1993).

There is ample evidence of the consequences of socially aggressive behaviour, in particular the long-term negative outcomes that can result from internalising the experience (James & Owens, 2005; Crothers et al., 2005; Goldstein, 2004; Ross, 2003; Owens et al., 2000). In this chapter, these emotional and psychological impacts are discussed in greater detail. In an attempt to explain how adolescents can consider it acceptable to target others with sustained socially aggressive behaviour, the

mechanisms that enable moral disengagement are considered, in particular the cognitive restructuring to make behaviour morally justifiable, the diffusion of responsibility, the minimisation of the harmful effects of one's behaviours, and blaming of victims.

As sociology can provide valuable insights in relation to human behaviour, the contributions of prominent sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim (Collins (1977), Craib (1997), Simpson (1963), Lukes (1975), Hilbert (1986), Thompson (1990), Sennett (2006), and Rene Girard (1977, 1986), are examined. Durkheim's early classic studies on social behaviour enhances modern understanding of aggressive behaviour by considering it in terms of social facts, imitation, social rejection and social disharmony – the latter with its associated outcomes of anomic and egoistic suicide. As egoistic suicide has been related to a rejection of another's identity, a detailed discussion of what constitutes identity follows. As part of that discussion, distinctions are drawn between social identity and digital identity and some of the prevalent concerns regarding online identity are outlined.

The work of Rene Girard also provides valuable philosophical insights, particularly in relation to victimization. Four key pillars of his work are of particular relevance to this discussion of social aggression. These are Mimetic Theory, Triangular Desire, Sacrifice and The Scapegoat, and the concept of Persecution. While these theories are themselves intertwined, each is considered in terms of the different insights that they provide regarding the underlying social tensions that frequently exist within adolescent social groups and can result in aggressive behavioural outcomes. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key insights drawn from the literature on social aggression and emphasises how the work of social theorists can assist by providing us with a framework within which to situate our understanding of socially aggressive behaviour.

### **2.3 Terminological Distinctions**

Socially aggressive behaviour is manipulative, intentional and seeks to harm the individual's social status and/or damage their self-esteem through disparaging remarks or behaviour intended to ostracise the individual from others. It has been defined by Galen & Underwood (1997) as:

Actions directed at damaging another's self-esteem, social status, or both, and includes behaviours such as facial expressions of disdain, cruel gossiping, and the manipulation of friendship patterns (p.589).

In the latter stage of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the term 'relational' aggression emerged and was more precisely focused in so far as it described an intention to damage an individual's social standing through manipulation of relationships. Study into relational aggression has been undertaken most notably by Crick and Grotpeter (1995) and Crick et al. (1999).

In the literature, the terms 'social aggression' and 'relational aggression' are used interchangeably as if denoting the same behaviour. However, it should be noted that there is a distinction in emphasis, albeit minor, between these terms. For example, the term 'social' tends to indicate a focus on social exclusion whilst 'relational' tends to predominantly refer to relationship manipulation. Despite this difference, the predominant term used in the literature remains that of 'social' aggression and its use is typically understood to incorporate both social and relational aspects of aggressive behaviour. Whatever the semantics, the intention of these behaviours is the same. The precise distinctions between these terms are now discussed in more detail.

### **2.3.1 Social & Relational Aggression**

Social aggression can manifest in two distinct forms - direct and indirect aggression. The former, *direct social aggression* is exemplified in the abuser verbally demeaning the intended target with the aim of damaging their self-esteem whilst *direct non-verbal social aggression* usually involves the use of deliberately negative body language (such as turning away and ignoring an individual or negative facial expressions such as eye-rolling or showing facial disgust towards the individual).

'Indirect aggression' has predominantly been associated with childhood aggression and pioneering research on this phenomenon was instigated by Buss (1961). Modern day research on the concept of 'indirect aggression' has been pursued and highlighted through the works of Björkqvist (1994) and Lagererspetz et al. (1988). This method of aggression usually employs a "behind the back" strategy. This covert form of aggression is deployed with the intention of demeaning the intended target and

harming their social standing usually amongst a group known to both the target and the aggressor. The aggressor may even communicate with the target in a congenial manner face-to-face whilst avoiding any implication or suggestion of direct hostility (Archer & Coyne, 2005; Björkqvist 1994). Clearly, it is easier to demean an individual's character using indirect methods of aggression since physical confrontation does not take place and such indirect aggression makes it difficult to identify the perpetrator. As Buss (1961) notes:

From the aggressor's vantage point, the best mode of aggression is one that avoids counterattack. Indirect aggression solves the problem by rendering it difficult to identify the aggressor (p.8).

The concept of 'indirect aggression' can be further subdivided into verbal and non-verbal forms. *Indirect verbal social aggression* occurs without the target being present and takes the form of demeaning gossip to undermine the individual's social standing, whilst *indirect non-verbal social aggression* is non-confrontational and takes place behind the target's back though the target is usually present (e.g. "face-pulling" or "eye-rolling" behind the individual's back although the individual is present). As noted by Miller & Vaillancourt (2007) the outcomes of this is that victims of indirect aggression tend to become 'frequent targets of negative evaluations from the peer group, resulting in feelings of inferiority and worthlessness' (p. 232).

It has been suggested that such forms of aggression may have their basis in evolutionary development. For example, rather than focusing on the negative psychological implications of such aggression, Vaillancourt (2005) contends that this behaviour is a normal and adaptive part of human development. He posits that social aggression facilitates a natural selective process in nature whereby socially dominant females have access to 'quality mates' in a natural evolutionary manner and argues that such behaviour is paralleled in the animal kingdom (e.g. with wolves and primates). He also observes that 'prominent and powerful females use indirect aggression more than lower-status females' (p.167). However, even if social aggression is a natural evolutionary trait amongst females, that does not negate the psychological damage it can inflict on those who are less dominant and persuasive in social groups, particularly in the developmental years. Therefore, whilst evolutionary theory provides an interesting perspective on social aggression, Vaillancourt (2005)

tends to focus on the aggressor, but little attention is paid to the experiences of the target of social aggression, their coping mechanisms and responsive behaviour.

Crick & Grotpeter (1995) coined the term 'relational aggression' to describe the non-physical forms of aggression more commonly (although not exclusively) found in girls than boys. They defined it as: 'harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships' (p.711).

As will be discussed later, the form of aggression is generally dependent on the object of desire. For example, Buss & Dedden (1990) found that the content of female verbal aggression against rivals was different to rivalry amongst their male counterparts. In certain cases, rivals were rumoured to be sexually promiscuous and have had many partners. In other cases, the form of verbal attack against perceived rivals focused on physical appearance. Females tended to demean rivals by casting disparaging remarks on their physical attributes. According to Buss and Thackelford (1997):

They were more likely than men to call their competitors fat and ugly, mention that the rival's thighs were heavy, make fun of the size and shape of their rival's body, and call them physically unattractive (p.615).

Whether described as social or relational aggression, there is widespread consensus in the literature that such actions can have a devastating effect on the target of the aggression (Baldry, 2004; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Crick & Nelson, 2002; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007; Owens, Slee & Shute, 2002; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001; Storch, Brassard & Masia-Warner, 2003). In fact, Paquette & Underwood (1999) have found many cases where social aggression, is perceived as being more harmful than physical aggression.

## **2.4 Gaps in the Literature on Social Aggression**

The majority of quantitative studies regarding social aggression have focused on causal factors surrounding the actions of the perpetrator and gender comparisons rather than the target of bullying. In the early 1990s psychosocial studies into the phenomenon of social aggression grew exponentially (eg. Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Galen & Underwood, 1997), but the focus was on the perpetrator and causal factors of social aggression. Later studies broadened to consider the consequences and impact on the target of bullying – issues such as stress, depression and suicidal tendencies (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein, Boergers & Vernberg, 2001; Storch et al, 2003; La Greca & Harrison, 2005; Storch et al, 2005). However, much of the above research took a broad focus on short-term consequences with research data limited to a one-year study at most.

Similarly, qualitative research examining ‘relational’ aggression has tended to focus on the perpetrator, their behavioural traits and rationale pertaining to social aggression (Crothers, Field, Kolbert, 2005; Goldstein, 2004; James & Owens, 2005; Owens et al., 2000; Ross, 2003). Rather than placing an emphasis on the first-hand opinions and perspectives of such individuals experiencing social aggression, they have relied on second-hand observations in drawing conclusions to their research.

In summary, whilst issues such as causal factors, behavioural traits of the perpetrator and surrounding issues have been examined in the literature, there seems to be little or no in-depth focus on the experience and perspective of the target who has been subjected to bullying behaviour. Consequently, our understanding of the adolescent target’s perspective including the factors that influence their reporting behaviour is distinctly limited and requires more detailed attention.

## **2.5 Theoretical Frameworks of Social Aggression**

Despite decades of empirical study into the phenomenon, there is still a need to articulate a comprehensive theoretical framework in order to define and understand social, relational and indirect aggression, as noted by researchers such as Underwood (2003). Within the last decade or so, various psycho-social and evolutionary theories have been put forward in a bid to rationalize the ‘why’ and ‘how’ factors behind social aggression (Archer & Cote, 2005; Underwood, 2003; Vaillancourt, 2005).

### **2.5.1 Psychological Theory of Social Aggression**

From a psychological perspective, research to-date repeatedly shows that acceptance and belonging amongst children (in each stage of development) with “significant others” (peers and family) is critical to their healthy psychological development (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). This is consistent with other research (e.g. Rubin, Burgess, Kennedy, & Deater-Deckard, 2003) which shows that difficulty in early/late stages of childhood development can lead to later psychological trauma (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Miller & Vaillancourt, 2007). According to Crick and Zahn-Waxler (2003), the desire for emotional and social attachment is stronger amongst females than males. It is therefore unsurprising that a key objective of relational aggression is to harm the intended target through a process of isolation or damaging their relationships with peers, thus leaving the target emotionally disconnected. Such alienation and lack of emotional support can cause significant psychological damage amongst young females given that their need for attachment and self-worth is at a critical stage of their development (Miller and Vaillancourt, 2007).

Cyberbullying is a complex form of interpersonal aggression that has many forms and manifests differently in different relationships. It is less likely to present as a dyadic problem between the bully and target, and more typically occurs in a social grouping context within which a number of factors actively work to promote, maintain or suppress that behaviour (Salmivalli, 2001). Although this study focuses on the non-reporting of cyberbullying by those who have been victimized, it is also valuable to understand how cyberbullying can originate and perpetuate, in order to assist in its prevention. Due to the complex nature of cyberbullying (its unique characteristics of anonymity, the effect of online disinhibition encouraging increased cruelty, the absence of time and space limitations, the large size of a potential audience, and the absence of non verbal clues to message intent) more than one theoretical lens is necessary to understand the phenomenon and inform effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Two theories within the psychology field are particularly useful in helping understand the factors and processes through which aggressive behaviour can develop and through which it is sustained. The first of these, Social Learning Theory, was

proposed by Albert Bandura (1963) and integrates behavioural and cognitive theories of learning. It posits that learning is a cognitive process that takes place in a social context and can result from observation or direct instruction, even in cases where is not being directly reinforced. In doing so, it places particular emphasis on the concept of observational learning where an individual first observes and then models another person's behaviour. That observed behaviour is interpreted as learned information and can then serve as a guide for action. Whether the observer decides to model or decides against modelling that observed behaviour is dependent on their motivations and expectations, including the positive consequences that they anticipate from engaging in the behaviour, a process which Bandura has termed vicarious reinforcement.

It is understandably difficult for parents and teachers to comprehend how an adolescent who may have never previously engaged in negative interpersonal actions, who has high academic ability and a record of positive social interactions with their peers, could even consider engaging in cyberbullying of another adolescent. This theory therefore offers a valuable framework for understanding the mechanism of how adolescents can very quickly learn specific acts of aggression such as cyberbullying and incorporate them into their behaviour through observing and imitating the aggressive behaviour of others. The attributes of the person being observed also influence social learning, as adolescents are more likely to be influenced by those who are perceived to have status and power and to be deemed as similar in some way such as gender.

Moreover, the assertion that people don't just respond to stimuli, but interpret them as well in the light of motivational factors such as vicarious reinforcement is particularly relevant to understanding the adolescent's decision to engage in cyberbullying. For example, the reward of inclusion and membership of a social grouping, or the achievement of a greater level of esteem within that grouping as a result of engaging in cyberbullying behaviour would serve as an important motivational factor for those adolescents who strongly desire social acceptance and fear social group ostracisation.

Whilst this theory helps explain why adolescents might model aggressive behaviour of others, it could be accused of being deterministic in inferring that individuals

passively absorb observed behaviour and imitate it without considering its implications. This is particularly true in light of the fact that many adolescents never engage in aggressive behaviour, choosing not to model the aggressive behaviour that they have observed in others. Bandura acknowledges this fact and contends that individuals can of course respond by self-regulating their own behaviour. He suggests that this can be achieved through self-observation, where the individual examines himself and his actions, through judgment - one compares these observations with standards and expectations introduced by the society or himself and through self-response, by rewarding himself for positive behaviour. In an adolescent context, parents and teachers would perceive such self-regulation as highly desirable. However, realistically, the ability to do so is not an automatic development for the majority of adolescents. It is an undertaking that needs to be progressively developed right through adolescence and in the case of the school needs to be systemically embedded in its programmes and culture. Consequently, both parents and schools have a central role to play in assisting the development of adolescent self-regulation through consistently developing moral awareness and rewarding moral engagement. This can be achieved by increasing awareness of those who are vulnerable and suffering (both students and in general society), through demonstrations and rewarding of empathetic behaviour towards students and others in society who need support, and more generally through development of increased awareness of the motivations that underlie negative behaviour, the moral choices that present and their consequences.

Social Learning Theory also enriches our understanding of cyberbullying through its emphasis on the concept of reciprocal determinism, which proposes that an individual's behaviour, their environment, and their personal qualities all reciprocally influence each other. Not only does their environment influence an individual's behaviour, but that behaviour also influences their environment. The concept of reciprocal determinism therefore implies that the effect of cyberbullying extends far beyond either the perpetrator or victim, and that it impacts the wider culture within which it has taken place. For example, referent adolescents who engage in cyberbullying behaviour are likely to have their behaviour modelled by peers within their social grouping, particularly if they are perceived as important by their peers. This reciprocal dynamic between the individual on their environment has the potential

to perpetuate extensively, resulting in cyberbullying behaviour developing into a normatively accepted and embedded activity within an adolescent context unless that behaviour is inhibited through effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Vygotsky's (1934) Social Development Theory also provides valuable insights into our understanding of how children and adolescents learn, insights that are particularly salient for understanding the influence of the social environment on what and how children learn as well as how to develop effective interventions for preventing and addressing cyberbullying. It posits that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition, with human learning conceptualised as a social process within which community has a critical function. In short, knowledge is not generated within an individual, but instead is constructed through interaction with other people in the individual's culture, specifically 'more knowledgeable others' who can support and enable the learning process through guided instruction which supports the child step by step, a process which he terms scaffolding. These more knowledgeable people typically have a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. Therefore, children and adolescents require cooperation and interaction with these more skilled adults and peers in order to learn. Vygotsky described a zone of current development, which is what the individual knows, and a zone of proximal development, which is what he or she could feasibly know. The latter is limited by access to education and the wisdom of the individual's teachers, parents, and peers. Learning is therefore viewed as a co-constructed experience with the more knowledgeable person either modelling behaviours or providing verbal instructions for the child, an experience that is referred to as cooperative or collaborative dialogue. The child then internalizes that information, using it to guide or regulate its own behaviour.

This theory is valuable in terms of its contribution to our understanding of the influence of children's social and cultural context on how they learn and what they learn about. It points to the importance of a school and home culture that actively rejects bullying in all its forms and also points to the need for guided learning on this issue from those who are considered more knowledgeable and trusted either through their position or experience. For example, whilst school policies are an essential part

of the effort to counter cyberbullying, to a large degree they form a backdrop to the adolescent's lived experience and the effectiveness of these policies will be limited unless the adolescent who is experiencing cyberbullying confides in and is guided by those who can enable direct interventions to address the problem. Consequently, if learning is a co-constructed experience that is influenced by a more knowledgeable other, then identification of that person(s) who is perceived by adolescents as more knowledgeable and influential is critical to their learning about cyberbullying. They have potential to influence how cyberbullying behaviour is perceived and equally they represent a supportive and trusted source of advice guiding adolescents on the best way of dealing with this issue should it arise, including encouraging reporting to school authorities, thereby serving as a trusted mediator between adolescents and school management.

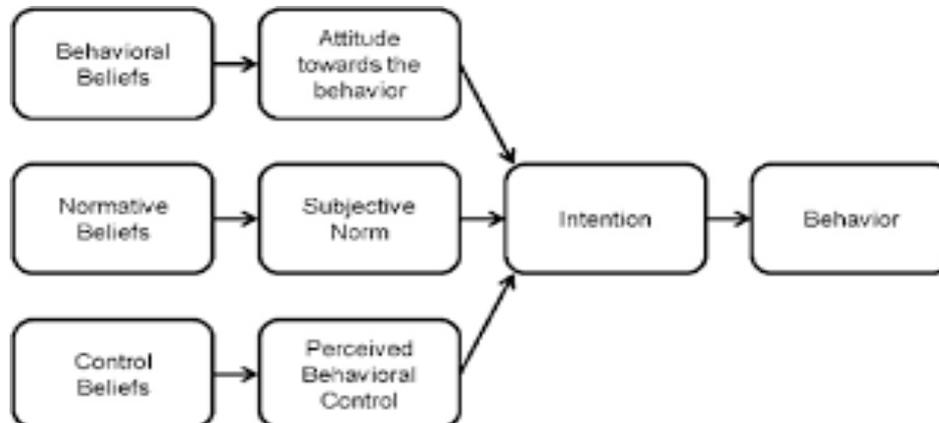
As the person who is considered most influential is likely to vary according to the adolescent's age and level of development, relying on only one category of person is unlikely to yield positive results. For example, in the case of younger children in particular, teachers are likely to be perceived as 'more knowledgeable others' and they can play a significant role to play in communicating with adolescents about cyberbullying, what it is, how to deal with it, the school policy on this issue, as well as being a trusted and supportive authority figure. Although the more knowledgeable other may be a parent or teacher, this is not necessarily the case and peers are likely to constitute an important source of cognitive development, particularly for older adolescents. These peers may include friends, a year prefect, or a sibling whom the adolescent trusts as someone who understands their experience. Whilst the work of Bandura informs our understanding of how children and adolescents can use their observations of others behaviour to model that behaviour themselves, Vygotsky informs our understanding of the role of culture and social interaction in providing guided learning from more knowledgeable referent others, guided learning that can influence how cyberbullying is perceived and how it can be most effectively countered. These theories provide a valuable framework for parents and educators alike.

## **2.6 Theoretical Frameworks related to Non-Reporting**

Non-reporting is a response behaviour that reflects the individual's beliefs regarding a situation, their evaluation of the expected outcomes of reporting and resulting intention to perform an action. Moreover, as people exist within a social context, that context is likely to influence intention to behave in a particular way. Social psychology intention models focusing on the factors that influence behavioural outcomes may therefore provide some insight into the factors influencing non-reporting response, and highlight issues that are worthy of consideration in studying this issue. One such model, the Theory of Research Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1967) suggests that the individual's intention to engage in a specific behaviour is the results of the outcomes that the individual expects to result from performing the behaviour. Attitudes and subjective norms are proposed as the key factors in determining that intention, with attitudes reflecting the individual's positive or negative feelings towards the behaviour and subjective norm reflecting the perceived social pressure to either perform the behaviour or resist doing so. This provides an interesting perspective in relation to adolescent non-response, as it indicates the importance of understanding underlying attitudes and of identifying the social pressures faced by the adolescent in terms of the impact of these issues on intention to report. One criticism of this model relates to the fact that strengths of attitude and subjective norms are likely to vary culturally and therefore the weight that adolescents' place on specific variables may vary by population and culture. However, that is true of any model and does not lessen the potential explanatory power of this model.

A second model that builds on the Theory of Research Action, and provides a more nuanced approach that may be more effective in explaining the factors that influence non-reporting behaviour, is the Ajzen's (1985) psychology-based attitude paradigm, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). Though other models have been reviewed, this model was deemed to have closer resonance for this research, in particular, when studying intent and actual behaviour to report cyberbullying experiences. For this reason, I have opted to use it in the study as an overarching figure to illustrate my arguments.

Figure 2.2 Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1985)



This model indicates that an individual's behaviour is determined by three sets of beliefs that influence their intention to perform a particular behaviour. These are behavioural beliefs (which influence attitude), normative beliefs (which influence subjective norms) and control beliefs (which influence perceived behavioural control beliefs). Attitudinal beliefs comprise feelings towards a particular behaviour and also involve an evaluation of the outcomes of performing the behaviour, whilst subjective norms reflect the individual's perception of social pressure to either perform or not perform the behaviour. However, it is the inclusion of a third factor, perceived behavioural control, and its potential explanatory power, that is of particular interest in relation to the focus of this study i.e. non-reporting behaviour. Perceived behavioural control refers to the individual's perception of his or her control over the performance of the behaviour (reporting) and their confidence in undertaking the behaviour (Ajzen 1991). However, this factor has two sub-dimensions: self-efficacy and controllability. Whilst self-efficacy indicates belief in one's ability to perform a behaviour (e.g. confidence in ability to report to an adult), the second dimension, controllability, refers to external factors and in particular that the extent to which the individual believes that he or she control over the performance outcomes of engaging in the behaviour. This is particularly important in the context of non-reporting as it points to the importance of considering perceived loss of control on the part of the adolescent once he or she has reported the cyberbullying incident to a parent and

teacher. That issue has not received any consideration in the literature on cyberbullying to date and merits more detailed attention, particularly in relation to non-reporting behaviour.

The importance of the Theory of Planned Behaviour towards this research is that it appreciates the influence of attitudinal beliefs, subjective norms and perceived control on behaviour, factors that are likely to influence the adolescent's decision to report or not report their cyberbullying experience to a teacher or parent. For example, it is conceivable that Irish adolescents' decisions to not report their experiences of cyberbullying may be predicted from their attitudes towards reporting, from subjective norms such as whether it is perceived by their peers as an acceptable behaviour and by their perception of control over the outcomes related to the reporting action. However, whether this is the case remains to be determined.

## 2.7 Gender

There is some evidence to suggest that girls may be more socially or relationally aggressive than boys (e.g. Crick et al., 1999). That is to say that they are more socially rather than physically aggressive, but evidence as to whether they are actually more socially aggressive at particular age categories than is the case for boys is mixed. Moreover, the causal factors for their social aggression differ from those of boys and merit careful attention.

Research has revealed female aggression to be comparable to male aggression in intensity though the forms used vary between the genders (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Buss & Thackleford, 1997; Maccoby, 1998; Vaillancourt, 2005). For example, James and Owens (2005) found gossip to be the most commonly used form of social aggression amongst adolescent girls. This included destruction of individual character through the use of disparaging remarks such as ‘spreading rumours’ and ‘bitching’ (p.77). Indirect forms of aggression also took the form of ‘ignoring, neglecting and excluding’ and ‘nasty looks’ whilst direct forms included hostile verbal remarks, being pushed against lockers and “accidentally” kicking the intended target of aggression (p.78).

The lack of clarity in relation to whether girls are more socially aggressive than is the case for boys stems from studies that seem to provide conflicting results. For example, a 1992 study by Björkqvist, et al., using a cross-comparative analysis between both genders and three age groups (8, 11 and 15 year old boys and girls), found that girls use this form of aggression more than boys, particularly the girls in the older grouping. These findings were consistent with those from an earlier study conducted by Lagerspetz et al (1988). They also found that adolescent females create tighter social formations (or dyad groupings) than adolescent males, thereby creating an environment conducive to using socially-manipulative behaviour and which is utilised for aggressive behaviour against their peers (Björkqvist, et al., 1992). However, both studies revealed that 8-year-old boys and girls showed similar levels of indirect aggression thus showing that as adolescent girls socially mature they manipulate peer relationships in a different manner to boys, in particular with regard to indirect aggression. Subsequent research on gender differences in social aggression has not been entirely consistent (Underwood, 2003). Some research

studies have found that girls more commonly use indirect aggression against same-sex peers than boys (Björkqvist, 1994; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), while others have noted equal rates across genders (Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001). Unfortunately, the developmental age of participants has not helped to explain this variation. Moreover, whilst researchers such as Vaillancourt (2005) contend that social aggression is more prevalent among females than males in many different cultures, including Indonesia and Argentina, they do not provide us with any insight as to why that should be the case.

### **2.7.1 Gender & Two Culture Theory**

One explanation for why girls engage in social aggression is that proposed by the Two Culture Theory. This theory emerged in the 1980s and proposes that the distinctive play styles of the two sexes manifest themselves in distinctive cultures that develop within boys' and girls' groups as the children grow older (Maccoby 1998). Support for this has been provided by Crombie & Desjardins (1993) amongst others. The theory proposes that girls' social encounters emphasise relationship rather than structured games or physical activities and that these relationships tend to be more dyadic and intense than those of boys with greater concern for who is best friends with whom. Such an emphasis inevitably results in a greater need to fit in with peers as well as a greater vulnerability to gossip and relationship manipulation.

While the Two Cultures Theory is an attractive explanation for why girls might engage in social aggression, as it fits with the gendered stereotypes of girls engaging in social aggression rather than physical aggression and the value that girls place on value close relationships, Underwood (2003) cautions against assumptions that girls are more socially aggressive than boys and points to the need to test specific questions about the interactions between individual differences and social contexts. Peer-relations evidence suggests that her caution may be warranted. For example, a study by Zabatany et al., (2000) provided evidence of considerable similarity between the activities in which both genders participate. The study findings were in sharp contradiction to the implication of the Two Cultures theory that girls participate predominantly in communal, relationship-focused activities in contrast to boys who tend towards more structured activities. Therefore, it would appear that a premature adoption of the Two Culture theory should not be advocated. In fact, Underwood

suggests that research is needed to investigate the claims of Two Cultures theory as they relate to the development of social aggression by first examining whether there are gender differences across a number of developmental periods, including that of adolescence.

### **2.7.2 Gender & Expression of Anger**

Social aggression can also be conceived as a developmental outcome relating to peer contexts. Evidence for this is provided by Larson and Asmussen's 1991 study which found that young people reported more experiences of anger, worry and hurt as their ages increased. When examined in terms of gender differences, the results showed that adolescent girls reported more than twice the proportion of negative feelings related to friend interactions than did boys. For those girls, the developmental increase in negative feelings relating to interactions with their friends was due mainly to an increase in negative feelings based on social relationships with boys.

Whilst the focus for this study relates to adolescents (aged 13 to 17), it is worth discussing certain behavioural traits of pre-adolescent children. Responses to aggressive behavioural can vary between both genders according to the various stages of the child's developmental process. There is a need to identify to what degree age across both genders influences both form of aggression, level of impact and the type of reporting response with regard to cyberbullying behaviour. A study by Tisak et al. (2012) of 138 children aged 7-12 found that children formed closer links to their same-gender peers rather than children of the opposite gender.

Longitudinal research by Brown et al. (1998) revealed lower self-esteem amongst girls compared to boys in the early stages of adolescence. This may, in part, be explained by social norms influencing the thought processes of pre-adolescent children to behave in a certain manner. As children progress into early adolescence their gender differences may cause them to seek a balance from previous expected 'norms'. For example, Pollack and Shuster (2000) postulate that in the struggle for identity formation, adolescent girls may require help to become more assertive or express feelings of anger whilst, conversely, boys may require help to understand that feeling and expressing emotions (other than anger) are normal.

A study by Lindeman, et al., (1997) in relation to aggression, pro-sociality and withdrawal amongst a sample of 2,594 pre-, mid-, and late adolescents found that both direct and indirect aggression, and withdrawal was more common among boys in the pre-adolescent stage. However, in late adolescence, pro-social and withdrawal strategies were more typical amongst girls in the same age grouping whilst aggression was the most often used strategy among boys.

Despite increasing experiences of anger, worry and hurt, Brendgen et al. (2001) found that girls tend to be less open in expressing their anger. While there is no definitive explanation for this, this repression of directly expressed anger is consistent with widely accepted gender stereotypes that girls do not fight and the perception that their anger should be managed and controlled (Lutz 1990). It may be that girls are aware of and subconsciously perpetuate these stereotypes. Whilst they may not pursue a conflict directly with their friend, they may instead engage in covert retaliation at a later point (i.e. engage in social aggression behind the person's back). In fact, Underwood (2003) suggests that because girls are prone to feeling distress about friendships but are less likely than boys to engage in physical and perhaps even verbal aggression, one powerful strategy for girls who are expressing anger or pursuing social goals such as dominance or status might be harming others covertly by damaging their relationships. It is also consistent with Russell and Owens (1999) analysis of the data set obtained in the Owens (1996) study of gender and developmental differences in indirect aggression across a wide age range, which found that girls directed greater levels of indirect aggression toward other girls than toward boys. Thus, it would appear that in order to protect the integrity of their social relationships when faced with conflict, adolescent girls are more likely to cope by engaging in submission and disengagement strategies (Laursen and Koplas 1995). This coping mechanism is consistent with studies such as those of Miller et al. (1986) which have shown that girls seek to avoid conflicts by cooperating with the wishes of others, and that they are more likely to express anger covertly.

A study by Gamez-Guadix and Gini (2016) found that neither individual nor group justification for cyberbullying behaviour showed any significant interaction with gender as a variable for predicting such behaviour. However, their findings revealed that whilst certain adolescent students reported high levels of impulsivity as a causal

factor for cyberbullying behaviour, such impulsive behaviour had a low correlation with justification of such behaviour as a factor. Therefore, both high justification and high impulsivity could be considered risk factors in potential cyberbullying behaviour. Their findings revealed that holding broader normative beliefs justifying cyberbullying affects subsequent cyberbullying behaviour only among adolescents with lower impulsivity. The results from the study also found that the cognitive justification of cyberbullying is a psychological process that facilitates acting immorally. Although separate variables as risk factors for predicting cyberbullying behaviour, the effects of justification and impulsivity on cyberbullying are not additive.

### **2.7.3 Gender, Group Process & Group Boundaries**

A further explanation for why girls engage in social aggression relates to the issue of social network boundaries. For example, Owens et al., (2000) found that girls cited two main categories of reasons for why they engage in indirect aggression; the first of which was to alleviate boredom, and the second relating to friendship/group processes which included group inclusion, belonging to the right group, and self protection.

Research by Gini (2006) found that regardless of unethical group behaviour, children desired to be part of an accepted group even when there was evidence of bullying behaviour by that same group. Social identity plays an important part in adolescent self-concept and their acceptance within a particular social grouping. The individual desire for acceptance can be tested against 'normative' expectations by the group. Research by Morrison (2006) found that individuals who adhered to group norms regarding bullying were more likely to be rewarded compared to individuals who failed to accept such behaviour and were likely to be alienated from the group.

Emotional outcomes following group bullying behaviour can vary according to research by Jones et al. (2009). Their study found that pride was linked to affiliation with a particular group. On the other hand, guilt was associated with a desire to apologize to the target of the bullying behaviour, and feelings of anger led individuals to consider telling an adult.

Later research by Jones et al. (2011) found that the degree to which children identify with group membership coupled with that same groups 'norms' is highly influential in affecting the individual's response to cyberbullying behaviour. Other influencing factors included the extent to which the group was perceived to be responsible for its behaviour and the extent to which the behaviour was perceived as legitimate. The results of the study showed that emotional responses by group members to the target of cyberbullying behaviour were highly dependent on the extent to which they could identify with the perpetrators and the target of the cyberbullying behaviour. The study further highlights the importance of understanding group-level emotional reactions when it comes to tackling bullying, and show that being part of a group can be helpful in overcoming the negative effects of bullying. Social Network Sites (SNS) provide adolescents support within a unified online group system. As Boyd (2014) posits, social media platforms allow adolescents to 'see themselves as part of a broader community' (p.9). However, despite certain similarities regarding online usage, relational theory suggests that females possess a unique desire to develop and maintain personal relations with others (Portman, Bartlett, & Carlson, 2010; Samnani et al., 2014). Clearly, by engaging in peer-group approved socially aggressive behaviour towards a peer-group designated target increases the perception of the individual as a central member of the social network.

However, according to Wang et al. (2016), this unique desire amongst female adolescents for strong social cohesion 'will tend to make girls more hesitant than boys to engage in cyberbullying because this behaviour may likely compromise positive relations with their peers. Certainly, it can be argued that other factors may play a role between genders differences in aggressive online behaviour, such as age, maturity and cultural influences. Consequently, the threat of social ostracisation or loss of status within the peer group can create tension which may manifest in online social aggression.

Underwood (2003) makes the interesting observation that girls fulfil their communal needs not only within the context of dyadic friendships but also in larger groups and peer networks and that their dyadic interactions are in turn embedded in wider social groups. Adolescent girls have also been found to report greater distress regarding negative interactions within their social network (Gavin and Furman, 1989). This

may result from the fact that they are more connected within their peer network and more distressed at conflict that may affect the solidity of that network.

Research by Festl and Quandt (2016) found that, for girls, cyberbullying involvement (perpetration and victimization) could be traced back to more intensive online social activities and a higher amount of online contact with strangers. In contrast, for boys, only higher exposure to antisocial media content predicted higher levels of victimization over time. The findings indicate that certain patterns of online communication increase the cyberbullying risk over time. However, the risk factors vary between boys and girls. Whilst Barlett and Coyne (2014) found that male adolescents were more likely to perpetrate cyberbullying behaviour, this relationship between gender and involvement was strongly influenced by the age of the participants. Their findings further reveal that female adolescents are more active in cyberbullying behaviour during early adolescence, whereas for males, it tended to be later in the adolescent stage of development. Further to these findings, research by Schultze-Krumbholz et al. (2015) found that whilst both genders are actively involved in cyberbullying behaviour, boys tend to behave more intensively, particularly in the perpetration of cyberbullying behaviour.

## **2.8 Internalising the Experience**

Being the target of social aggression can be a devastatingly hurtful experience. Support for this is provided by Sharp's (1995) large scale study of secondary school students in the UK which found that of the 20% of students who reported having been bullied by others spreading rumours about them, those students described being the target of those malicious rumours as the most psychologically distressful form of bullying.

In the late 1990s, research was undertaken to understand the link between social aggression and psycho-social problems, particularly in the case of adolescents. One particular study found a link between deep internal distress coupled with social maladjustment issues amongst children and adolescents who experience social aggression. This distress manifested in depression, social anxiety and loneliness (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). Later research confirmed this and highlighted the link between social aggression and internal distress in adolescents (James and Owens,

2005; Storch et al., 2005; Storch et al., 2004; Storch et al., 2003; Prinstein et al., 2001; Owens et al., 2000a; Paquette and Underwood, 1999). Such internal distress has manifested in the form of confusion, social anxiety, depression and a sudden loss of self-esteem.

Research has shown a correlation between the experience of social aggression and a poor sense of self-esteem or negative self-evaluation amongst adolescents, in particular where the individual, in a bid to rationalise such confusing behaviour, attributes self-blame for such behaviour (Storch et al., 2005; 2004; 2003); Prinstein et al., 2001; Owens et al., 2000a; Paquette and Underwood, 1999). Whilst earlier research (Paquette and Underwood, 1999; Prinstein et al., 2001), looked at individual emotional and psychological dimensions to social aggression such as low self-esteem, later successive studies by Storch et al., (2003/2004/2005) focused on the social and relational aspects of such aggression. In particular, this research identified a correlation between peer-peer social aggression and socially maladaptive behaviour, social anxiety/phobias, isolation and loneliness. Attempting to explain this finding, Storch et al. (2003) make the important point that peer-peer social relationships are highly important in the adolescent's psychosocial development and probably more so than at any other stage of their development. Consequently, it is understandable that a relationship should exist between their critical need for peer acceptance and the associated social anxiety that relates to being the target of social aggression. A subsequent study by Storch et al. (2005) examined the link between aggression (both relational and overt) and social phobia outcomes over a one-year period with a sample of almost two hundred mixed-gender adolescents. The results revealed a link between social aggression and resultant social phobia one year later. Whilst the study did not find a noticeable difference between the levels of anxiety experienced by boys and girls, the sample was relatively small. Regardless of this fact, the findings emphasise that the experience of social aggression can have negative consequences that persist long after the experience has happened. A similar study by La Greca and Harrison (2005) of social aggression in adolescence used a sample of four hundred and twenty-one students of mixed race and gender. It found that adolescents reported greater social anxiety and depression as a result of the internal distress that accrued from being the target of social aggression, and that this was the case even when negative aspects of adolescents' close friendships and romantic relationships were considered.

Evidence in support of the greater sensitivity of girls to social aggression, a sensitivity which can cause greater emotional and psychological impact, is provided by the work of Paquette and Underwood (1999), which examined seventy-six boys and girls (with the average age being fourteen). The authors found that despite boys and girls experiencing social aggression with equal frequency, the girls who had been victims of social aggression reported being more distressed by their experiences than was the case for boys. Equally worryingly, the results indicated that, in the case of girls, being the victim of social aggression was negatively related to self-concept both globally as well as in specific domains such as physical appearance. For example, the findings showed that self-perception amongst girls was compromised in relation to 'athletic competence, physical appearance, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendships and, global self-worth' whilst for boys the only perceivable negative impact of social aggression was low self-perceptions of close friendships. Girls had greater recollect and more recurring negative thoughts of social aggression than boys, suggesting a higher level of psychosocial stress when peer social relationships were damaged. This finding also adds credence to the hypothesis that girls have greater emotional need for social/relational bonding and acceptance amongst their peers than boys and a corresponding greater psychological stress when this social union is broken (Crick and Grotpeter, 1995). That psychological stress can have devastating consequences as observed, for example, in the highly publicised, tragic outcome of Phoebe Prince.

One final point relating to the consequences of social aggression is that although social cohesiveness and support may reduce the effects of socially aggressive behaviour to some degree (Prinstein et al., 2001), it has been shown that such support does not protect individuals from the full effects of socially aggressive behaviour. For example, studies by La Greca and Harrison (2005) and Prinstein et al., (2001) found that women continued to experience hurt and struggle with low self-esteem, suffer from depression and various forms of neurotic anxiety, such as social phobia and panic attacks, as a result of having been a target of social aggression in their adolescent years. These long-term negative outcomes manifested despite the protection and support of family and friends.

## 2.9 Moral Disengagement

Bearing in mind this discussion of possible factors that influence the choice to engage in socially aggressive behaviour, nonetheless, it remains difficult to understand why adolescents with adequate moral reasoning frequently continue to perpetrate socially aggressive behaviour despite awareness of the psychological distress they are causing to another. In an attempt to explain how this can happen, Underwood (2003) notes that even when people believe in moral ideals, these can become disengaged from their actual behaviour. She refers to Bandura's (1999) description of moral disengagement as involving four primary mechanisms: cognitive restructuring to make behaviour morally justifiable, denying one's own agency by diffusing or displacing responsibility, minimizing the harmful effects of one's behaviours, and blaming or dehumanising victims. Bandura (1999) states: 'The strength of moral self-censure depends partly on how the perpetrators view the people they mistreat' (p.8). A key point from this statement is the perpetrators *perception* of the intended target of mistreatment. The perception contributes towards the behavioural outcome.

Bandura (1999) also alludes to the fact that 'social practices that divide people into in groups and outgroup members produce human estrangement that fosters dehumanization. Strangers can be more easily depersonalized than can acquaintances' (p.9). Therefore, a tribal or group mind-set also contributes to ostracization or alienation of the individual from the social group. In turn, the individual outcast may be perceived as being of lesser status or value than those accepted within the immediate social group. In the case of socially aggressive behaviour, any or all of these mechanisms can effect that disengagement from the target of the aggression. Underwood (2003) cites Hymel et al's (2002) study of fourteen and sixteen year olds, which found that endorsement of attitudes that related to moral disengagement predicted 38% of the variance in self-reported bullying. Therefore it would appear that if others within the social network approve of socially aggressive behaviour (and themselves provide example by engaging in such behaviour), then moral disengagement from the victim of the aggression is not only facilitated, but also endorsed.

A further insight into the world of adolescent social reasoning is provided in the work of Goldstein (2004) who found that whilst adolescents perceived gossip as being

morally wrong and equally as bad as physical aggression, these same adolescents considered social exclusion more acceptable. Moreover, a common consensus existed amongst the adolescent sample that the targets of social aggression were in the main responsible for their own social demise through annoying behaviour or particular social vulnerabilities such as having few or no friends, being a newcomer to the school, lacking self-esteem and assertiveness or being perceived as different from the majority. This blaming of the victim is consistent with Bandura's description of moral disengagement and provides further insight into the trigger factors that can attract attention from adolescents who engage in socially aggressive behaviour as well as the ways in which they can disassociate themselves from their target and self-justify their behaviour.

A more recent study undertaken by Wang et al. (2016) found that moral disengagement was significantly associated with cyberbullying behaviour. Their study also found that moral reasoning moderated the association between moral disengagement and cyberbullying. When adolescents reported a low level of moral reasoning, those with high moral disengagement reported higher scores in cyberbullying than those with low moral disengagement. However, the high and low moral disengagement group had a low level of cyberbullying when moral reasoning was high.

One key point in our understanding the complex nature of social aggression is the fact that it is not fixed within a single unitary dimension. Rather, it must be understood within its own specific context. As Buss and Shackelford (1997) state:

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, aggression is not a singular or unitary phenomenon. Rather, it represents a collection of strategies that are manifest under highly specific contextual conditions. The mechanisms underlying aggression have emerged, on this account, as solutions, albeit a repugnant ones, to a host of distinct adaptive problems, such as resource procurement, intrasexual competition, hierarchy negotiation, and mate retention (p.617).

In summary, whilst the literature on social aggression is rich, it is quite complex and varied in terms of focus, with much attention being given to specific age groups and different methodologies being used to gather insights. Much of the work on relational aggression has focused on middle childhood samples (such as Crick et al., 1999) to the detriment of insights on adolescent aggressive behaviour. As Underwood (2003) notes, whereas for middle childhood there is a large body of research on social aggression using large samples and diverse methods, for adolescence only a handful of studies are available, some using peer ratings but most relying on semi-structured interviews. A large-scale study of the factors that influence social aggression would be particularly helpful in providing a rich portrait of social aggression in adolescence for both genders.

There is a lack of consistency in the extant research on social aggression as to *how* adolescent distress is experienced by each individual and *why* individual adolescents experience this distress differently and at differing levels. Our understanding of the consequences of cyberbullying as a distinct form of social aggression would therefore benefit from a more detailed understanding of the nature, duration and intensity of the internalised stress as well as the whether such consequences differ according to race, gender, age and the individual's family structure.

Finally, empirical studies of adolescent social aggression in an Irish context are limited, and examinations of cyberbullying as a distinct form of social aggression are particularly so. As different people experience cyberbullying and its consequences in different ways, the personal perspectives of adolescents require individual expression. An examination of the causal factors, the consequences, and in particular the pathways for adolescent reporting or reasons for non-reporting of their experiences would substantially progress our understanding of this form of social aggression. The need for such an understanding is particularly urgent in light of past Irish adolescent fatalities of death by suicide due to cyberbullying behaviour.

## **2.10 Theories Relevant to Understanding Social Aggression**

In order to understand why cyberbullying occurs and more specifically why certain individuals or groupings engage in cyberbullying behaviour and the factors underlying their choice of a particular target for their aggression, it is useful to

examine the work of a number of prominent sociologists, such as Emile Durkheim and Rene Girard. Their theories provide us with a framework within which to situate our understanding of cyberbullying behaviour as well as interesting insights into the cause and effect relationships that apply to this technology-mediated social dynamic.

### **2.10.1 The Social Philosophy of Emile Durkheim**

Emile Durkheim (1858 –1917) was a French sociologist who believed that every part of society should be studied, not exclusive to, but rather in the context of its relationship to every other part that forms that society. It was his view that ‘no one part of a society can be studied separately from the others, but must be seen in the context of its relationships to all other parts’ (Craib, 1997, p.26).

A founding father of modern social science, his work tends to focus on the social changes that he observed as a traditionally older and more stable society transitioned to an industrialized and more secular society. Consequently, his observations and studies of societal change and evolution are particularly relevant to the modern and increasingly technological society, which has enabled rapid transformation in relation to personal communication methods, the emergence of virtual worlds and the use of communication technologies in ways that have profoundly transformed the landscape of human social interaction.

Durkheim’s work is of particular relevance to the study of adolescent cyberbullying because of his contribution to our understanding of human social dynamics and the regulation of society. Taking a scientific approach to the study of society, he coined the term “social facts” to describe laws and customs external to the individual and contents that these “facts” can be analysed in a systematic sociological manner in the same way that biological facts are studied by scientists. These social facts incorporate a number of social dynamics such as social regulation, imitation and integration, collective consciousness, social rejection and the outcomes of same – issues that are of particular relevance to adolescent online social behaviour and will be discussed in more detail in this section.

For Durkheim, ‘social facts’ differ from other scientific facts in that they are imposed upon us from the outside. He perceives them as normative expectations or

‘obligations’ that are placed on the individual by his/her society and consequently contends that only a mainstream social group has authority to create or amend these ‘social facts’ regardless of whether they are ethical or otherwise; in other words, individuals cannot alter these conditions or social moral imperatives. He defines them as: ‘ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him.’ The community or social group anticipate (and communicate their anticipation) that each individual member will fulfil his social duty in order to achieve a social harmony. Thus, Durkheim notes that "When I fulfil my obligations as brother, husband, or citizen, when I execute my contracts, I perform duties which are defined externally to myself and my acts, in law and in custom." (in Farganis 2000, p. 63). In this sense, social facts can be perceived both as shared values and equally as constraints that are placed upon the individual. These constraints are imposed by ‘the public conscience’ and failure to comply with the accepted social values or expectations may bring about a punishment by use of the ‘appropriate penalties’ available (Farganis, 2000, p.63). These social expectations and normative obligations can therefore provide an important function in stabilising society. The individual is perceived as being similar to a cog on a wheel; although cogs on their own are ineffective, together they stabilise the functional wheels of society that is dependent on each individual cog functioning in unison.

Just as it did in Durkheim’s time, the concept of ‘social fact’ holds as true today in adolescent sub-groups or sub-cultures. For example, consequences, expectations and external pressures are exerted upon adolescents that pressure them to conform to the accepted social order within the school environment. The reward for conformity is unity, affiliation and acceptance within a social group. However, one consequence of this is that individual independence can be sacrificed for the sake of social cohesion and in order to prevent tensions and instability from developing within the social group. This dynamic and its consequence remain independent of a particular environment. For example, the adolescent’s conformity or lack of it during the school period can also directly influence the social response that that he or she will experience after school-time has concluded.

Many examples of cyberbullying have served to confirm this social phenomenon; a classic example being the homophobic reaction of certain social groups to adolescents who are considered to be gay or effeminate. Whilst, in modern Europe the greater macrocosm of society would appear to permit individual expression of sexual orientation, at the microcosm or sub-strata level, such tolerance is often limited and can vary according to the norms of a particular social grouping. As a result, individuals who are perceived as being outside the heterosexual majority may run the risk of being perceived as being non-conformist and as a consequence be considered unacceptable by certain social groups. This is as true in the adolescent school environment as it is in wider society and adolescents who are perceived to exhibit non-conformist behaviour in terms of sexual orientation may find themselves marginalised and oppressed by other members of their sub-group. As previously mentioned, gifted students who declare themselves as LGBT face double-victimization. This can be particularly difficult and hurtful if they are obliged to relate to or participate in activities with that same sub-group either face-to-face or through online activity.

Attempts to avoid such oppressive marginalisation tend to manifest in increased conformity. Therefore, in *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim argues that ‘imitation’ should be perceived as the consequence rather than the cause of the coercive nature of a social fact (Durkheim, 1895/1982: 57). The obligatory, coercive nature of ‘social facts’ manifests in individuals because it is imposed upon them, most notably through educational means. He maintains that society (and the social group) shapes and influences the individual who in turn must conform to societal “norms” in order to be accepted into society and thus avoid oppression.

In a school environment, individuality can be expressed via school-dress, talk, type of mobile phone, hair-style, sexual orientation, manner of speaking, and in a myriad of other ways. It is understandable that insecure and emotionally vulnerable students making the transition from primary to secondary school would tend to “go with the flow” and conform to social expectations by dressing and behaving in a similar manner to the majority. However, in later years the desire to express individuality often manifests in rebellious behaviour against family structure, the educational system and even the student’s social group in the school. The tension between

wanting to belong and yet, at the same time, maintain independence as the concept of self-identity increases with the passing of the years. Carducci (2009), in describing this phenomenon, points to Erikson's Stages of Development, and states:

... a crisis occurs at each stage of development. For Erikson these crises are of a psychosocial nature, because they involve psychological needs of the individual (i.e. psycho-) conflicting with the expectations of society (i.e. – social (p.188).

Moreover, it should be noted that the level of integration, which the individual has with their immediate social group, has the potential to influence the degree of social acceptance (and potentially overcome the social tension resulting from non-conformist traits). Thus, for adolescents, the degree to which they are socially accepted can be influenced by different variables such as the number of classes shared with peers, time spent with the peers both within and outside school time, years bonding with influential members of that group, common shared goals and objectives and a shared social background with principal members of that same social group.

Clearly, adolescents who have not integrated with the social grouping and consequently not benefited from integrative acceptance are more likely to experience alienation at best, if not become a sustained target of physical and/or online bullying at worst. However, in certain cases, rather than choosing to fully conform to group norms, the adolescent may deliberately choose to remain on the periphery of the social group or within a certain social boundary, conforming to some social expectations, but not becoming fully aligned to the social group in which they exist. Mallinckrodt (2000) uses the term 'avoidant strategy' to describe this and considers it to be a defence mechanism whereby the individual seeks to avoid being completely drawn into a social group, but can avail of its resources when required. This same behaviour is described by Holmes (2001) as follows: 'The avoidant strategy means staying near to a protective other, but not too near for fear of rejection or aggression – here a measure of intimacy is sacrificed in which affect is 'deactivated' (p.3). Thus, some of the desired social regulation and integration is achieved and contrary expressions of independence are moderated, if not entirely sublimated. This perspective is valuable as it provides us with insight as to why non-conformity may result in some adolescents becoming the target of cyberbullying behaviour whilst

others who have learnt to “give and take” (and are thereby more integrated) with their immediate social circle do not suffer the same outcome. An example of complete social alienation is provided by the Phoebe Prince case, where a vulnerable adolescent who was seeking to establish social roots but was perceived by others to have ignored the cultural norms and rules of her new environment, was consequently alienated and exposed to the harassment and extreme levels of bullying both physically and online, with fatal consequences.

One concept that is closely linked to ‘social facts’ – (the social obligations and expectations of the social grouping) - is that of the ‘collective conscience’. This concept refers to the fact that the individual must not only conform in their behaviour, but also fully accept that which is deemed to be acceptable by the greater society of which the individual is a part. What this means in essence is that the individual’s morality is subject to influence from the greater social majority. It is akin to the old adage “when in Rome” which applies as a bias rule in any given society. In his book, ‘The Division of Labour in Society’ Durkheim clearly links ‘collective conscience’ to a common sense of morality by stating:

The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the collective or common conscience ... It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them.

(Durkheim, 1983/1964: 79-80).

It has been suggested by Stones (2008) that this ‘collective conscience’ or totality of beliefs of a given society can have its own ‘life’ or culture. This is of significance when analysing technology-mediated behaviour. For example, social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace reveal groups of individuals united by common interests, such as ‘friends’, ‘likes’, ‘dislikes’ and shared agendas. In many cases, these ‘dislikes’ can take a more personal tone where individually-shared dislike of one person’s behaviour or personal beliefs “justifies” a mutually-accepted attack on the individual’s personality, which has become known as ‘trolling’. Thus, it could be argued that the ‘collective conscience’ of these sub groups justifies (in the individual’s eyes) the right to punish a particular individual who is perceived as being in breach of the accepted normative behaviour.

However, it is possible (and very likely) that an individual whose behaviour may appear consistent with the collective conscience of their social group may in fact not fully embrace the moral beliefs of that group to the same degree as others. For example, it is possible that some members of social networking websites may choose to imitate negative online behaviour in order to ensure their social acceptance within the group, rather than because they embrace the prevailing viewpoint. In other words, in some cases, individualism can be temporarily sublimated to the social expectations of the group.

Additional support for the contention that the collective conscience may not be as unified as Durkheim would purport it to be, is provided by the fact that an individual's behaviour in a group setting can differ considerably from their behaviour when separated from that group. For example, some people take part in violent behaviour under the common protection and guise of mass action. However, separated from the group that same behaviour is avoided, as these actions, if exposed at a personal level, would bring shame and embarrassment. Thus, it would appear that in some cases the collective conscience could have the potential to facilitate moral disengagement on the part of some who would, in an individual context, behave differently.

This phenomenon of distinction between personal versus group behaviour is even more evident in the case of group online harassment of an individual as cyberbullying behaviour has specific characteristics that facilitate the anonymity of the perpetrator and work against the target. For example, not only do the perpetrator and intended target not engage face-to-face, but also the deliberate intention to cause distress and wound the target is covert and hidden from public scrutiny. The target may not even know the perpetrator and the attack can be carried out in an anonymous manner regardless of geographic location and time constraints. As Mura (2011) notes:

Being unable to see and perceive the counterpart of an ICT mediated interaction influences the activation of the cognitive mechanisms associated with anonymity, reducing the impact of empathy and facilitating the activation of moral disengagement strategies ... In the case of cyberbullying, moral disengagement seems to play a double role, not only allowing bullies to justify

their actions, but explaining the relevance of the counterpart invisibility in facilitating certain aggressive behaviours (p.36).

Consequently, it follows that the stronger the negative group feeling towards an individual who is perceived to have transgressed the social norms of the group, the greater the perceived “carte blanche” or lack of empathy within the ‘collective consciousness’ of the group towards the individual.

Just as European society in the time of Durkheim was undergoing huge social changes, moving from a predominantly agrarian to industrialized society (which brought about deep ramifications for past norms and individual standing in society), so too 21<sup>st</sup> century society has been radically transformed through telecommunications and ever-evolving Internet-based technologies. For example, technology facilitates faster development and communication of opinion to a wider audience than has ever previously been the case and therefore represents a social upheaval in terms of information dissemination as well as group think outcomes. For example, technology-enabled ability to speed the dissemination of opinion and thus create a mass viewpoint in a short period of time may enable hysterical responses that can have devastating outcomes including the mass social rejection and ostracization of an individual. Durkheim alludes to this when he states that 'great upheavals in society, like great popular wars, sharpen collective feelings' (p.223).

Many cyberbullying cases typify the wide and consistent dissemination of negative collective opinion by technology. One prominent case that received worldwide attention and highlighted the potential tragic impact of cyberbullying was seen in the case of Phoebe Prince. Her interaction with ex-boyfriends of girls who were members of a strong social unit brought about continuous hostile responses. As a group, they retaliated against her with sustained online character denigration, insults and threats, thus creating an environment which Phoebe Prince found intolerable and which caused her to contemplate suicide as an option. Although multiple factors influenced her eventual death by suicide, the social facts and behaviour demonstrated by the perpetrators are consistent with the collective conscience group dynamic as described by Durkheim. In dating ex-boyfriends of girls within a dominant social group, Phoebe Prince unwittingly exacerbated tension and hostile feelings amongst

individual members of that same group which inevitably led to social disharmony directed at her. This is consistent with the view propounded by scholars such as Durkheim who maintain that those who violate a group's social norms (or that which is deemed to be acceptable behaviour) run the risk of punishment from that same social unit.

### **2.10.2 Social Rejection**

One other issue that relates to the bullying dynamic (either face-to-face or cyberbullying) is social rejection or exclusion of the bullying target from a social group. In the literature, the desire for acceptance and belonging is considered to be an essential aspect of the human condition (Fiske, 2004; Leary and Baumeister, 2000). The need for social acceptance and bonding with significant others stems from early childhood development and has been examined by Erikson, Freud, Bowlby and significant others in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy. From the earliest stages of development, children seek attachment to a significant caregiver, which broadens to a need for acceptance and integration by social groups in later years. Rejection by those social groups has been shown to exert a significant impact on the individual's self-esteem and emotional stability (e.g. Baumeister, 1991; Baumeister and Tice, 1990; Leary, 1990; Nezlek et al., 1997; Williams, Cheung, and Choi, 2000).

Cairns et al., (in Galen and Underwood, 1997) found that the bullying-related social exclusion and ostracism was more prevalent among girls and moreover that it increased in frequency as they progressed through the various stages of adolescence. Social rejection can have a profound effect on self-esteem, particularly as social relationships and social bonding play such a significant role in the psychological well being of individuals. In fact, medical research has shown that rejection by significant others can cause psychological and neurotic symptoms to manifest in the rejected party. For example, a study by Beeri and Lev-Wiesel (2012) of five hundred and eleven students found that 35% experienced some form of social rejection resulting in depression, symptoms of post-traumatic stress and avoidance in social activities. The study also found that girls experienced higher-levels of stress than their male peers when ostracised from their social groups.

Scholars such as Fiske and Yamamoto (2005) assert that an individual's acceptance or rejection by a social group is determined by two main factors. These are: (i) the perceived *intent* for good or ill by the "outsider" towards individuals within the group; and (ii) if the latter is the case, then the perceived *capability* of the individual to carry out a negative act towards the group or group members. In short, if the individual is perceived as a threat towards the stability of the group, then they are more likely to suffer social rejection by the group. With that in mind, it could be argued that this perspective is a protective mechanism based on primeval instinct for group and social survival and is in line with Durkheim's collective conscience theory as previously discussed.

### **2.10.3 Social Disharmony & Anomie**

The role of normative behaviour in social regulation is repeatedly emphasised by Durkheim. As previously noted, he contends that challenges to normative behaviour are typically associated with dramatic changes within a given society, changes that cause the norms relating to social regulation to be displaced or lost. Social etiquette, morality and values based on traditional norms of social interaction may be lost in the world of social media. Without proper regulation, such etiquette, morality and values are subject to the individual's composition. The social disharmony that results from such challenges to previously accepted norms can produce a social state that Durkheim refers to as 'anomie' and which he describes as a lack of social regulation, increased individualism and a greater prevalence of social deviancy. Clearly, the greater the social changes the greater the resulting state of 'anomie'. The next section looks at Durkheim's theory on suicide and its related links to social behaviour

### **2.10.4 Suicide**

In his book 'Suicide' (1897), Durkheim details the consequences of anomic breakdown in society - social and moral deviancy, greater rates of crime and an increase in the rate of suicide. His sociological perspective on suicide is of particular interest to a discussion of cyberbullying consequences since, using a sociological construct, he draws parallels to the links between social dynamics and categories of suicide. . Though society has changed dramatically since his time, the basis of his theories on suicide bear as much relevance regarding human nature and modern society as they did in his era.

Durkheim observed that the rate of suicide shows remarkable constancy over time in a systematic way from society to society and that there are no suicidal boundaries when it comes to gender, religion, class or economic status. Secondly, he categorised suicide into three social forms: egoistical, altruistic and anomic. For the purpose of this dissertation the egoistic and anomic classifications are discussed. These particular forms of suicide relate to individuals or groups who are marginalized by society or larger groups within society as a whole, the outcast(s) - those who cross boundaries and rules stipulated by the larger established group or simply those who, for whatever reason, cannot connect to a unifying and supportive group. As other forms of suicide, (e.g. virtuous, romantic, copycat and the altruistic form of suicide, which fall within his sociological classification), bear little relevance to the issue of cyberbullying, they are not considered in this discussion.

Durkheim does not perceive suicide as being an individual act. Rather, than viewing it from a personal or psychological perspective, he places emphasis on the '*social fact*' of suicide – i.e. the act is perceived as a social phenomenon rather than a pathological condition. Thus, suicide results from of a lack of social solidarity or social integration and can be viewed as either 'anomic' or 'egoistic' suicide.

#### **2.10.4.1 Anomic Suicide**

A certain type of suicide, 'anomic' suicide, results from the breakdown of the "status quo" or social stability in the life of the individual.

Craib (1997) in alluding to Durkheim's concept of 'anomic' suicide states:

Anomic suicide occurs when the rules that govern social life fail and we are left not knowing how to behave, or what is appropriate; this often happens during periods of rapid social change, which will be reflected in individual lives (p.31).

Social integration ceases to exist when the old rules seemingly fail, and with no new social rules to compensate, the marginalized individual is at a loss to cope with their social dilemma. In addition, Durkheim showed that suicidal tendencies can be

influenced by other factors such as family size, nuclear family structure and support within the family group.

#### **2.10.4.2 Egoistic Suicide**

Sennett (2006) defines egoistic distress as a particular type of 'social emotion' that results from 'distress at not belonging to a group' and, at the extreme level can lead to 'egoistic suicide' (p.xvii). This type of distress results from the individual being misplaced from society or facing social isolation which results from being deemed to be outside the 'norm' according to the 'social facts' of any given society (e.g. those who contravene what is perceived as 'normal' sexual orientation in certain social groupings may suffer great distress and social ostracization.)

Today, the speed by which an individual can suffer that social emotion is increased to a greater degree than before due to online communication technologies that can be used to disseminate negative comments on an individual to a wider audience than was ever previously available. This form of cyberbullying is used to marginalize and oppress an individual or individuals. The resulting alienation and constant online denigration of the individual/s character can create a pressured situation that has the potential to result in death by suicide. Durkheim has described such an outcome as 'egoistic' suicide – suggesting that it results from the fact that the individual no longer finds a "raison d'être" for their existence (p.124) and the individual identity finds no basis for acceptance in society. The complex issue of identity is discussed in more detail in the following section.

### **2.11 Defining Identity**

Despite the fact that identity is frequently referenced in everyday discourse, it is difficult to define the meaning of the word in a way that adequately captures the wide range of its present meanings.

Definitions of identity vary according to the tradition of the researcher, but one that is of interest is that provided by Katzenstein (1996) who suggests that the term identity references 'mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other' (p.59). Similarly, Jenkins (1996) asserts that 'identity refers to the ways in which individuals

and collectivities are distinguished in their social relations with other individuals and collectivities' (p.4), whilst Kowert and Legro (1996) consider that 'identities are ... prescriptive representations of political actors themselves and of their relationships to each other' (p.453). These definitions are of particular interest because, despite semantic differences, they reference the fact that identity is mutually constructed in the context of social relationships with others.

Erikson (1968) was one of the earliest psychologists to focus on identity. He makes the distinction between the psychological sense of continuity, known as *the self* or *ego identity*, the personal characteristics or idiosyncrasies that distinguish one person from the next, known as the *personal identity*, and the collection of social roles that a person might play, known as the *social identity*. This latter form of identity shall now be discussed in more detail.

### **2.11.1 Social Identity**

Social identity, involves the differing personas or social roles that individuals assume according to differing contexts and how they identify with group identities and how these are expressed in order to reinforce group affiliation. The socially embedded nature of identity has long been recognized by social scientists (e.g. Cooley, 1902). In fact, the twentieth century philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934) argued that the self actually appears through social behaviour, or that social identity affects the formation of personal identity. Thus, he perceived the self as being a product of social interactions.

Mead (1934) further extends our understanding of the social construction of identity by contending that the self is established through communication with others. It is his contention that in the first instance we are an object to others, but then when we take the perspective of other people through language we become an object to ourselves. Although Mead was theorizing about these issues as far back as the 1920s, his perspectives clearly take on new currency in the technology-enabled communication era. They resonate with more recent perspectives on the role of online communication in influencing identity development, such as that of Moinian (2006) who contends that:

... our identity does not originate from inside, but from the social realm, where people swim in a sea of language and other signs, a sea that is invisible to us because it is the very medium of our existence as social beings ... (p.16).

In an online context, such language and signs may incorporate references to influential peers, choices and opinions, each of which serves as a marker that assists in the construction of a perceived identity. In the world of online communication a person's social identity takes on a virtual reality that allows the individual to create his or her own self-identity. The individual is identified and "judged" by what they say about themselves and what information others may have about them within the "real" world. In support of this, Moinian observes that:

It is very common to name drop in diaries by attaching a list of friends and their email addresses. Children regard their friends and their style and choice of consumption as a good enough marker to represent themselves in their diaries. (p.16).

It is unsurprising that adolescents might use other individuals and peer friendships as markers to validate themselves, their choice of music, social culture etc and in doing so to define and validate their identity. What is different, however, is the fact that technology is now used to speed that validation by disseminating the information to a wider audience than hitherto possible, to reinforce others perception of themselves and in doing so to situate themselves in the eyes of others, in short to communicate their identity. That digitally constructed identity has a number of specific characteristics that are relevant to the study of cyberbullying.

### **2.11.2 Digital (Online) Identity**

Digital or online identity is the psychological identity of the individual in the technology-enabled cyberspace environment. It has been described by Windley (2005) as data that uniquely portrays and contains information about the subject's relationships to other entities. Thus, the philosophical concepts of personal and social identity and their influence on each other are played out on social networking websites. For example, Facebook can be viewed as an example of communicative identity on an interpersonal level (i.e. as a performance of the self based on already established social roles).

In parallel with the offline world, digital identity has become increasingly multi-faceted and fluid as individuals move from one online social context (such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs), to the other, adopting different roles in each context – what Zurcher (1977) terms the “mutable self”. Scholars were quick to recognize the potential for self-multiplicity afforded by the Internet. Turkle (1995; 1999) suggests that our experiences with computers and our online experiences are challenging our culture’s traditional notion of identity and has significantly changed the way we think about identity. For example, unlike face-to-face interaction, online interaction provides an opportunity for one to be anonymous, invisible and multiple, and most important of all, users can express unexplored aspects of the self. This is particularly true in multi-user domains or online role-playing games such as Second Life. According to Turkle (1995), the sense of identity that emerges from our relationships with computers and our experiences online is one of a fluid, multiple, and de-centered disposition.

Although true anonymity is becoming increasingly harder to achieve online, it is nevertheless the case that people often feel a sense of anonymity when they share information online (Kennedy, 2006). This feeling may engender a sense of liberation from the social constraints that are typically experienced when interacting in offline social settings. Thus, it appears that online environments may encourage new forms of identity expression.

#### **2.11.2.1 Concerns regarding Online Identities**

However, for those such as Turkle (1997), the authenticity of that expressed online identity is a matter of concern. Having examined the profundity of peoples’ connections with the objects of their lives, and in particular how the construction of identity is informed by our relationships and interactions with these objects, she contends that:

we make technologies, our objects, but then the objects of our lives shape us in turn... it is not clear what we are becoming when we look upon them – or that we yet know how to see through them (p.82).

Her primary concern centres around the ways that computers and online experiences are influencing our sense of true identity, and she reasons that if people need to feel

connected, in order to feel and in order to be themselves, then an unhealthy sense of identity has been formed. More specifically, she is concerned with the lack of reflection that is often associated with electronically enabled communications and the associated need to be connected in order to know what to think. Building on this point, she posits that our utilization of new technologies to wire into society and our online experiences seems to have somehow moved us away from deliberateness and away from the genuine self-reflections that are essential to discovering an identity. As she states:

The more we manipulate ourselves and the more our artifacts seek pride of place beside us as social and psychological equals, the more we find the issue of authenticity confronting us (2003, p.9)

That lack of authenticity stems from the fact that because we now have a generation that has grown up in a communications culture, but not necessarily a culture of self-reflection, they have never formed an authentic identity (Turkle, 2007). This manifests in a dependency to be connected to relevant others who are perceived as socially important and then to uncritically absorb and replicate their views and behaviour in an online context. Therefore, such a dependency may inhibit the development of the individual's authentic identity. Aside from the fact that in such a scenario the individual never forms an authentic identity and simply reflects and imitates the views and behaviour of another person or the collective group, such behaviour has the potential to contribute to the dissemination of destructive opinions and behaviour. Whether this is the case or not is of course dependent on the moral views and behaviour of the group with which the individual identifies. However, as Schöpflin (2001) points out, in every system of identity construction there has to be a hierarchy of norms, as well as lateral, reciprocal relations and this requires people to be "judgmental", in as much as they must have the criteria to condemn certain kinds of behaviour or judgments and approve of others.

In line with the views of Mead (1934) on communication as central to perceived identity, he contends that the articulation of identity, of collective norms, of the value hierarchy and its criteria are encoded in various discourses. These modes of expression are specific to the community that has generated them and are simultaneously a form of recognition and an instrument of cultural reproduction. For

example, if a group of adolescents choose to target a particular person and to disseminate negative comments about that person on social networking sites, then the articulation of their individual identities will be dependent on participating in that behaviour and thus reinforcing the group identity.

It is undoubtedly easier for adolescents to identify with an online group as collective identity provides a sense of security for its members. As Schöpflin notes, it makes the world meaningful, permitting collective communication and constructing collective forms of knowledge, but this rationality is necessarily bounded, as it is the rationality of the particular thought-world in which it is produced and reproduced. This therefore is where the problem lies, as that bounded rationality unquestioningly accepted by those whose own digital identity is closely tied to the group view. It underscores the unease of researchers such as Turkle, regarding the lack of self-reflection that prevents the development of an authentic identity and instead results in the unthinking assumption of the group view and participation in accepted group behaviour. That lack of self-reflection is consequently the starting point for group cyberbullying behaviour.

Technologies affect how our identities function and can exert an important influence on the individual and on society. Historically, social identity was based upon the person's tangible attributes and immediate environment. In an online context, that is no longer the case and identity is formulated via language and association. It is based on participation in blogs, social networks and online communities, all of which contribute to the formation of online social identity.

An adolescent's digital identity (as indicated through their online behaviour) can differ significantly from their offline identity. Unlike face-to-face interaction, online interaction provides an opportunity for a person to be anonymous, invisible and multiple and most important of all, users can express unexplored aspects of the self. People often feel a sense of anonymity when they share information online and this may encourage new forms of identity expression, but the authenticity of that expressed online identity remains a matter of concern.

There is concern in the literature regarding the fact that the mass utilization and dependency on new technologies to wire into society has moved us away from the genuine self-reflections that are essential to discovering an identity. This manifests in a reliance on and the uncritical absorption of the views of referent others and the imitation of their views and behaviour in an online context. That lack of self-reflection prevents the development of an authentic identity and instead results in the unthinking assumption of the group view and participation in accepted group behaviour. Thus, that lack of self-reflection that frequently characterizes online interactions is the starting point for group cyberbullying behaviour.

## **2.12 Rene Girard & the Philosophy of Victimization**

Whilst Durkheim's theories of suicide provide us with a valuable understanding of the social dynamics that can result in alienation of the individual from society, another, more contemporary social philosopher, Rene Girard, provides us with complementary insights that can expand our understanding of the causal factors and underlying social dynamics that predict negative social behaviour such as bullying. Therefore, in conjunction with the theories of Durkheim, the work of Girard can be used to deepen our understanding of the social factors that influence the cyberbullying phenomenon.

In his seminal book *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), Girard sets out his understanding of the dynamics that lead to victimization. He contends that the genesis of victimization is two individuals desiring the same thing with further individuals then emulating this pattern of desire. A core tenet of his philosophy is that such desire is aroused by the other party and not by the object that is desired. As a consequence, the object is quickly forgotten and the rivals no longer imitate each other's desires for the object, but now imitate each other's antagonism. In the same way that they originally desired the same object, they now unite in wanting to destroy the same enemy. As a result, they focus their violence on an arbitrary victim and a unanimous antipathy now grows mimetically against another individual.

Four pillars of Girard's philosophy of victimization are of particular relevance to this discussion of cyberbullying. These are 'Mimetic Theory', 'Triangular Desire', 'Sacrifice' and 'The Scapegoat', and his understanding of the concept of persecution. While these theories are themselves intertwined, each provides us with different

insights regarding the underlying social tensions that frequently exist within adolescent social groups that can result in aggressive behavioural outcomes.

The first theory, 'mimesis', relates to imitative rivalry and is considered a predictor of social violence. As O' Higgins-Norman and Connolly (2011) suggest: 'At the heart of Girard's understanding of violence among people is his argument that rivalry leads us into conflictual behaviour.' It is best described by Girard (1977) as follows:

If the appropriative gesture of an individual named A is rooted in the imitation of an individual named B, it means that A and B must reach together for one and the same object. They become rivals for that object ... [and] ... violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means (p.9).

In a bullying, or cyberbullying context, what this would imply is that individuals who are striving for a similar end (e.g. to be perceived as the dominant member or the most liked in a particular social grouping); in other words, they may try to outdo each other via negative treatment of a potential threat to the desired social order. Thus, Girard (1977) perceives violence not as an original phenomenon but as a by-product of mimetic rivalry. In his view, 'Violence is mimetic rivalry itself becoming violent as the antagonists who desire the same object keep thwarting each other and desiring the object all the more' (pp. 12-13). In a cyberbullying context, this may manifest as a number of aggressors using communications technology to send or post increasingly nasty comments about an individual, with each aggressor seeking to outdo the other in terms of level of offensiveness for the sake of social popularity.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the individual who initiates cyberbullying attacks, perceives in their victim (the mediator) some personal attribute that they themselves admire and desire to have. This attribute may be social identification, popularity or any attribute that is perceived as being of great value to the individual. Therefore, it would appear that the real focus of the aggressor is not in fact the individual victim, but rather the valued attribute that they possess and which is the actual object of desire. For example, in the case of Phoebe Prince, jealousy and rivalry were contributing factors by a cohesive, strong-knit, female social group against an attractive girl who was popular with male adolescents in the same school.

Her popularity was the attribute of value as perceived by her attackers and their hatred of her derived from secret admiration of this attribute.

Moreover, the victim is perceived by the community of antagonists as being fully responsible for the troubles caused. As Girard notes:

The victim cannot be perceived as innocent and impotent ... [but] must be perceived ... as a creature truly responsible for all the disorders and ailments of the community

Once the 'victim' is found to be guilty, it follows that the threat must be removed in order for harmony to return to the social group. The 'continued presence is therefore undesirable and it must be destroyed or driven away ... by the community itself' (p.15).

One way of achieving social harmony is by uniting against the common perceived threat, rather than dealing with the individual alone. Thus, Girard asserts that social violence can take the mythical form of a 'ritual sacrifice' of the intended victim, which can be viewed as 'a collective action of the entire community, which purifies itself of its own disorder through the unanimous immolation of a victim' (p.11). This results in the 'scapegoat effect' in which the social group 'now have a single purpose, which is to prevent the scapegoat from harming them, by expelling and destroying him' (p.12).

This 'scapegoat effect' provides an interesting extension of Durkheim's perspective on collective conscience. It is valuable to our understanding of cyberbullying dynamics as it re-emphasises the importance of social harmony and goes some way towards explaining the strength of collective negative response (either offline or online) that those who are perceived as having threatened the prevailing social order are likely to experience.

Interestingly, the selection of those who will become the target of such persecution is not always based on obvious criteria. While he contends that the further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution, Girard

points out that such deviations from what is perceived as normal in any one social group may not always be easily definable. He states:

Extreme characteristics ultimately attract collective destruction at some time or other, extremes not just of wealth or poverty, but also of success and failure, beauty and ugliness, vice and virtue, the ability to please and to displease. The weakness of women, children, and old people, as well as the strength of the most powerful, becomes weakness in the face of the crowd (p.113).

In practice, what this means is that the wide spectrum of deviations from what any one social group or society perceive as being the norm has the effect of making it more difficult to identify in advance who is likely to become a potential target of cyberbullying attacks and consequently more difficult to protect from such attacks. However, it also points to the need for the development of greater awareness on the part of educators and parents that those adolescents who benefit from positive extremes (such as success, wealth, beauty, popularity etc.) are equally likely to suffer cyberbullying attacks similar to those adolescents who embody negative extremes.

### **2.13 Summary**

In general terms, the value of Durkheim and Girard's contributions to this examination of cyberbullying lies in the fact that their theories provide us with a greater understanding and insight into the complex dynamics, causal factors and nuanced aspects of social aggression. As such they provide a basic foundation in understanding modern concepts of social aggression and thus provide a useful backdrop to the issue of non-reporting. Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour (1985) was used as a basis from which to understand factors that either inhibited or influenced gifted adolescents' decision to report their experiences of cyberbullying behaviour. The focus of this theory is to identify attitudinal beliefs, subjective norms and perceived control on behaviour – factors which are influential in an adolescent's decision-making process. This theory, therefore, may help in understanding the influences governing between intent to report (but not doing so), and actual reporting behaviour. The insights that they provide are not context-specific, and therefore contribute a valuable starting-ground into studying the social dynamics that surround the technology-mediated communication environment. As that environment is relatively new and constantly evolving, it is worth turning our attention to how it has

evolved, how communication technology is used by Irish adolescents and some of its accompanying concerns.

## **CHAPTER 3: ADOLESCENT USAGE OF INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY**

### **3.0 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, a number of sociological theories were examined in order to provide a framework within which to situate our understanding of cyberbullying behaviour and in particular to provide insights into the relationships that apply to the technology-mediated communication environment.

The development of that Internet-enabled communications environment is a relatively recent phenomenon and one that has brought with it accompanying concerns relating to technology usage. Given that the phenomenon of cyberbullying cannot exist without the availability of technological devices and the availability of related communications media, it is important to study and understand the technical world of the cyberbully and the environment in which they thrive. Though many adolescents naturally strive to communicate with peers using available modern technologies without malice or intent, the same technologies are available and adopted by both perpetrators and targets of cyberbullying. Therefore, no study of cyberbullying would be complete without reference to these technologies and a discussion of their implications for adolescents.

This chapter discusses ICT (Information and Communications Technology), its historical background and continual evolution from the early days of ‘Arpanet’ to the modern-day ‘Internet’. After discussing the historical backdrop to the technology behind cyberbullying, current devices and media used in Ireland are discussed. The mobile phone, (in particular the modern ubiquitous ‘Smartphone’) is now considered a basic commodity or necessity by many Irish adolescents and technological acquisition is notably widening to an ever-younger market. Such availability is, in part, due to the fact that older and more basic mobile phones become cheaper to acquire as the communications market continually expands and retails more sophisticated mobile devices. In a similar manner, broadband development in Ireland has remarkably improved since the days of simple and extremely slow modems and the Irish market for broadband usage has dramatically increased in the last twenty years. This widespread broadband availability has permeated every area of Irish

society (including most homes, schools, libraries and Internet Cafes), and modern broadband provides fast and easy access to the Internet and social websites such as Twitter and Facebook (to name a few). Therefore, a statistical comparative analysis on Internet usage by Irish adolescents and the post-adolescent generation will be undertaken and its implications for the current research discussed.

This chapter also identifies in detail the extent of usage and type of electronic/e-communication (phone, text and email) adopted by modern Irish adolescents. It provides a critical analysis of the time these same adolescents spend online in comparison to other countries, their technical competence and understanding of these technologies. Mobile/Smartphone usage is discussed in detail, as is Internet usage, and a statistical comparative analysis explores such usage by age and gender. The implications, particularly in the context of this study are discussed.

Adolescence can be a critical and traumatic time of self-development as younger people gradually strive to be independent and develop their own identity; they seek freedom to make choices in friendships amongst peers, self-expression in dress and conversation, and yet are co-dependent on approval and support of their closest peers as they seek a form of identity. Such guaranteed support can require mutual sharing of opinions, modes of conversation, behaviour and lifestyle in general. Though not a cause for concern amongst many adolescent, nonetheless, such social dynamics can have a negative influence and impact on individuals pertaining to moral codes of communication and behaviour.

These particular causes for concern are explored and the problematic issues for adolescents using these new technologies are discussed – in particular, social websites and the concerns surrounding such usage. The dichotomy between their advanced technological skills and their equal lack of maturity in using the Internet as a communication medium is discussed in detail.

Figure 3.1 provides a diagrammatic summary of this chapter.

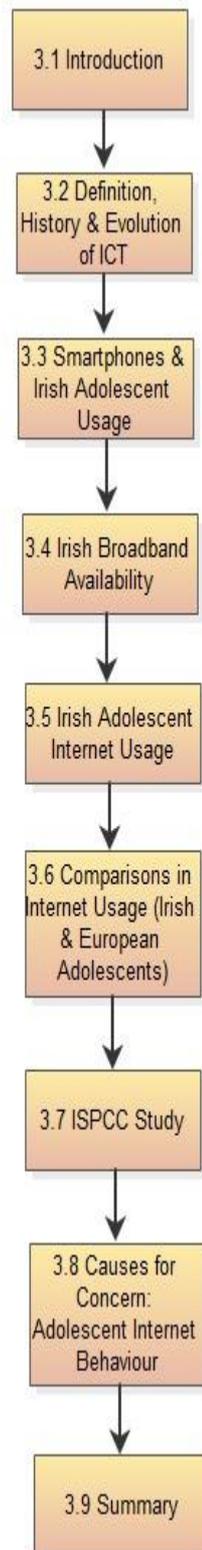


Figure 3.1 Chapter Structure.

### **3.1 Definition, History & Evolution of ICT**

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) refers to technology-enabled provision and communication of information. Historically speaking, public adoption and use of ICT is a relatively new phenomenon. Its gradual development took place in America after World War Two. Initial interest in the development of these technologies was confined to specialist Information Scientists whose focus was scientific research or the use of these technologies for military communication purposes. For example, the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) was the world's first operational packet switching network and the progenitor of what was to become the global Internet. The network was initially funded by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA, later DARPA) within the U.S. Department of Defence for use by its projects at universities and research laboratories in the US (Couldry, 2012).

The 'World Wide Web' or 'Internet', (as it is more commonly referred today), stemmed from the Arpanet in the late 1960s. Arpanet in its simplest form was a series of computer servers or "gateways" – (today referred to as "routers") which, in a web-like manner, were interconnected computers serving a primary function - they facilitated the sharing of information to a group or groups of scientists and academics with a common agenda. Originally, data accessed through these "gateways" or "routers" was restricted to scientists sharing common objectives and working on shared projects. Though initially restricted to one-one communications, the concept behind development of the Arpanet was to enable multi-way communication between terminals, the predecessors to modern computer systems (Taylor, 1999).

As time developed, scientists and academics realized the potential of sharing data and communicating across these small private clusters of networked computers on a larger scale. Tim Berners-Lee is accredited with leading the design project of what we now know as the 'World Wide Web' in the early 1990s where a standard network protocol was developed to allow communication between the newly-emerging computer networks. The key advantage to this new technology was that data and email could now be accessed through a centralised database remotely rather than having to travel and access the same data locally, thus saving time, expense and effort (Couldry, 2012; Tanenbaum, 1996).

Early use of the Internet was restricted to government, academic and scientific research. However, by 1995, this restriction was officially lifted when the government-funded National Science Foundation ended sponsorship of the ‘Internet backbone’. Independent Internet Service Providers had already been offering network service support to local groups and this continued to expand. Independent commercial network providers such as AOL, Prodigy and CompuService offered network services to individual subscribers (Howe, 2012).

Much has changed since that time and no one in the USA of the 1960s era could have foreseen the degree to which the developed world has now become dependent on communications technologies, or the degree to which access to those communication technologies has transcended social class, culture and age groups in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For example, communications technologies have changed the way we interact both socially and in the workplace, with both positive and negative outcomes. From a positive perspective, Internet enabled conversations and data transfer can take place in real-time and are both location and time independent for the recipient or reader of such information. The Internet has opened up an ever-growing and vast online resource for the worldwide acquisition and dissemination of information (e.g. via search engines and social media such as Twitter). It is a vast virtual world enabling access to global data and personal communication with little restriction at any time of the day. Free wireless access is now available in ever-increasing venues or “Wi-Fi hot spots” throughout the world – airports, cafes, restaurants, hotels, libraries, etc. In many cases this access is free of charge to anyone with an internet-ready device either locally or when abroad. A current trend in the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the design of smaller mobile phone and computer devices which are pre-enabled for wireless internet access, such as tablets, smartphones, pocket PCs and various GPS devices (Howe, 2012). Communication speeds have become increasingly faster with the advent of fourth-generation (4G) mobile technology. Modern fibre-optic and broadband technologies provide faster accessibility on the Internet than ever before. Routing services are provided by Internet Services Providers (ISPs) competing for greater market control of an ever-increasing, younger, Internet-savvy demograph. Such ISP companies include Eircom, UPC, Vodafone, Meteor, amongst others.

Whilst the primary motivation behind the creation of the Internet was based around research and communication by professionals, the development of the World Wide Web resulted in the opening of the online environment for commercial use. This in turn enabled the development and proliferation of user-oriented services, which (since 2006) have given rise to a social media revolution (Fuchs 2017), as evidenced through the significant use of social websites by the younger, so-called “X Generation”. Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Ask.fm and many other social sites, provide common ground for users of the Internet to communicate and discuss a myriad of issues. Users of these sites can choose to use their true identity or create fake accounts in a bid to remain anonymous. Tim Berners-Lee stressed the importance of maintaining this new Internet technology as a simple system with simple rules that would be acceptable to all based on “egalitarian principles” for all individuals to share. His altruistic philosophy was that this new open global information system should be easy to use and free to all. In his book ‘Weaving the Web’, he states:

The web is more a social creation than a technical one. I designed it for a social effect — to help people work together — and not as a technical toy. The ultimate goal of the Web is to support and improve our web like existence in the world (Berners-Lee, 2004 p123).

However, in seeing his creation develop, he also perceived a potential dark-side to this medium of communication. In an interview with Ian Katz of ‘The Guardian’ newspaper, he stated:

The amount of control you have over somebody if you can monitor internet activity is amazing ... You get to know every detail, you get to know, in a way, more intimate details about their life than any person that they talk to because often people will confide in the internet as they find their way through medical websites ... or as an adolescent finds their way through a website about homosexuality, wondering what they are and whether they should talk to people about it (The Guardian, 2012).

In its natural form, the term “communication” and “data sharing” suggest a positive role where (at least) two people are in harmony with a common goal and sharing knowledge to achieve that goal. However, whilst ICT admittedly confers many advantages, it also has the potential to be used in a negative fashion and can be used

as a virtual weapon against others. Berners-Lee, in an interview with the BBC, stated: ‘I think it is human nature, we have always had a wonderful side ... and a dark side ... and the Web is fairly accessible to those who wish to exploit it’ (BBC, 2014). He further commented that it was ‘staggering’ that people ‘who clearly must have been brought up like anybody else will suddenly become very polarised in their opinions, will suddenly become very hateful rather than very loving.’ (BBC, 2014). This is particularly evident in the case of adolescent cyberbullying where technology is used to deliberately hurt others.

Unlike actual physical weaponry, it is difficult to restrict negative use on social media sites, as the technology is widely available to all ages and classes of society. The barriers to entry are minimal and all that is required is access to the relevant medium (e.g. mobile phone, laptop, computer or tablet), Internet access and basic knowledge of how to use same. Furthermore, fake profiles or personal accounts can be setup to create anonymity or pseudo-anonymity.

One outcome of this is the increasingly pervasive nature of technology i.e. technology has not only pervaded communication and work situations but the increased awareness of the need for technical literacy has driven widespread adoption of ICT even amongst primary school children. This is evident in the fact that technology is embedded in early school curricula and as a result for most students today, technology is a ubiquitous and widely accepted part of their daily lives. As Gutmann (2001) states: ‘For people that have grown up within a digital environment the information technology is no longer a subject of discussion, but a simple fact of life’ (p.6).

New and ever-evolving “user-friendly” browsers and simple point-and-click data access facilitates “surfing the web” to all age groups and the increasing amount of information that can be found on the Internet on individual profiles have made the online virtual realm an ever more attractive medium for social purposes, most notably among adolescents and ever-growing younger age groups.

Cyberbullying is a technology-mediated behaviour that is enabled via mobile phones, Internet-enabled devices and social network services. One key aspect to all definitions of cyberbullying behaviour must always include reference to technology. It is defined by Hinduja and Patchin (2009; 2006) as: ‘wilful and repeated harm

inflicted *through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices* [italics mine]. These ‘electronic’ or technological devices and their uses are ever evolving and the definition of cyberbullying must therefore reflect new and future technological developments. The degree and ways in which those technologies and services are being adopted by adolescents and pre-teens is therefore of interest. In the following section, the adoption and usage of a number of these technologies in Ireland and the level of digital maturity that they reflect is discussed in more detail.

### **3.2 Smartphones and Irish Adolescent Usage**

In its simplest form, a smartphone is a mobile phone that is built on a mobile operating system and has more advanced computing and connectivity capabilities than a traditional phone. They contain the functionality of portable media players, compact digital cameras, GPS navigation units on one multi-use device. For many users they have replaced the older and more basic type of mobile phone. Many of the more recent generation of smartphones also include high-resolution touch screens and web browsers that display standard web pages as well as mobile optimised sites. The necessary high-speed data access is provided by Wi-Fi and mobile broadband. Examples of smartphones include Apples’ iPhone, Samsung Galaxy (android) phones and many Blackberry devices.

A 2011 Amárach Consulting survey of 811 people provides interesting insights into mobile phone usage in Ireland. It found that all 811 respondents of both genders and all ages owned a mobile phone of some form. More specifically, 37% of the sample between the ages of 15-24 owned a smartphone, with stronger adoption among males (45%) compared with females (29%). In terms of usage purpose, the study found that 83% of all smartphone users have accounts on Facebook and 56% conducted social networking on Facebook via the use of their smartphone. The highest users of this social application were females in the 15-24 age group. Moreover, 25% of all smartphone users access Twitter via their smartphone device. The wide availability of fast broadband connectivity, social networks and affordable mobile devices has enabled greater adoption and usage of these devices and as they continue to competitively reduce in price over time, it is likely that adoption of these devices will increase amongst the adolescent demographic.

### **3.3 Irish Broadband Availability**

Whilst smartphone usage is likely to increase into the future, broadband availability also influences pervasive Internet usage. The number of Irish households (72%) with Internet access at home was marginally ahead of the EU average (ECDL, 2012). Moreover, the proportion of people (64%) who are considered regular users, accessing the Internet at least once a week, was slightly ahead of the EU average. However, these figures included both broadband and the slower dial-up Internet access. Subsequently, the EDPR (2016) report revealed that 96% of Irish households were covered by fixed broadband, whilst 95% of households were covered by 3G and 90% by 4G mobile broadband. Broadband (rather than dial-up) adoption is necessary to enable high-speed technology-enabled communication, including the downloading of information and accessing of online services. Although in 2005, broadband adoption levels in Ireland remained at just 7.4% - (a figure which relegated Ireland to the bottom five of EU countries) - in the intervening years significant strides were made to successfully narrow that gap. For example, the OECD (2011) report found that 57% of Irish households had broadband access in 2010, a figure that is just three percentage points off the European average. Moreover, ComReg quarterly data research showed that Irish broadband subscriptions at the end of March 2011 had increased by 2.1% to 1.62 million from the previous quarter and 10.4% on the previous year, with mobile broadband enjoying considerable growth and now accounting for 36% of broadband subscriptions. These figures indicate a broad based increased level of digital maturity across Irish society and narrowing of the gaps with other European countries. This increased digital maturity is likely to have implications for adolescents in terms of their access to and usage of the Internet for communication purposes, as greater access to broadband and the accompanying normalisation of its usage within the home, at school and via mobile devices increases the opportunities for unmonitored usage by adolescents.

### **3.4 Irish Adolescent Internet Usage**

The landscape of social communication in Ireland has changed dramatically over the past number of years as traditional face-to-face communication has increasingly given way to online communication and virtual relationships. The Central Statistics Office (2015) Report on Internet usage shows a significant increase in such usage with the highest number of online users being in the 16-29 age group. The increased adoption

and frequency of usage by this age category is evident in the fact that in 2009, 57% of this age-group used the Internet ‘every day or almost every day’, whilst by 2014 this figure had risen to 86% (in the last three months prior to this study), thereby surpassing every other age category. According to the same report, in 2014 an estimated 80% of individuals interviewed for the census used the Internet in the 3 months prior to the interview. The report provides evidence that Internet usage is highest amongst younger people. In the 16-29 age category, 86% accessed the Internet every day, compared with just 26% of the 60-74 age category.

Although not focusing uniquely on technology adoption, the 2010 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children report (Gavin, et al., 2013) provides interesting insights regarding technology usage amongst children in Ireland. For example, it revealed a significant development in the daily use of e-communication<sup>2</sup> in the Irish adolescent population, which grew overall from 42.3% in 2006 to 51.7% in 2010. There was a significant growth in use of technological devices between 2002 and 2006 and more so in 2010. Daily usage was most frequent amongst 15-17 year olds of both genders. Also, of particular interest is the higher number of females using e-communication on a daily basis (60% for girls) as opposed to boys (43.9%).

A further significant observation from this report is that the majority of adolescents who use e-communication to converse with friends are more likely to find it ‘easy’ or ‘very easy’ to talk to a friend (p.64). The figures were highest for females and older children (Gavin, et al., 2013).

The Amárach Research Survey (2009: 21) found that 43% of females under 25 had an online account and used some social networking site such as Facebook or the now defunct social media platform Bebo. Furthermore, it found that usage increases significantly by age and gender. According to the survey, in 2004 some 45% of Irish teenagers (aged 12 to 17) own a mobile phone. By 2008 that figure had climbed to 71%. Significantly, the report also suggests that 33% of teenagers send a minimum of 100 texts per day with 11% sending more than 200 messages per day. On average, boys send 30 text messages whilst girls send 80 messages on a daily basis. Such

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<sup>2</sup> E-communication, in the context of this report, refers to mobile phone conversations, texting and online chat.

behaviour would be inconceivable to previous generations, including the parents of these teenagers. It indicates the changing nature of communication and normalisation of new modes of communication, but equally points to the importance that teenagers place on remaining ‘connected’ to their peers and consequently the sense of isolation that would result should parents or teachers limit or remove access to such technologies, even through well-intentioned interventions, a fact that must be taken into account when seeking to counter cyberbullying experiences.

### **3.5 Comparisons in Internet Usage (Irish and European Adolescents)**

Another recent study that focused more specifically on children’s usage of the Internet provides interesting comparisons between the Irish and the more general European experience. The EU-funded *Kids Online* survey (Livingstone, et al., 2011) investigated the use of new media by 25,000 children aged 9-16 across 25 European countries, mapping children’s changing experience of the Internet, uses, activities as well as risks and safety issues. As part of this study, 990 interviews were conducted with Irish children and one of their parents in 2010. The results showed that the Internet is embedded in Irish children’s lives and that Irish 9-16 year olds are typically online from the age of nine, which is a year older than in the UK and two years older than children in Denmark and Sweden.

Moreover, Irish children are among the leaders in a number of aspects of Internet usage when compared to their counterparts from across Europe. For example, use of the Internet at home among Irish children is well above the European average (87% vs. 62%). Access via school or college is much the same (66% vs. 63%). Using the Internet ‘when out and about’ is also higher for children in Ireland than in Europe generally (20% vs. 9%), a fact that reflects the increasing popularity of mobile Internet access through smartphones, laptops and other handheld devices. While schoolwork and playing games are the most popular online activities, three out of five Irish children who are online have social networking profiles on sites like Facebook or Twitter.

When usage intensity is examined more closely (i.e. daily usage and time spent online), the findings show that 53% of Irish children use the Internet daily or nearly daily and this figure rises to nearly three quarters of 15-16 year olds. Interestingly,

these figures are somewhat behind the European average of 60% and well below the high figures of 80% daily use reached among Northern European and Scandinavian countries. However, the numbers are likely to increase in line with the experience of other countries. For example, research in the USA by Rideout, Foehr and Roberts (2010) examined a sample of American 8-18 year olds over a three-year period. They found that the average number of hours that teens spend on a computer was 0.27 in 1999, 1.02 in 2004, and 1.29 in 2009. Similarly, the time they spent talking on mobile phones was 0.33 hours in 2009 and time spent texting was 1.33 hours. Therefore, it is to be expected that Internet usage is likely to increase for Irish adolescents and pre-teens over time and as social media and applications become more of a norm for communication and for sharing of information.

Similarly, in relation to time spent online, Ireland lies below European norms. According to O'Neill et al (2011), Irish children spend just over one hour per day online (61 minutes) as compared to an average of 99 minutes per day on average for children in the United Kingdom. However, based on the trajectory of Internet adoption and usage in Ireland over the past decade and as Internet penetration continues to grow, it is reasonable to expect that Irish children will spend more time online and in doing so close the gap on those northern European countries where Internet use is now a daily and ubiquitous facet of their lives.

One aspect of the report that deserves particular attention relates to the fact that Irish children are among the highest percentage when it comes to declaring some concern in relation to negative experiences of the Internet. For example, a large majority of children in Ireland (67%) believe that there are things related to Internet usage that bother their age group. Specifically, 11% of children, rising to 16% of 15-16 year olds stated that they themselves have been bothered or have suffered a negative online experience. These experiences include having been sent nasty or hurtful messages on the Internet in the past 12 months (p.28). These statistics indicate that existing cyberbullying policies in schools have limited effectiveness. It also raises questions as to whether the parents of these children are aware of their negative experiences and what interventions, if any, were used by them to deal with those experiences and prevent their continuation.

Internet usage does not necessarily equate to broader digital maturity and one other aspect of concern that emerged from this report relates to Irish children's online skills. When asked about a general range of skills related to going online, O, Neill et al. (2011) found that Irish children had only four of the eight skills mentioned as compared to the European average of 5.7. For example, less than half (43%) of Irish children can delete their history on an Internet browser. Only 42% say they compare websites to judge the quality of information and less than a quarter can change filter preferences (p.18). It would therefore appear on deeper examination, that whilst Irish children demonstrate high levels of Internet usage, their media literacy is lagging behind their European counterparts.

### **3.6 ISPCC Study**

Whilst the EU Kids Online (2011) study provides the most comprehensive examination of Internet usage and experiences that is currently available, another large-scale study of Irish young people's media usage is worthy of note. The 2011 study conducted on behalf of the ISPCC canvassed the views of more than 18,000 children and teenagers in Ireland. The sample was split into two groups – primary students, who were mainly aged 11, and secondary students and members of youth groups. The results showed that 46% of the primary group and 49% of the secondary group spend 1-3 hours online per day (p.16), with many doing so from their bedrooms, without parental supervision. For the teenagers, the majority (56%) go online from the family kitchen or sitting room, but 44% said that they accessed the Internet from their bedrooms. Among the primary group, 23% used the Internet in their bedrooms while slightly more than half the sample said that they used it from the kitchen or sitting room (p.17). Different usage patterns were recorded between the two groups, with a strong social media and communications bias among the older group. For example, of the primary youth group (less than 12 years of age), 13% use social networking sites, 11% chat to friends and 9% check emails. This compares to 75% of the secondary youth group using social networking sites, 54% who use Internet to chat to friends and 38% check email (p.19). The survey results indicate serious privacy concerns. For example, nearly a quarter (24%) of the older group indicated that they did not use privacy settings; while over a third (36%) of the younger group (primary) stated that they did not know how to keep their social network accounts private (p.21).

In summary, it would appear that Irish children and adolescents are quickly narrowing the gap that previously existed between them and their EU counterparts in terms of Internet usage. That trend is likely to continue and to embrace new Internet-enabled devices such as smartphones, iPads and tablets. With the increased mobility afforded by these devices, the location of usage is likely to diversify. The amount of time spent online without parental supervision is therefore likely to increase as these devices enable location independent access to the Internet and social networking sites. It is therefore of considerable concern that children and adolescent Internet access is not paralleled by an equivalent dearth of skills relating to protection of personal information, particularly given that a vast majority of Irish youth are either not using or unable to use privacy settings on their social network profile web pages. Moreover, it is particularly disturbing that over a quarter of Irish children state they have suffered negative online experiences in the past twelve months including having been sent nasty messages over the Internet. These figures are summarised in Table 3.5.

Table 3.1. Children & Adolescents' Internet Usage in Ireland. Source: ISPC, Children and the Internet: "This will come back to bite us in the butt." Published Oct 2011

<b>USAGE ISSUE</b>	<b>FINDING</b>	<b>SOURCE</b>
Use of Social Media	43% of females have an online account	Amarach Consulting 2009 survey
Smartphone usage: Age	37% of respondents aged 15-24 owned a smartphone	Amarach Consulting 2011
Smartphone usage: Gender	Stronger smartphone adoption among males (45%) compared with females (29%).	Amarach Consulting 2011 survey
Smartphone usage: SNS	83% of all smartphone users have accounts on Facebook	Amarach Consulting 2011 survey
Smartphone usage: SNS	25% of all smartphone users access Twitter via their smartphone device	Amarach Consulting 2011 survey
Smartphone: SNS access	56% of smartphone users conducted social networking on Facebook via the use of their smartphone.	Amarach Consulting 2011 survey
Smartphone SNS: Gender	Of those accessing Facebook via smartphone the largest number are females aged 15-24.	Amarach Consulting 2011 survey

Internet usage: 16– 29 years	Daily Internet use is greatest among younger people. 77% of people aged 16-29 are on the Internet daily.	Central Statistics Office Information Society 2007-2011 report
Internet usage: 9– 16 years	53% of Irish children use the Internet daily or nearly daily and this figure rises to nearly three quarters of 15-16 year olds.	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Online usage starting age	Irish 9-16 year olds are typically online from the age of nine	EU Kids Online survey (2011) of 25,000 children aged 9-16 across 25 European counties
Access location: EU comparison	Use of the Internet at home among Irish children is well above the European average (87% vs. 62%).	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Access location: EU comparison	Access via school or college is much the same (66% vs. 63%).	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Access location: EU comparison	Using the Internet ‘when out and about’ is higher for children in Ireland than in Europe generally (20% vs. 9%)	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Access location when at home	44% of teenagers access the Internet from their bedrooms. Among the primary group (aged 11 years), 23% used the Internet in their bedrooms.	ISPCC 2011 study
Time spent online: EU comparison	Irish children spend just over one hour per day online (61 minutes) as compared to an average of 99 minutes per day on average for children in the United Kingdom.	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Time spent online	46% of the primary group (aged 11 years) and 49% of the secondary group (aged 12-18 years) spend 1-3 hours online per day with many doing so from their bedrooms, without parental supervision.	ISPCC 2011 study of 18,000 children and teenagers in Ireland.
Usage purpose	40% of the primary youth group (11 years) use social networking sites, 21% chat to friends and 19% check emails.  67% of the secondary youth group (12-18) using social networking sites, 37% who use Internet to chat to friends and 35% check email.	ISPCC 2011 study
Social network usage	Three out of five Irish children who are online have social networking profiles on sites like	EU Kids Online survey (2011)

	Facebook or Bebo.	
Concerns regarding digital skills	Less than half (43%) of Irish children can delete their history on an Internet browser. Only 42% can compare websites to judge the quality of information and less than a quarter can change filter preferences.	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Privacy concerns	The survey results indicate serious privacy concerns. Nearly a quarter (24%) of the older group indicated that they did not use privacy settings; while over a third (36%) of the younger group (primary) stated that they did not know how to keep their social network accounts private.	ISPCC 2011 study
Online negative experience	A large majority of children in Ireland (67%) believe that there are things related to Internet usage that will bother their age group.	EU Kids Online survey (2011)
Online negative experience	11% of children aged 11-14 and 16% of 15-16 year olds stated that they themselves have been bothered or have suffered a negative online experience.  These experiences include having been sent nasty or hurtful messages on the Internet in the past 12 months.	EU Kids Online survey (2011)

A later report by Machold et al. (2012) found internet usage by Irish adolescents aged 11-16 years to be high, particularly with regard to the use of Facebook (95% of sample), followed by Bebo (65%) and Twitter (33%).

### **3.7 Causes for Concern: Adolescent Internet Behaviour**

As previously noted, many concerns relating to adolescent usage of ICT centre around a lack of maturity regarding the usage of those technologies, particularly in relation to protection of personal information. In some ways, these adolescents are unique as their exposure to technology is greater than has ever been the case in previous generations. In fact, they have never known social life without a technological presence. Thus, Prensky (2001) uses the term ‘digital natives’ to describe individuals born after 1980 who have grown up in a socio-technological world where social communication with peers is heavily dependent on (though not exclusively confined

to) mobile phones and Internet access. Similarly, referring to adolescent digital natives, Palfrey and Gasser make the following observation:

These kids are different. They study, work, write, and interact with each other in ways that are very different from the ways that you did growing up ... And they're connected to one another by a common culture. Major aspects of their lives - social interactions, friendships, civic activities - are mediated by digital technologies. And they've never known any other way of life (p.2).

Following on from this observation, Palfrey and Gasser suggest that a socio-digital paradigm is currently emerging, one which contains two critical implications that require our attention. Firstly, as noted above, they contend that the move from our previous analogue communications paradigm to the current digital paradigm, as now experienced by the modern adolescent, is effecting dramatic social changes in terms of how these adolescents, think, communicate and live, as well as how they perceive themselves based on digital responses (e.g. texts and social forums) and they emphasise the need for adolescents to realise that those perceptions can sometimes differ considerably from reality.

A second factor affected by this new paradigm is the issue of privacy, which has been severely compromised on various social network platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, amongst others. Whereas a cautionary wiser, older and more conservative generation resist sharing their personal information on the Internet, adolescent digital natives are far more willing to share personal information on social networking web sites. Once revealed, it is a futile measure to clear personal data from the individual profile as the individual has now been exposed and communication regarding the individual (personal data and their conversations) can be copied or forwarded to others in an exponential manner. Palfrey and Gasser (2008) speak of this danger as follows:

In the process of spending so much time in this digitally connected environment, Digital Natives are leaving more traces of themselves in public places online. At their worst, they put information online that may put them in danger, or that could humiliate them in years to come. (p.7).

Unfortunately, those who engage in cyberbullying can use that personal information against the adolescent. For example, placing personal details on Twitter, Facebook,

YouTube or other online sites provides bullies with an opportunity to acquire information that can be used to attack the target of their behaviour - information such as phone numbers, friends, photos, likes/dislikes and other personal details. Even though the target of cyberbullying attacks may eventually hide these details, in many cases it can be too late as the information has already been exposed to the wrong people.

Beyond the obvious dangers of potential exploitation, there is the issue of growing dependency on such devices. Though such online social networking dependency is a subtype of what is called Internet Addiction Disorder (IAD), this dependency is directly referred to and more commonly called ‘cyber-relationship addiction’, ‘social-networking site (SNS) addiction’ (Griffiths, 2013) or ‘Social Networking Site Addiction Disorder’ (Kuss and Griffiths, 2011). It manifests in repetitive compulsive behaviours such as constant texting, messaging and social-media communication on a daily basis to the point where it becomes a dependency. A negative consequence of this behaviour (particularly for those with poor face-to-face social-interactive skills) may mean that virtual or online “friends” become significantly more important in the individual’s life than peers, siblings or parents - particularly in times of loneliness, depression, or when the adolescent is stressed, anxious or embarrassed and cannot communicate with a significant other in the real world.

Research by Echeburua and De Corral (2010) has found that the symptoms of SNS addiction are similar to substance addiction. La Barbera et al. (2009) posit the view that young vulnerable people with narcissistic tendencies are particularly prone to engaging with SNSs in an addictive way. However, to date, only three empirical studies, which used small and specific samples, have been conducted that have assessed some aspect of the addictive potential of social networking. Further studies need to be undertaken that assess addiction specifically rather than merely assessing excessive Internet use. Research on social interactions that have the potential to create addictive tendencies in vulnerable and troubled adolescents, particularly those with a compulsive disposition, is required. Such studies will however require clear-cut and validated addiction criteria for SNS addiction and should investigate the link of potential addiction with narcissism. As Kuss and Griffiths (2011) state:

Due to the apparent scarcity of research on SNS addiction, further empirical research is clearly necessary. Investigating the relationship of potential addiction with narcissism may be a particularly fruitful area for empirical research. In addition to this, motivations for usage as well as a wider variety of negative correlates related to excessive SNS use need to be addressed. Furthermore, clear-cut and validated addiction criteria for SNS addiction are needed.

Children are now being exposed to technology at even younger ages via iPads and mobile phones. Whilst there are benefits to this, psychologists have raised concerns regarding the influence of such technology on synaptic activity and conscious thought. For example, Taylor (2012) contends that this exposure is changing the way in which those children think, in terms of how their brains develop and are wired as video games cause their brains to pay attention to multiple stimuli, which in turn can lead to increased distraction, reduced memory and an inability to think deeply about material and evaluate their decisions. Similarly, field experiment research at the University of California (Uhls *et al.*, 2014) has shown that increased use of technology can negatively affect a preteens ability to empathise and pick up on the emotions and nonverbal cues of others. This is particularly important in the context of cyberbullying as it may shed some light on why adolescents might engage in such behaviour without considering the impact on the victim. Whilst the influence of technology is determined by the specific technology being used and the frequency of usage, parents can have a counteracting influence on how technology affects their children, but for this to be the case will require greater awareness on their part of the effects of sustained exposure to technology and greater confidence that their interventions will bring positive outcomes to their children. The results of this study will assist in providing insights as to what interventions are likely to increase adolescent reporting of cyberbullying and what interventions adolescents are most likely to value.

Finally, it is worth noting that some discussions about technology usage by adolescents tend to take a binary perspective with either an exclusive emphasis on the benefits of technology or alternatively a negative emphasis on the consequences and impact of technology usage. However, the reasons why and how adolescents use technology (including for the purpose of cyberbullying) and the degree to which it influences social change can not be reduced to a simplistic generalizations or a

reductionist formula of cause-and-effect i.e. a technological deterministic perspective. The literature is replete with argument for and counterargument against technological determinism and whilst this thesis does not focus on these issues, they are worth considering in light of our understanding technology enabled bullying. The determinist perspective perceives technology as being an alive, independent entity and as the main driver shaping social phenomena – of which cyberbullying would be one manifestation. Thus, researchers (e.g. Croteau and Hoynes, 2003; Innis, 1951) who espouse this viewpoint consider that the social, cultural, political and economic developments of each period in time can be directly related to the communications technology of that period, with functions resulting from form (Postman, 1993). This perspective views that the technology dictates an individual's behaviour, resulting in diminished human agency. However, this would imply that communications technology independently causes cyberbullying, which is of course a simplistic interpretation of complex social behaviour. Technology may facilitate new forms of social aggression, but that aggression has long existed and preceded technological evolutions such as the Internet. Neither do the attributes of the technology automatically result in their usage for the purpose of cyberbullying.

A differing perspective is the social construction of technology as proposed by Mackenzie and Wajcman (1985). These researchers argue that culture, politics, economic and regulatory structures are the principal forces that shape both innovation development and its social consequences. This social deterministic viewpoint considers the social system within which technology is embedded to be the dominant influence on outcomes, rather than the technology. Within a cyberbullying context, this perspective views the technology platform as passive and the ways in which it is used as being determined by social and regulatory influences. This would imply that adolescents' social system determines their technology usage, but fails to consider the view that the technology and its attributes have any role to play in that interaction. A more realistic viewpoint is that proposed by Murphie and Potts (2003). They suggest an alternative intertwining perspective, where technology is not seen as determining, but rather as operating and being operated upon in a complex social field. This perspective provides a more accurate interpretation of adolescents' usage of technology from a cyberbullying perspective, as it allows for the fact that technology enables new methods of communicating social aggression, but equally the usage of

those methods is subject to influence from their social context and other influences. This is the perspective taken in this study where both the influence of the communications medium and the social context of the adolescent are examined in relation to their experience of cyberbullying and their evaluation of an appropriate response.

### **3.8 Summary**

Mobile phones have evolved and the functionality, power and availability of the latest smartphones are enticing to adolescents. Such widespread availability of smartphones facilitates access to social media sites when computer availability is not present. Consequently, they provide a medium of continuity for cyberbullying behaviour. Though such behaviour is sometimes explicit, the option to create fake accounts facilitates would-be perpetrators who wish to operate within an anonymous environment. Whilst high-speed broadband is available in most areas, free wireless access to the Internet is available to all in the majority of modern high-street cafes, restaurants, public transport services and other outlets. The ISPPC (2011) study has shown that Irish adolescents (at both primary and secondary level) are increasingly spending more time online but awareness of Internet security amongst the given sample was limited. Cyberbullies have adapted accordingly by embracing these new, ever-evolving technologies to suit their individual purposes and exploiting the weaknesses of others, particularly amongst their peer groups. Further concerns stem from the fact that ‘digital natives’ (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008) can find it difficult to differentiate between the virtual and the real world; their psychological interpretation of the real world is defined by their perception of the digital world. A further concern is the fact that many young adolescents and pre-pubescent teenagers lack the maturity to protect their personal details online whilst others intentionally share such details. Finally, further research is required regarding what has been termed IAD or Internet Addiction Disorder. Similar terms include ‘Cyber Relationship Addiction’, SNS (Social Networking Site) Addiction and ‘Social Networking Site Addiction Disorder’. Essentially, these terms all refer to a dependency on digital technologies, and most vulnerable, amongst adolescents, are those individuals with inherent addictive tendencies. Clearly, adolescents’ perception and experience of the digital environment differs considerably from that of previous generations. However, while these digital natives are undoubtedly technically literate, their adoption and usage of

Internet enabled communication technologies is not necessarily accompanied by the required maturity and awareness of the challenges which those technologies can bring with their usage.

The previous chapters discussed the rationale behind this study. The issues of cyberbullying, social aggression and related theories were discussed. A particular model (Ajzen's Theory of Planned Behaviour) - was reviewed and considered most appropriate for use in this study. This model will be further reviewed post data analysis. Furthermore, Irish adolescent use of modern communication technologies was discussed in detail. The literature review examined these issues at both national and international level. The next chapter shall examine the methodology used for this research into the issue of non-reporting of cyberbullying experiences by Irish gifted adolescents.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **4.0 Introduction**

This chapter starts with a brief discussion of the rationale underlying adoption of a qualitative methodology for this study. The purpose of the research and the guiding questions used to determine the most appropriate method of achieving the study aims are outlined. This is followed by a discussion of the research anchors that were utilised as guiding themes for the methodology employed in this study. The chapter then progresses to address some of the methodological issues relating to the use of this approach, which comprised three in-depth focus group interviews conducted with a sample of gifted youth. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a deeper insight into experience of cyberbullying amongst this sample, its impact on them, the nature of the experience (technology platform), and the reasons underlying adolescent resistance to report cyberbullying experiences to adult caregivers (including teachers). A qualitative approach enabled in-depth discussion and elaboration of these issues. For example, the focus groups explored why participants chose to confide in peers rather than adults. This provided significant insights that could not have been obtained by other methods. Other issues were also explored including the participants' perspective as to the efficacy of methods employed by schools to counter cyberbullying behaviour and these provided similarly valuable insights. The ethical considerations relating to the study topic and measures used to address these considerations are detailed. The data collection protocol is described and relevant considerations such as number of interview sessions conducted, number of participants, and length of interview are outlined. Similarly, the data analysis protocol and the guiding framework that was employed are described in detail. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Figure 4.1 presents the structure of this chapter.

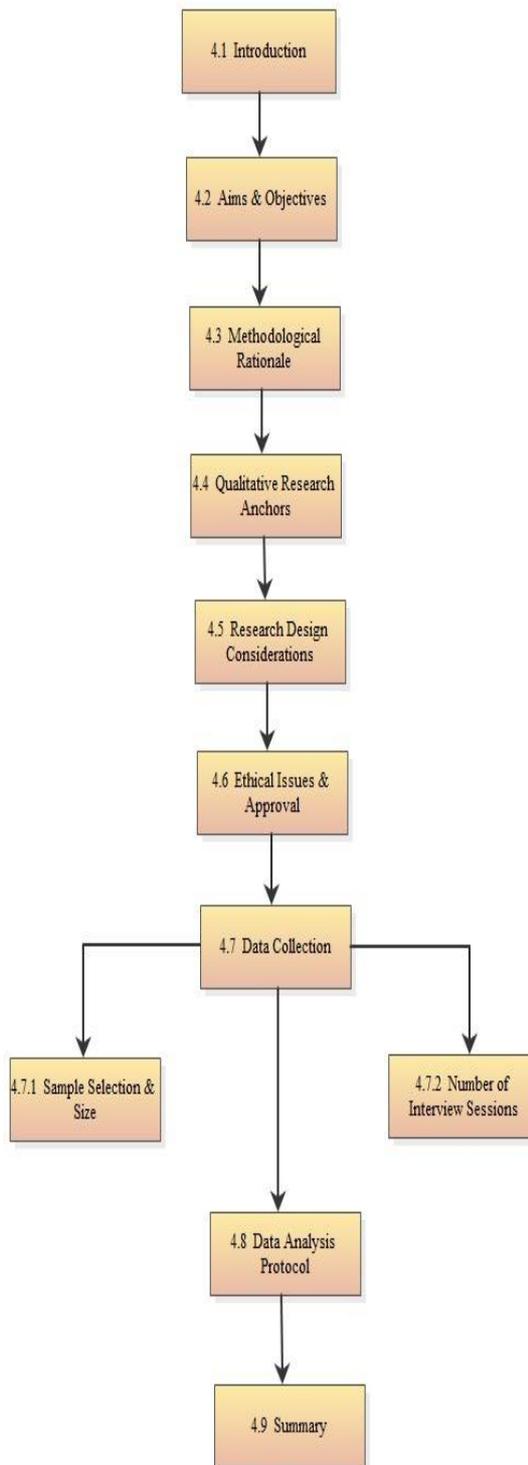


Figure 4.1. Chapter Structure

#### **4.1 Aims and Objectives**

The aim of this research was to explore the factors influencing gifted adolescents' non-reporting of cyberbullying experiences to adult caregivers. Qualitative techniques were considered the most efficacious way of gaining the required insights. The rationale for the choice of methodology is now outlined.

#### **4.2 Methodological Rationale**

The purpose of social research is to contribute to the body of knowledge by explaining social reality, and according to Williamson (1982), 'to add to knowledge through exploration, description and explanation of social reality' (pp. 31-32). As noted in chapter 1, the field of cyberbullying has been dominated by studies that have employed quantitative research designs, focusing on identifying rates and forms of bullying (e.g. Wang et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2008; Mnet, 2001). However, understanding of the more complex social and psychological dynamics that influence cyberbullying is poorly served by an exclusively quantitative approach. It is therefore unsurprising that those few studies (e.g. De Lara, 2012) that have employed a qualitative approach to examinations of cyberbullying have provided valuable explanatory insights that have considerably progressed knowledge within the field.

The decision to use one research method as opposed to another is a philosophical and practical one based on the researcher evaluating both the purpose of the research and the phenomenon of interest in terms of feasibility constraints (Bonoma, 1985). Yin (1994: 6) asserts that the choice of research method employed is dependent on the researcher understanding the nature of the research question that he or she seeks to answer in addition to understanding the characteristics of the research method utilised to achieve that answer. To choose a suitable research method, Yin (1994) contends that it is essential to consider the answer to three questions. These are:

1. The type of research question;
2. The extent of control an investigator has over the behavioural events;
3. The degree of focus on contemporary, as opposed to historical events should be considered.

This study examined 'How' (*Nature of Cyberbullying Experience*), and 'Why' (*Reporting Response Motivation Factors*) types of research question. The primary question was to identify the factors that influence (predict or inhibit) the decision to report cyberbullying to adult caregivers. In order to satisfactorily answer that question, it was necessary to first examine *the experience of cyberbullying* from the perspective of individuals who have direct knowledge of that experience and its impact. In line with the primary research question, the study investigated the target group's reporting responses, specifically *the considerations* which influenced their decisions to report their behaviour to adult caregivers, as well as why some students resist reporting to teachers or parents and the experiences which inhibited their reporting response. These 'How' and 'Why' types of questions, which enable capture of the individual narrative, are most suitably addressed via open ended questions that will permit each participant to describe their own experience and motivating factors. In summary, it was clear that the type of research questions in this study and their associated need to capture descriptive narrative can be most effectively achieved via a qualitative research methodology.

Yin suggests that consideration be given to the amount of control that the researcher has over measuring behaviour. A practical issue in this research was the absence of control over behavioural events. For example, this was not an experimental study and as the narrative of the students reflects their differing experience, it can only be captured through allowing reflection and self-expression of experience, attitudes and motivation. Such expression is most suitably captured through use of a qualitative methodology. Finally, in this study, the focus on contemporary events was high, as technology-mediated bullying is a relatively new phenomenon that is an issue of contemporary concern both for parents, teachers and policy makers. As a relatively new phenomenon, the potential for disclosure of new or previously unconsidered issues is high. Such disclosure is most likely to be facilitated through a qualitative methodology. In conclusion, the answers to all three of the questions proposed by Yin point to a qualitative methodology as the most suitable research method for the purpose of this study.

In addition to Yin's guiding questions, the rationale for using a qualitative research approach as the preferred method of collecting data for this study included the following considerations:

Firstly, the aforementioned literature review demonstrates the issue of concern in this study. Adolescent reporting of cyberbullying experiences is considered to be a multi-faceted construct and consequently the reasons for non-reporting are likely to vary considerably depending on population type and context. Investigating a topic such as 'cyberbullying' incorporates multiple elements that are defined by each individual's unique experience, the impact and internalisation of that experience, and their personal evaluations of the consequences of reporting are some examples. To capture details comprehensively requires that individuals be provided with the opportunity to elaborate on specific points, as well as providing the researcher with the opportunity to further explore particular responses as necessary. A qualitative methodology is most suitable for enabling this type of an in-depth insight into the research issue.

Secondly, cyberbullying is moderated by context. The literature suggests that females place greater emphasis on social support networks than do males. Equally the impact of bullying on females can be more severe than is the case for males. The reasons for greater impact on female adolescents, the nature of their context and the rationale for their choice of reportee cannot be drawn out fully through an exclusively quantitative gender-neutral approach. Female adolescents are more likely to successfully identify the issues that are most salient to them via an open interview approach. As Miller and Dingwall (1997) note, the 'attempt to establish correlation between variables depends upon a lack of attention as to how these variables are defined by the people being studied' (p.3).

Thirdly, previous research on cyberbullying has predominantly employed a quantitative approach with an emphasis on questions such as 'how many', 'what' and 'when' (O'Moore and Minton, 2011; Walker, et al., 2012; Cotter and McGilloway, 2011; Hinduja and Patchin, 2010). This is understandable when dealing with research that is of an embryonic nature. This approach would not assist in achieving the purpose of this study, as it would not allow the respondents

to discuss the motivations that influenced their response behaviour, which is the purpose of this research. As a result, it was determined that the study would be best served by adoption of a qualitative methodology explore the experiences of gifted Irish adolescents and the reasons why they report, or resist reporting their experiences to parents and teachers.

Finally, the literature (Creswell & Clark, 2011) posits that qualitative research should be applied when: (a) the topic is relatively new; (b) the important aspects of the phenomenon are unknown; and (c) discourse was not given to a specific group of people. The study of gifted adolescents' experiences with cyberbullying and the reasons underlying their non-reporting responses satisfies all three of these criteria. For example, examinations of cyberbullying are relatively rare and the topic has received limited academic attention, particularly when compared with traditional bullying. The reasons underlying non-reporting behaviour have received little attention, consequently remaining unknown. Added to that fact, discourse has not previously been given to the population of gifted adolescents. Qualitative research is therefore appropriate in order to gain richness of insight into the impact of the cyberbullying experience on the adolescent, the reasons for their reporting response and the nature of their individual cyberbullying experiences.

### **4.3 Qualitative Research Anchors**

In line with the recommendations of Sutton (1993), four themes were employed as anchor points to this study. These were significant considerations in the choice of a qualitative methodology and each of them remained central throughout the data collection and analysis sections of the research. The first of these anchor points is *contextualization*. Many forms of qualitative research emphasise the importance of not only understanding the data, but also understanding the context from which the data are derived. Despite this fact, as Sutton points out, failure to attend to context has been a recurring problem in social science. The qualitative methodology employed in this study, through the use of open questions, will enable a stronger focus on the contextualization that is central to the understanding of adolescent cyberbullying and will concentrate on capturing the unique narratives of the study participants.

*Understanding* is the second anchor point for this research. As Sutton notes, acquiring useful knowledge means moving beyond the data and achieving some level of understanding to make sense and constitute that life in order to make them scientifically usable [p. 125]. Whilst verbally articulated concepts relating to cyberbullying will retain their identity with respect to context and derive their meaning from that context, it is recognised that it will be necessary to progress from that descriptive level to the second order level and this requires involvement of some type of explanatory device such as a model that has been previously applied in other settings. Bearing this mind, in this study, a number of relevant behavioural explanatory models will be considered in order to provide a meaningful shape to observed detail.

The third anchor to this research is *pluralism*. Qualitative research deals with uncertainty, in that a diversity of meaning may exist even within a specific setting and yet remain equally valid. Sutton suggests that this should in fact be considered a positive as the constant juxtaposition of conflicting realities tends to 'unfreeze' thinking, and so the process has the potential to generate theory with less researcher bias than theory built from incremental studies or armchair, axiomatic deduction" [31, p. 547]. Therefore, in this study, the personal point of view and diversity of both experience and meaning attributed to specific issues such as cyberbullying is not perceived as a weakness but rather as an extremely valuable source of insight that contributes to the overall goal of understanding.

The final anchor to this research is *expression* or conveying of the results. As Sutton notes, the ultimate test of research is its truth, and "telling the truth" has been the elusive but enduring goal of social research. There is a growing awareness of the social nature of knowledge itself and that the importance of language as the original source of theoretical perspective, as the agent of understanding, as the tool of analysis, and as the medium of reporting. This research bears in mind that reality is constituted by language and seeks to retain the qualitative character of the data by presenting results as representations of the researcher's observations, rather than absolute conclusions.

Quantitative research designs tend to focus on establishing associations between variables or on establishing causality. They assume that it is possible to objectively control and measure data in order to determine causes of behaviour. Such designs are particularly suitable for contexts with a focus on capturing numerical data. However, results obtained through this methodology are frequently criticized as being narrow and superficial as they are not capable of capturing detailed narrative or varying human perception and consequently lack contextual detail, particularly in relation to behaviour, attitudes and motivation. Moreover, the development of narrow research questions may result in structural bias with data that reflects the view of the researcher instead of the participating subject. One obvious consequence of this is that results may be obtained which may be statistically significant but humanly insignificant. In contrast, this study seeks to understand a research problem taking into account the contextual perspective of those who have knowledge or experience of the issue. As a consequence, whilst the qualitative interviews will set a general direction using open-ended questions, they will also allow the participant to raise and discuss specific issues relevant to their experience, enabling the internal perspective of the participant to become the main focus of the interview (Babbie & Mouton, 1998). This approach will allow the participant to answer in their own words, providing a more meaningful individual narrative with the opportunity for unanticipated insights.

Despite the attractiveness of qualitative data collection in providing richness and depth of data, it also has been subject to some criticism and these were taken into account when deciding on the research methodology. One of the more common concerns relates to the subjectivity of the researcher, in comparison to the perceived objectivity of quantitative research. However, whereas the sense of precision and accuracy conveyed by statistical data in quantitative studies might indicate detachment, in fact the construction of questionnaires to produce the raw data on which the statistical calculations are based is no less open to the intrusion of bias than asking questions at an interview. As Patton (1990) posits, ‘numbers do not protect against bias; they sometimes merely disguise it. All statistical data are based on someone’s definition of what to measure and how to measure it.’ (p.480). Hence, while qualitative studies may give rise to concerns about

subjectivity, in reality these concerns may equally apply to quantitative studies, where the subjective element may not be as apparent, as it is distanced from the final statistical outcome. Qualitative studies may not lend themselves to generalisations, but as generalisations are limited in both time and context, this is not seen as a major drawback. Furthermore, as previously outlined, a quantitative methodology would not allow for an in-depth exploration of causal factors influencing non-reporting responses, which is the express aim of this research. Therefore, having considered the above, a qualitative approach was deemed the most suitable approach to achieve the aims of this study.

#### **4.4 Research Design Considerations**

Having decided to apply a qualitative design to the research, the next question was to identify which form of qualitative design was most suitable. Two data gathering techniques were employed: a) semi-structured focus group interviews and b) field notes. The two forms of data were interwoven and utilized to assist in exploring the experiences of cyberbullying and the reasons for non-reporting of same among the study's participants.

*Semi-structured focus group interviews.* The experience of cyberbullying and non-reporting response among gifted adolescents was explored through semi-structured focus group interviews. The most common purpose of a focus group interview (FGI) is to 'provide an in-depth exploration of a topic about which little is known (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015, p.109) and these focus groups provided the opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the multiple factors influencing non-reporting behaviour.

As previously stated, the primary aim of this research is to identify the factors that influence adolescents' reporting responses – whether or not they report their experience and the reasons underlying their choice of reporting response. In addition, it explores the extent, nature and impact of the cyberbullying experiences of this group, as well as determining their perceptions of the effectiveness of adult interventions to address cyberbullying. The guiding interview template (Appendix D) consisted of open-ended questions that allowed the researcher to explore responses at a personal level and, in particular, identify

the impact that cyberbullying behaviour had on the individuals concerned. It allowed the subjects to speak in more detail about their experience of cyberbullying, the effect it had on them and the reasons underlying their behavioural response. The guiding questions were as follows:

- *What does the term 'cyberbullying' mean to you?*
- *If you were cyberbullied, how did it happen? (When, Where, Platform, Nature of experience)*
- *How did it affect you?*
- *Did you report it and if so who did you speak to?*
- *Why did you choose that particular person?*
- *If you didn't report it, why not?*
- *Do you know of others who have been cyberbullied?*
- *What have they done about it?*
- *Regardless of whether you report cyberbullying behaviour or not, how do you respond to cyberbullying behaviour? For example, do you retaliate against the cyberbully and if so, how?*
- *How can adults (parents/teachers) help in preventing cyberbullying behaviour?*
- *What is the best type of response in your view?*
- *Does your school have an anti-bullying policy in place that you consider effective in stopping all forms of bullying? Why is it effective/ not effective?*
- *How could schools deal with cyberbullying more effectively?*

*Field notes.* Field notes included hand-written notes collected during the various forms of data collection. They provided immediate feedback for improving the process. After each interview field notes were reviewed and modifications to interview questions occurred when necessary. Additionally, the field notes documented verbal and non-verbal gestures, along with any other cues.

In advance of commencing the research, ethical approval was sought and secured from the DCU Ethics Committee. More information on this process is detailed below.

#### **4.5 Ethical Issues and Approval**

At all stages of this research, ethical considerations were viewed as critically important. The four principles originally devised by Beauchamp and Childress (2013), were used as the guiding ethical framework in this study, and particular attention was paid to the principal of beneficence, as it was central to the research i.e. the principle of acting with the best interest of the adolescents in mind. For example, due to the age of the respondents involved in this survey, a number of extra measures were applied. These included the following:

1. The adolescent respondents and their parents were made aware that participation in the focus group was entirely voluntary in nature and they could withdraw from it if they so wished at any time;
2. Their anonymity was fully protected as personal data was not requested and this was clarified in the issued consent forms;
3. Written parental consent was requested and mandatory in order for the adolescents to participate in the research. The Plain Language Statement is available in Appendix B.
4. The data that were collected were stored in a secure, locked environment and access to that data was limited to the researcher;
5. The data will be only stored for an agreed limited timeframe of 5 years post-PhD and will be subsequently destroyed at that point;
6. All focus groups were conducted in a comfortable environment;
7. A trained counsellor was available in the event that any of the respondents might find the experience of recalling their experience upsetting and wish to discuss with a trained counsellor. Teaching assistants were present during all, should there have been a need to access the counsellor due to emotional upset of the student.

Prior to data collection, approval for this study was sought from the DCU Research Ethics Committee. This application was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee.

The letter of support received from the Centre for Talented Youth is available in Appendix A. The final approval to conduct the research was received from the DCU Research Ethics Committee and is available in Appendix C.

## **4.6 Data Collection**

### **4.6.1 Sample Selection & Size**

The informants were adolescent students attending the summer CTYI (Centre for Talented Youth of Ireland) School at Dublin City University. The age range was 13-17 inclusive, both genders were equally represented and came from both rural and urban backgrounds. The three focus groups comprised a total of 17, 19 and 23 students (59 in total).

Although, traditionally, general focus group samples tend to be small in number, it was decided, for the purpose of this research, to allow an open forum whereby students of both genders and varying ages could voice their opinions and recount their experiences of cyberbullying behaviour. Some researchers claim that there are no definitive guidelines for deciding number of groups (Steward & Sharndasani, 2007; Bowling, 2002; Patton, 2002). Furthermore, there is little empirical evidence in deciding the best approach on sample size selection. Carlsen and Glenton (2011) state:

... to our knowledge no study has yet assessed how decisions about sample size in focus group studies are reported. Nor does the effectiveness of different sample sizes appear to have been evaluated. This lack of empirical evidence suggests that advice offered with regard to sample size is, as a rule, based on common assumptions or personal experience with the method (p.3).

However, quite clearly, smaller sample sizes require more careful and intricate selection criteria. One issue with a smaller sample size is that the researcher creates a risk of excluding participants who can provide unique key information to the research topic, whilst larger sample sizes and a wider audience provide greater opportunity for capturing more in-depth information regarding the research topic in question.

Furthermore, sample size selection is quite subjective – ten to twelve participants are considered the norm for marketing research whilst non-commercial topics usually accommodate five to eight participants. According to Carlsen and Glenton (2011) group size ‘seldom goes beyond a minimum of 4 and a maximum of 12 participants per group (p.2). However, they also state that most focus group guidance recommends:

... that the focus group should be the unit of analysis in focus group-studies. In line with this, sample size should refer to number of groups and not the total number of participants in a study (p.2).

Given the critical and very topical nature of the subject at hand and the number of potential participants available, it was decided that a restriction on sample size would limit understanding the nature of the phenomenon of non-reporting cyberbullying experiences. Hence, a pragmatic approach was taken regarding sample size and number of FGI sessions undertaken. However, it was decided, after conducting three focus group sessions, that a point of data saturation had been reached (i.e. there was no further gain in data analysis beyond the third interview set) and a fine balance between quantity and quality of analysis had been reached.

#### **4.6.2 Number of Sessions**

A similarly pragmatic approach was taken regarding the number of focus group interview sessions undertaken. For example, after conducting three focus group sessions, it was determined that a point of data saturation had been reached (i.e. there was no further gain in data analysis beyond the third interview set) and a fine balance between quantity and quality of analysis had been reached. The duration for each session was the same and was restricted to standard class time – a maximum of 40 minutes. This was considered sufficient time for interviewing this homogenous group of available participants – not so short as to limit data collection, but equally not over-exhausted so as to create boredom and apathy during the interview process amongst the adolescent participants. This pragmatic approach is in line with Millward *et al.*, (2000), who contend that most focus group researchers agree that ‘between 1 and 2 hours is the standard duration for each session involving adults, and a maximum of 1 hour for sessions involving children’ (p.426).

Open-ended questions were employed in line with good practice as it allowed the researcher to explore responses at a personal level and, in particular, identify the impact that cyberbullying behaviour had on the individuals concerned. It also allowed the subjects to speak in more detail about their experience of cyberbullying, the effect it had on them and the reasons underlying their behavioural response. Furthermore, it enabled a more detailed exploration of responses, which appeared inconsistent with previous statements and thereby provided more clarity and insight into the issues under consideration.

Selection of participants was based on voluntary participation in conjunction with permission from a parent or guardian. The procedure applied for interviewing the sample in this study was based on the protocol proposed by Hycner (1999). The respondents were interviewed and their responses recorded during class time (a maximum of 40 minutes). There was no further contact with the students post-interview. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The data analysis protocol is now outlined in more detail.

#### **4.7 Data Analysis Protocol**

The information was processed using a systematic approach to ensure that appropriate themes and categories were created and aligned with the research objective. The following section lists the steps that were followed in order to ensure analytical rigour when analysing the interview data. Hycner's (1999) guidelines for the qualitative analysis of interview data were followed. These are now described:

- *Transcription:* The interview tapes were transcribed within one week of each interview session. Mergenthaler and Stinson's (1992) principles for transcription were applied. Firstly, the morphologic naturalness of the transcript was preserved. This was achieved by keeping the transcription of word forms, the form of commentaries, and the use of punctuation identical to speech presentation. The transcript was an exact reproduction or verbatim account, consisting of the literal statements of the interviewees. Ensuring that the text was clearly structured by speech markers preserved the naturalness of the transcript structure. For the purpose of categorising and identifying the relevant interview source, quotes transcribed direct from tape were followed by "FGx" where "x" refers to the interview group; for example, a quote

from Focus Group 2 is referenced as “FG2”. Where a response is of a male student it is referenced as (MS) and for a female student (FS). For the purpose of tracking individual quotes, numbers were then applied to both male and female respondents (e.g. MS1, FS1, etc.). The transcriptions were completed as Word Documents, which subsequently facilitated their further examination and coding using Excel.

- *Listening to the interview for a sense of the whole:* The entire tape was listened to several times and the transcriptions were read a number of times. This provided a sense of the whole interview, a gestalt (Giorgi 1975, p.87) and a context for the emergence of specific units of meaning and themes. Particular attention was paid to the non-verbal and para-linguistic levels of communication, that is, the intonations, the emphases, and pauses. With repeated reading and listening to the audiotapes, the researcher became familiar with the data to the point of immersion resulting in a heightened level of understanding.

- *Delineating units of general meaning:* Every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph in the transcript was examined and significant nonverbal communication such as emphasis was noted in order to elicit the participant’ meanings. This was done with as much openness as possible. This process attempted to get at the essence of the meaning expressed, while trying to stay very close to the literal data. In order to provide structure to this approach, Semantic Content Analysis (Stewart and Shamdasani, 2015) was employed. This consisted of three different types of analysis.

- 1) In the first instance *designation analysis* was used to determine the frequency with which certain objects (i.e. persons, institutions, or concepts) are mentioned.

- 2) Secondly, *attribution analysis* was used to examine the frequency with which certain characterizations or descriptors are used. The emphasis was on adjectives, adverbs, descriptive phrases, and qualifiers rather than the targets of these parts of speech.

- 3) The final content analysis method employed was *assertions analysis*, which examined the frequency with which certain objects (persons, institutions, etc.) were characterized in a particular way. Assertions analysis

involved combining designation analysis and attribution analysis. This data was entered into an Excel file and formed the initial attempt to identify linkages among subsequently coded data (Marshall and Rossman (2011)).

- *First level coding:* Providing further structure to the process, coding was conducted in order to identify reoccurring relationships amongst the data. This consisted of bracketing and labelling important words, ideas, phrases, and sentences to identify any patterns. The titles of these first level codes reflected the pattern or relationship that they identified and were allocated by the researcher.
- *Delineating units of meaning relevant to the research question:* Once the units of general meaning had been noted, they were examined in relation to the research question and theoretical framework, in order to determine whether what the interviewee had said relates to and illuminates the research question.
- *Clustering units of relevant meaning:* Having examined the list of units of relevant meaning, the researcher then sought to determine if any of the units of relevant meaning naturally clustered together, i.e. whether there seemed to be some common theme that united several discrete units of relevant meaning. According to Hycner such an essence emerges through rigorously examining each individual unit of relevant meaning and trying to elicit what is the essence of that unit of meaning given the context.
- *Determining recurring themes from clusters of meaning:* Finally, at this stage, it was determined that there were certain recurring topics that express the essence of these clusters. Additional second level codes were established to identify these themes. The titles of these codes reflected the themes that had emerged from the data relating to adolescents' experiences of cyberbullying and the factors that influenced their reporting responses. These coded themes facilitated a more comprehensive understanding the phenomenon. As a number of themes had emerged, for the purpose of manageability these were condensed into a hierarchal list that was then considered in terms of the theoretical framework on relational aggression. Hycner (1999) notes that if the research has done a good job of bracketing presuppositions, is very open to

the data, and yet utilises a rigorous approaches, the danger of inappropriate subjective judgements creeping in is likely to be minimal.

- *Thematic Notes:* Throughout this data analysis process, thematic notes were written under each piece of data to aid with comprehension and organisation. As Marshall and Rossman (2011) note, writing can help the analyst to create linkages among further coded data. These thematic notes formed an integral aspect of the data analysis process, as along with the coded data, they assisted in the development of understanding of the factors, motivations and concerns that influence gifted adolescents reporting of their cyberbullying experiences.
- *Eliminating redundancies:* The list of units of relevant meaning was re-examined and those that were clearly redundant to the research question were eliminated. This involved not only the literal content but also the number of times a meaning was mentioned and how it was mentioned. This step of the analysis protocol also ensured that no unit of relevant meaning was overlooked and served as an extra check stage of the process.
- *Searching for Alternative Meanings:* The data was examined for alternative meanings. Once saturation of the data occurred and patterns emerged repeatedly, the researcher scrutinized the collected information, looking for faulty approaches, and early mistakes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This portion of analysis focused on finding information that had not emerged from the initial coding process. A list of alternate meanings from the data was compiled and used it to develop alternate themes. Establishing alternative understanding can facilitate future associations between the most apparent findings and less obvious correlations.
- *Identifying general and unique findings:* Based on the thematic clusters that emerged from the data analysis and their consideration in relation to the research question and theoretical framework, initial inferences were made which imposed meaning on the interview data. These findings included the following: the definition of cyberbullying behaviour based on individual perception, gender

differences in cyberbullying behaviour and experience of such behaviour, the impact of cyberbullying behaviour, factors influencing non-reporting response and factors influencing choice of reportee.

A final point worth mentioning it that considerable care was taken to ensure that the researcher did not impose his voice on the analysis of findings. Throughout the process of the study, the data was repeatedly analysed to ensure that the analysis and final summation accurately reflected the meaning that had been attributed to it by the participants. Additionally, all findings were presented precisely and the thematic clusters represented the perspective of multiple study participants, rather than any singular view. It has been suggested (e.g. Creswell & Clark, 2011) that in any research study, when multiple data sources are used, the accuracy of the research study increases. This study employed three different forms of qualitative data: (a) demographic profile sheets; (b) semi-structured interviews; and (c) field notes. Finally, the same process was employed to interview and organize the information for all three focus group interviews.

#### **4.8 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the methodology that was employed in this study of adolescent non-reporting of cyberbullying and the reasons underlying that decision. It has described the rationale behind the research design and choice of qualitative approach that was adopted. The information was transcribed, coded, and entered into a matrix following an established qualitative data analysis protocol that has been described in detail. This process assisted the researcher with organizing the data for reporting the results and considering implications. Given the nature of the research and age-range of the participants, prior to conducting the study, ethical approval was sought and granted by Dublin City University. The nature of the ethical considerations has also been detailed. In the next chapter, the focus group findings and implications of the research are discussed.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

### **5.0 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the findings obtained from the three focus group interviews that were conducted with adolescent students attending the summer CTYI (Centre for Talented Youth of Ireland) School at Dublin City University. The three focus groups comprised 17, 19 and 23 students respectively (59 in total) aged 13-17 inclusive, with both genders equally represented. The focus group interview guide (Appendix D) encompassed the following issues:

- Experience of cyberbullying,
- Context of cyberbullying experience
- Reasons for not reporting to teachers, parents and adult caregivers
- Underlying reasons for choice of reportee.
- Impact of cyberbullying experience.

The FGIs provided interesting and richly detailed insights into the sample's experience of adolescent cyberbullying and their reasons for non-reporting. Certain findings emerged as consistent themes across all three FGIs. These are categorised into four main topics. The first topic addresses adolescent perceptions of what constitutes cyberbullying. The second topic addresses personal experiences and observations of cyberbullying amongst these groups of adolescents. Topic three addresses the effects of cyberbullying on these groups of adolescents and their observations of effects on those of siblings and friends. Finally, topic four addresses response behaviours to cyberbullying behaviour, specifically the factors that influenced non-reporting response and the rationale behind the adolescent's choice of reportee. These themes are discussed in sequence and in relation to the extant literature.

A summary of this chapter is provided in the graph (Figure 5.3) below.

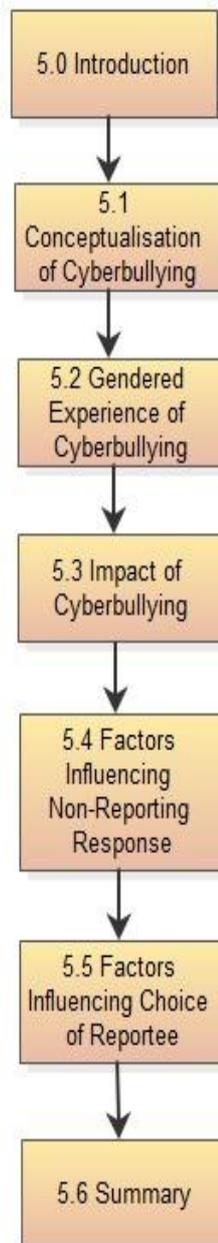


Figure 5.1. Chapter Structure

## 5.1 Conceptualisation of Cyberbullying

A consistent finding that emerged from this group of high-achieving Irish adolescents relates to the fact that their conceptualisation of what constitutes cyberbullying and the factors on which they base their evaluation of the experience are more nuanced than was expected. Their discussions of cyberbullying reflect a level of thoughtfulness and understanding of the core underlying factors that surpasses that of many adults.

One example of this is that considerable emphasis was placed on issues relating to perceived intent, personalisation and sensitivity, issues that are typically not referenced in definitions of cyberbullying in the extant literature. The perceived intent of the ‘perpetrator’ and the perception of the ‘target’, including whether or not the ‘perpetrator’ is known to the ‘target’ emerged as important determinants of whether the experience was defined as cyberbullying. One female participant (FS2) explained it as follows: ‘It [cyberbullying behaviour] depends on the perception of the person [being cyberbullied] because some people are a lot more sensitive than others’. In support of this view, some adolescents stated that whilst they had “traded” negative comments online or were merely joking, they did not see themselves, and nor did they intend to be perpetrators of cyberbullying behaviour, regardless of how others viewed that behaviour. Whilst such positive self-bias is not surprising, it does not detract from the fact that their behaviour may have severely impacted others and objectively constitute cyberbullying behaviour. However, it does provide an indicator of their awareness of the difficulties in differentiating between trading comments and cyberbullying. It was reassuring to note that some of the participants in the focus groups stated that had they known the feelings of the “victim” they would not have used certain words that could have been interpreted as cyberbullying behaviour. As one male student (MS95) stated:

I think at one point or another we’ve all commented something that’s hurt someone but we weren’t aware of it because it’s just our online personality so we act that way online. If we thought we would offend them we mightn’t but then they got offended but we didn’t know it because we didn’t know the person and we only found out we had offended them when they said something nasty back.

This would suggest that social dynamics do dictate differing levels of communication. In other words, the gravity of words used in communication between two people in each other's physical company can differ considerably from the 'online personality'. It also points to the need for greater self-awareness in relation to considering the impact of words in an online environment.

The issue of the personalisation of the aggression as opposed to random behaviour repeatedly surfaced as an important determinant in their conceptualisation of cyberbullying. This included both the personalisation of comments and the targeting of specific individuals, as opposed to what one male student (MS69) described as 'random abuse'. He expounded on the difference as follows:

I think it also depends on the content, not just on the exposure, but on how personal it is. Like often you get stuff just fairly randomly on, you know, Internet forums and YouTube and stuff. But they're not very personal because the person throwing the insults doesn't know the other person so it's not a targeted attack; it's just random abuse. It doesn't seem that much worse than if you're being shouted at or something but I think the thing about social networking sites very often is not only do you have exposure but it's also very personal because like on an internet forum nobody really knows who everybody else is while on a social networking site such as Facebook you're "you" on the internet.

It is unsurprising therefore that some students considered that cyberbullying behaviour usually entailed both parties knowing each other to a certain degree. However, it was acknowledged that may be difficult to ascertain and one male student (MS72) commented that, though both or one of the parties concerned may in fact know each other, the perpetrator may choose to remain anonymous. Due to that fact, he pointed to the greater significance of intent:

If they manage to be anonymous and they know who you are then I'd say they're targeting you and, in that way, they're cyberbullying you because the *intention* [italics mine] is there and that is hurtful.

A significant consideration for these students in the evaluation of whether a behaviour constituted cyberbullying or not related to their awareness of the difficulty in differentiating between bully and victim. For example, one female student (FS170) stated that sometimes the perceived "victim" initiates cyberbullying behaviour, and

many others in the focus group concurred with this. This may be a contributing factor to the high number of online respondents who claim to have been cyberbullied, but not perpetrators of cyberbullying behaviour. She stated:

From what I've seen online, sometimes the "victim" is the bully. Like, a lot of parents are making sure that their kids aren't being cyberbullied but they should also make sure that their kids aren't cyberbullying. Like no-one ever seems to bring that up – like it could be your kid is causing it [the antagonism] and then playing the "victim" when others turn against them and when you focus on the root cause of the bullying then you can identify the actual bully – not what you just happen to see on the internet.

A parallel consideration related to the perceived potential to over-react by describing behaviour as cyberbullying, which again points to differing levels of sensitivity. For example, other focus group respondents who had not been involved, but who had witnessed negative online comments of others indicated that there were difficulties in establishing whether the behaviour experienced was in fact bullying behaviour or whether the "victim" of such behaviour was over-reacting. Given that they were not involved in the behaviour (as either a target or perpetrator) they took a more objective stance in their perception of each incident of such behaviour (regardless of knowing the individuals concerned or the background to such behaviour). For some adolescents, it was considered to be nothing more than common online banter. These differing perceptions and evaluations of cyberbullying points to the corresponding need for awareness of and sensitivity to those differing evaluations by parents and teachers.

Whilst there was agreement amongst the students across these three focus groups in relation to many of the words that they used to describe cyberbullying behaviour, there was no absolute consensus and significant disagreement emerged on a small number of points such as the difference between online teasing behaviour and actual cyberbullying behaviour. It is worth noting that common perceptions, both agreements and differences, were expressed from all age groups and regardless of gender. Moreover, participants agreed on these recurring key characteristics that define cyberbullying which, when interlinked, provided an accurate picture of the cyberbullying phenomenon. These include: the 'targeting' of an individual by another individual or group; aligned to this is the 'consistency' in this form of behaviour;

‘how long it goes on for’; the ‘personal’ comments always through ‘gadget technology’ where the intent is to demean (‘embarrass’) the individual concerned via a public forum.

The effect of this public ‘exposure’ is dependent on the ‘content’ and on ‘how personal it is’ as opposed to ‘random abuse’. One student (MS69) aptly summarises this as follows:

It [random abuse] doesn’t seem that much worse than if you’re being shouted at or something, but I think the thing about social networking sites very often is not only do you have exposure but it’s also a very personal attack because like on an internet forum [e.g. YouTube] nobody really knows who everybody else is while on a social networking site (such as Facebook) you’re “you” on the internet.

This level of personalisation mentioned by the student is closely mirrored by the definition – albeit a definition of traditional bullying – proposed by Olweus (1993) who defines bullying as: ‘when (a student) is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students’. In this definition, ‘negative actions’ refers to ‘when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempts to inflict, injury or discomfort upon another – basically what is implied is the definition of aggressive behaviour’ (p. 9).

The repeated nature of the cyberbullying experience was widely recognised by the students. One female student (FS160) refers to the consistency involved in cyberbullying behaviour as follows:

My brother had this friend who kept commenting on any picture my brother would put up on Facebook and he found it kind of funny and my brother would reply: ‘Oh, that’s really funny’; but then he kinda kept doing it on every single thing my brother was doing and he got sick of it so he confronted the friend in front of a teacher and it kind of died down but he had just got totally sick of it.

One issue on which there was absolute consensus was the fact that the behaviour was intended to deliberately hurt the target, regardless of whether that intention was acknowledged by the perpetrator. In fact, the subjective nature of the experience and its denial by the perpetrator was described as being a considerable part of the problem,

with the target frequently being described as too sensitive. The students stated that this was particularly the case amongst girls where interactions are frequently described as ‘only teasing’ with one student (FS175) commenting:

You know, sometimes someone will pick on you for whatever reason and you know they just want to hurt you because of jealousy or whatever, and when you challenge them they just deny it, but the intention [to hurt] is there.

The key issue is therefore ‘intention’ which, as another student stated is ‘obviously malicious’ and as another student noted, the intention is ‘to cause embarrassment’. Another female student, in defining the term ‘cyberbullying’, used the word ‘degrading’ which is consistent with the intent to embarrass, demean and hurt the intended target of such behaviour.

Whilst knowledge of the perpetrator’s identity or lack thereof was not used to describe cyberbullying behaviour, it did emerge as a factor that influenced the adolescents’ perception of the impact of the behaviour. For example, one student (MS71) stated that a cyberbully who remains anonymous does not have the same effect as would be the case with someone who is known to the victim.

If someone like tries to insult you on some anonymous site (like Ask.fm), I don’t think it really holds much impact, because they more than likely don’t know who you are so the insults wouldn’t really hold any weight because it’s a random person saying something but they don’t actually know you so it doesn’t mean anything [to you] ...

However, this view was countered by another student (MS72) who argued:

If they manage to be anonymous and they know who you are then I’d say they’re targeting you and, in that way, they’re cyberbullying you because the intention is there and that is hurtful.

Amongst this group of Irish adolescents, it would appear therefore, that the concept of what constitutes cyberbullying can be quite subjective and may be interpreted differently according to the ‘perception’ of the individuals concerned, including whether or not the perpetrator is known to the target.

In summary, participants in the focus group interviews provide clear and unambiguous description of cyberbullying as a behaviour that includes the intention to: (1) target the individual personally; (2) a consistently repeated behaviour; (3) with the express purpose of demeaning and embarrassing the target of the behaviour. The impact of that behaviour may to some degree be influenced by the whether the perpetrator is know to the victim or not. The perceptions of cyberbullying as proposed by these groups of Irish adolescents support previous interpretations of cyberbullying in the literature including those of Williard (2007); Ybarra & Mitchell (2004); Trolley (2006); Aftab (2008); Shariff (2008); Goodstein (2007). For example, Willard (2007) has defined cyberbullying as:

... being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social cruelty using the Internet or other digital technologies, such as cell phones. Young people may be the target of cyberbullying from others or may engage in such harmful behaviour. Direct cyberbullying involves repeatedly sending offensive messages. More indirect forms of cyberbullying include disseminating denigrating materials or sensitive personal information or impersonating someone to cause harm (p.10).

Figure 5.2 provides a summary of findings regarding cyberbullying concepts.

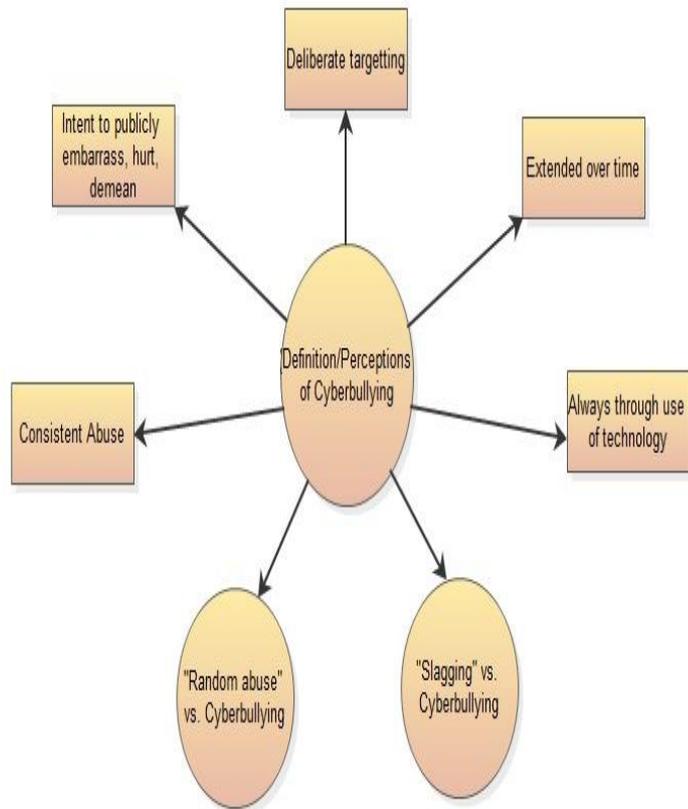


Figure 5.2. Cyberbullying Concepts

## 5.2 Gendered Experience of Cyberbullying.

Whilst many experiences of cyberbullying were common across both genders, the cyberbullying of female adolescents tended to focus more on their personal appearance than was the case for males. This fact and that it was common to all age categories was noted in the field notes (Appendix E). Both male and female participants in the focus group interviews acknowledged seeing derogatory online remarks that specifically targeted female adolescents' personal appearance. Some of the females in the focus group interviews recounted such personal attacks. The following example, from a female participant (FS10) in the focus group interviews, is one of many from the three focus groups:

I had an argument with a friend of mine. We're not friends anymore. But I had an argument with my friend and she made some comments on my profile on Facebook. She just said something nasty about one of my personal photos. I just left her to it and everyone else in my group of friends could see her comments. I had to delete the photo in the end.

Similarly, another female student (FS145) recounted her experience as follows:

I knew two girls who were friends originally but then they fell out and one of the girls got really nasty and said some nasty things online to the other girl. Then she started texting her that she was a fat \*\*\*\*\* and everything and this girl who was being attacked was my friend and she started to go anorexic.

Jealousy was perceived as the typical rationale behind these attacks on females. One female student (FS175) explained it in the following manner:

One of the big issues my friends got bullied for was jealousy. I mean my friends get abused online because of their hair and stuff or their clothes and it makes other people jealous and they don't care what they say; they just want to hurt you because you're different.

Although cyberbullying behaviour towards males tended to be equally aggressive, there was less focus by perpetrators on attacking male personal physical attributes. One male student (MS80) stated the difference as follows:

Personally, I think that the psychological is worse because it lasts a lot longer because like I know boys and they like punch each other and they'd be fine afterwards. Like girls, when it's psychological it just stays a lot longer and it

just makes you feel bad about yourself and you feel like you're a person who's not good enough or something; I just think ostracization is much worse.

One male student (MS81) commented on the problem of cyberbullying from a male perspective:

When its physical, you can always get back at them, but when it's like on the internet and when people are ganging up against you, it's much harder to get back at them than in real life when you can stand up to them.

The inference being that for many male participants, there is a commonality between the traditional form of bullying and cyberbullying, which differs between genders in its form, impact and resolution. Another male student (MS82) explained the difference as follows:

I think it kind of depends a lot on different factors, because boys in my experience – there can be a lot of rowdy bullying – but I think that actually in a sense that often hits them less hard; a lot of boys they just go “screw you” ... I'm really not saying that they can just completely ignore it because I got a lot of that and after a long time you get really irritated.

Therefore, although there is common overlap in the experiences of cyberbullying behaviour between both genders, males generally tend to experience it differently. Many male and female respondents in the focus groups stated that the nature of cyberbullying tends to take on a more personal nature (usually attacking physical attributes) either in a subtle or direct manner where the target is female. The intention is usually to alienate the target from her social group. For males, cyberbullying can and does encompass such behaviour but, in general, tends towards reactive responses, is less personal and shorter-lived.

The intention of these experiences clearly divided along two lines, which were either to insult the individual or ensure peer alienation from the social group of which the perpetrator was a member. For example, one girl (FS5) reported being deliberately excluded from a party where the intent was public humiliation; on her Facebook page the comment ‘You're not invited!’ was posted. Another male student (MS4) felt his teasing or “joking” others he knew as friends rebounded in a negative manner back in the school environment:

Mine was one of the reasons for me actually leaving Facebook altogether. It turned out it was more hassle than it was worth. It was a constant thing that I couldn't put up funny stuff about people from school I knew or I didn't know without them getting upset about it and putting up negative stuff about me online. So I blocked them on the actual site itself; they said: "Oh well why did you do that why did you do this?" My friends became like enemies. They just retaliated over nothing so I just deleted my account.

As has been noted in the literature (Kowalski and Limber, 2007; Maccoby, 1998; Crombie and Desjardins, 1993; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Underwood, 2003; Sharp, 1995; Collins and Laursen, 1992), female experiences of cyberbullying differ in nature from those of male targets. For example, the focus group results indicate that it was predominantly female students who reported being the subject of gossip and negative comments regarding personal appearance made by other female students, far more that was the case for male students. Sometimes these comments were the result of arguments arising from 1-1 interactions where one or other of the parties involved later wrote their emotive feelings online.

Although only mentioned by one female student (FS20), the issue of attention seeking was noted. This student mentioned people posting anonymous negative comments about themselves on a separate online account in a bid to secure sympathy; she refers to this as a need to gain sympathy from others or 'a cry for attention'.

Similarly, the dynamics that surround cyberbullying behaviour often involve group behaviour. For example, a male student (MS11) stated that cyberbullying behaviour was 'generally done in groups because no-one wants to be seen as a bully'. This view was supported by another male student who stated that perpetrators tended to act in groups unless acting alone – in which case the attacks were anonymous and on Ask.fm or Facebook. Interestingly, this is consistent with the work of Girard (1996) on mimetic behaviour as previously discussed in the literature review. Based on all three interviews, Facebook and Ask.fm appeared to be the most popular and, consequently, the most common social-media sites for cyberbullying behaviour.

Whilst these students operate in an environment where technology is ubiquitous, it is interesting to note that cyberbullying behaviour through the medium of mobile phone was not very common amongst this grouping. As one male student (MS13) stated:

‘No-one uses like mobile phones, ‘cos like anyone says that you give your numbers to people you trust [and] generally people don’t ask for phone numbers anyway’. He also stated that numbers could easily be traced given the fact that numbers are mutually swapped, can be traced online or by asking friends. Although not stated, another factor to consider is the fact that cyberbullying via text messages and phone calls, due to the nature of the medium, does not allow for public exposure to the same degree as online postings on public forums.

However, one female student (FS32) remarked about iPhone devices being used for group chats: ‘I’ve seen a lot of guys like they’ll text about one person and it’s like just between them and then they delete the message or whatever.’

One issue on which there was broad consensus across all the focus groups was an acknowledgement that the consequences of cyberbullying are severe and long lasting. This was evident in the tone used by the students in discussing this issue (noted in field notes, see Appendix E). For example, some of the experiences were described as being vitriolic in nature as observed by one male student (MS74): ‘On Facebook, I’ve seen like some of my friends get told they should commit suicide and stuff ... I think by people they knew.’ One girl (FS72) gave her personal experience of this type of comment:

There were these girls in my [1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>] Year and they all turned against me and they would email me on ways to kill myself ... my parents and the school tried to get them but they turned it against me and said that I was bullying them.

The serious consequences of such online animosity are explained in the following female student’s observation (FS81):

One of the girls in my Year, she got bullied like quite severely on Ask.fm and all the messages were like: ‘Why don’t you kill yourself? I’m going to get people to go after you and kill you!’ And then it was just repeated and repeated and then she actually ended up in hospital over it. Like she attempted suicide ... I think she was about 15 at the time.

Such bullying behaviour can indeed lead to fatal consequences as stated by this female student (FS142):

I had a friend who was bullied on Facebook and Ask.fm, and she never told no-one, and it went on for about 2 years and then it went on to self-harm and ended up in suicide.

One male student (MS85) referred to the effect of duration on comments:

There are a bunch of people constantly over the years who just insult me sometimes with their comments [playing games online] or are just mean to me and at first I was really sad about that but then I started to wipe it like I don't care about it now but it leaves a mark and eventually like I sometimes clamp up to the point that I'm really stressed.

The personal observations of this cohort of Irish adolescents regarding the significant consequences of cyberbullying is consistent with findings of studies conducted in other countries such as those of Holfeld and Grabe (2012), Kowalski and Limber (2007) and Paquette and Underwood (2009).

Sometimes the insults are varied, though always personal, as observed by one male student (MS149):

One of my friends got bullied on Ask.fm. It started with like: 'Hey, you should change your hair [style]', and she was like ok with that but it got to: 'Your family are a bunch of \*\*\*\*\*' and then there was a whole list of swear words and she was trying to make nothing of it, but I told her it wasn't ok, and I knew she was badly affected by it all.

This was confirmed by a female student (FS155):

It kinda starts off like one person will say something personal, like about your hair, and then, like, 5 other people will come on and start agreeing with them; and it just continues like that. It's always personal.

Interestingly, the interviewees sometimes considered the perceived "victim" to be the "bully" on occasion. This is in line with findings in the literature and relates to the term, coined by Olweus as "bully-victim" and shows that online behaviour may be a

part of a more complex dynamic rather than being a simplistic issue. For example, once the cyberbullied person responds in like terms to the cyberbully, he can no longer be called a victim, per se (Willard, 2007). Therefore, those involved continually switch roles between bully and bullied. This is explained by one female student (FS170) as follows:

From what I've seen online, sometimes the "victim" is the bully. Like, a lot of parents are making sure that their kids aren't being cyberbullied but they should also make sure that their kids aren't cyberbullying. Like no-one ever seems to bring that up – like it could be your kid is causing it [the antagonism] and then playing the "victim" when others turn against them and when you *focus on the root cause of the bullying* [italics mine] then you can identify the actual bully – not what you just happen to see on the internet.

One point marked in the field notes (Appendix E) is that these female students were highly engaged when discussing their experiences and consequences of cyberbullying, but based on observation of their tone and appearance, they seemed far more detached when rationalising the reasons for why they had been targeted. Other female students suggested the reasons behind cyberbullying relate to the fact that those targeted by cyberbullies are perceived as being 'different', thereby inspiring jealousy. Interestingly, they perceived those differences as relating to physical attributes such as hair, dress and make-up rather than academic ability. One surprising fact is the fact that not one of the female students in this sample considered that the motivation underlying their experience of cyberbullying could in fact reflect jealousy of their academic ability. This is particularly surprising considering that these are gifted female students. Bearing in mind that these students were very honest in their responses and their insights reflected quite a level of maturity, their obliviousness to this potential motivation is particularly difficult to explain. It may indicate their absorption into and acceptance of a socially gendered experience where greater emphasis is placed on physical attributes, rather than intellectual ability, thereby causing them to focus on the external and ignore the possibility that their intellectual ability is the real but unexpressed object of jealousy. In line with that, and bearing in mind that these are talented youth, it is very possible that the perpetrator's focus on physical attributes may simply serve as a masking technique, as it is easier to criticise the physical attributes of talented female adolescents, rather than their strong academic ability.

Figure 5.3 below summarises the findings regarding personal experiences and observations of cyberbullying behaviour.

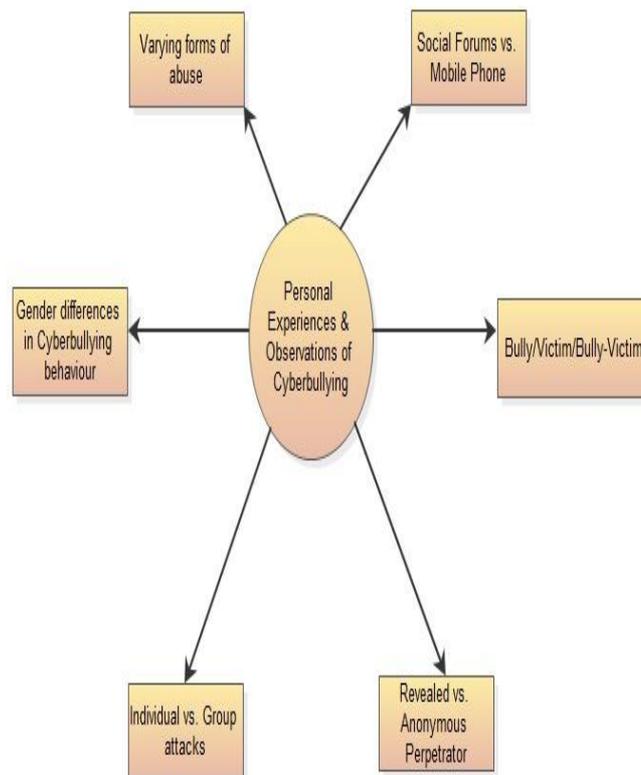


Figure 5.3 Personal Experiences & Observations of Cyberbullying Behaviour

### 5.3 Impact of Cyberbullying

The impact of the cyberbullying experience can have a very personal and long-lasting impact and the insights obtained from this sample confirmed that fact. They also confirmed the greater and differing impact of cyberbullying on female adolescents.

Both the female and male informants in these focus groups described the impact of their experiences. Common emotions resulting from cyberbullying behaviour included depression, anger, frustration and a sense of alienation. Male students experienced similar emotions to female students. One male student (MS48) stated:

About the cyberbullying, I let that go on for, I don't know, I think it was about three weeks and during that time that brought about another wave of depression over me so that meant I just didn't want to do anything. I just felt like I was worthless, so I didn't want to do anything which included study; so my marks, as a result of that, they did go down.

However, the female informants reported a more pronounced impact resulting from indirect bullying by their peers. These findings are also consistent with research by Bauman and Newman (2012), which found that the impact associated with cyberbullying was significantly higher among adolescent females than their male counterparts. One female student (FS52) alluded to a sense of social ostracization, which resulted in a significant emotional and academic negative impact. In certain cases, the impact of cyberbullying has had fatal consequences, as related by one female student (FS142):

I had a friend who was bullied on Facebook and Ask.fm and she never told no-one and it went on for about 2 years and then it went on to self-harm and ended up in suicide.

Other participants in the focus groups related similar accounts of female students known to them who had either self-harmed or who had died by suicide.

As the literature shows that the desire for emotional and social attachment is stronger amongst females than males (e.g. Crick and Zahn-Waxler, 2003), adolescent girls' friendships tend to be more exclusive than those of boys (Hallinan 1980), and they are particularly sensitive to the importance of protecting social relationships (Collins &

Laursen, 1992), it is therefore unsurprising that this group of female informants reported experiencing a greater negative impact as a result of their relationally focused cyberbullying experiences.

The literature indicates that cyberbullying experiences can exert a serious effect on the victim. For example, Chait (2008) found that the effects of cyberbullying included poor grades, emotional spirals, poor self-esteem, repeated school absences, depression, and in some cases suicide. The findings obtained from these focus groups of Irish adolescents are consistent with these effects. For example, with regard to the emotional effect that cyberbullying has on adolescents, one female student (FS49) made a poignant observation:

... It might be easy to brush it off the first few times. But then it can really get to you and you start to get depressed, and even if you have friends to talk to, the comments still remain with you ...

One female student found that after her cyberbullying experience, she became more withdrawn and cautious about making friends. Quite clearly, the experience of cyberbullying behaviour can impact on an individual's self-esteem and personality.

One issue that has received very limited attention in the literature is the pronounced effect of cyberbullying on academic performance when the perpetrators are students in the same class as the victim. One female student in this sample (FS52) described the social exclusion in such a situation and the corresponding impact on her academic performance. She stated:

The girls that were making comments, they were all in my class and the fact that I was pretty much excluded like I was really angry once that happened and... It affected my marks ... for a full month, I'd say.

Such experiences are in line with the findings of Kowalski, et al. (2008; 2011) who found that bullying had negative affects on a victim's education, affecting both grades and attendance and also that the long-term effects of cyberbullying are as negative as traditional bullying and can seriously impact on a student's education, self-esteem and emotional well-being.

As stated previously, certain students felt there was a link between the individual's perception of what constitutes cyberbullying and the effect on that individual. In other words, perceptions of cyberbullying behaviour can be quite subjective. This is not to imply that they were dismissive of perceived over-sensitivity, but rather that they viewed the impact of cyberbullying as a more accurate indicator of cyberbullying. One female student (FS67) summed it up as follows:

Say like, let's just say in racism terms, if someone sends you an email that's really racist against you; like, they mightn't do it again or they might never email you again. That would also have you mentally like: 'Oh God! They're not even talking to me anymore!' So like, I think you can define cyberbullying also by the effect it can have on you as a person; I mean it can be an individual interpretation depending on how deeply it affects you. So even if it only happens the once, *it's the effect that makes you decide if you're being cyberbullied or not.* [italics mine]

One male student (MS67) felt that the effect was dependent on whether the attack was private or public. A private 1-1 attack was considered less significant compared to the perpetrator's intent to publically embarrass the target:

If it happened, if it was kind of a private direct thing, like somebody sent me an email and they were being rude, I wouldn't think much of it compared to if they were posting it on Facebook where everybody can see it and they were trying to include everybody else in it. It would be much more embarrassing.

The affect also depended on 'the content, not just on the exposure, but on how personal it is' as opposed to 'random abuse'.

Interestingly, (for some) as they matured, it would appear that the level of awareness of the effect of their behaviour increased. A male student (MS95) provided this comment:

I think at one point or another we've all commented something that's hurt someone but we weren't aware of it because it's just our online personality so we act that way online. If we thought we would offend them we mightn't, but then they got offended but we didn't know it because we didn't know the person and we only found out we had offended them when they said something nasty back.

Whilst it is undoubtedly true that male students do experience and suffer the effects of cyberbullying, the consensus amongst this group of adolescents was that male students tended towards direct physical confrontation, far more than is the case for females, who prefer to attack others via online platforms. As one male student (MS87) commented:

I think like, when you get into a fight with your bullies and stuff it's like some form of relief in a sense – you're able to externalise it; it really doesn't stick with you forever.

This finding is in line with the work of Kowalski and Limber (2007) who found that, with regard to the frequency of cyberbullying behaviour, girls outnumbered boys. Whilst the results of this study confirm that finding and suggest that girls tend to rely on more indirect forms of aggression as typified in cyberbullying, it is worth noting other factors may provide explanatory power and therefore caution in interpretation is merited. For example, researchers such as Underwood (2003) caution against assumptions that girls are more socially aggressive than is the case for boys and highlight the need to test specific questions about the interactions between individual differences and social contexts. Therefore, it is accepted that the findings obtained in this study reflect the experience of this sample of gifted students and other samples may provide differing results.

Whilst being the target of social aggression can be a devastatingly hurtful experience for both genders (Sharp, 1995), the female informants in these focus groups reported a greater psychological impact from their cyberbullying experiences. Such findings confirm those in the literature. For example, evidence in support of the greater sensitivity of girls to social aggression is provided by the work of Paquette & Underwood (1999) who found that despite boys and girls experiencing social aggression with equal frequency, the girls who had been victims of social aggression reported being more distressed by their experiences than was the case for boys. As one female student (FS77) noted:

Like, when someone says something deeply insulting to you, you might make up later but you don't really forget it, especially if they've insulted you in

front of others. It's always there with you whereas, you know, if they hit you it's over with.

In part, the greater impact on females may be due to the unique characteristics of female-to-female cyberbullying. For example, the female adolescents in these focus groups reported experiences of having their physical appearance denigrated in online forums by other females. Their experience was that female perpetrators of cyberbullying tend to focus on and attack the physical characteristics (such as hair, facial appearance, or body weight) of other girls. Insight into the tendency of females to focus on the appearance of other females may be explained in part by the Two-Culture theory, which proposes that the distinctive play styles of the two sexes manifest themselves in distinctive cultures that develop within boys and girls groups as the children grown older (Maccoby, 1998; Crombie & Desjardins, 1993)

The results of cyberbullying experience amongst the girls who comprised these focus groups were significant. Thus, some of the girls mentioned other girls they knew who had experienced cyberbullying and as a result had become anorexic, seriously ill, or who ended up in hospital. On more than one occasion, reference was made to suicide attempts.

One of the more unusual cases mentioned by one of the female students (FS157) in the interview related to both bully and victim living in the same house. Her account is as follows:

I knew a girl who had a step-father and his biological older daughter was bullying the girl in my class a few years ago. She lived in the same house as her half-sister and she found it difficult to get away from the bullying since they lived in the same house and the older "sister" used to write anonymous nasty comments online about her ... she knew it was her cos the language used was the same as when she spoke to her and there were other similar things as well. She eventually self-harmed ... by cutting herself. Some of the stuff said about her was really personal so she didn't tell anyone until later but she'd already harmed herself before that.

Further insight as to the reasons why female cyberbullying of other females has such a devastating impact may relate to the importance of social acceptance for females. In part this is because adolescent girls' friendships tend to be more exclusive than those

of boys (Hallinan 1980). As a result, the psychological distress reported by adolescent girls who have been the target of social aggression is likely to relate to their sensitivity to the importance of protecting social relationships, a sensitivity that is paramount for them during this developmental period (Collins & Laursen, 1992). The impact of exclusion from social relationships was described by one female informant (FS5) as follows:

Somebody at school had made a comment – ‘You’re not invited’. They’d basically handed out invitations to a party to everybody and she’d posted all the pictures onto my Facebook wall.

The emotional fallout of such an experience has been described by Sennett (2006) as 'distress at not belonging to a group' and, at the extreme level, 'egoistic distress' leads to 'egoistic suicide' (p.xvii). As one male student (MS80) commented:

Like girls, when it’s psychological, it just stays a lot longer and it just makes you feel bad about yourself and you feel like you’re a person who’s not good enough or something. I just think ostracization is much worse.

The reasons why girls engage in indirect aggression has been posited as due to various factors, such as jealousy, boredom, attention-seeking, developing friendship processes, a desire to be accepted, self-protection and revenge (Owens, Shute and Slee, 2000). Therefore, the ostracization may be enacted by multiple members of a group joining in a common purpose, such as two females forming a friendship over a dislike of another, thereby intensifying the impact on the victim. Such behaviour has been described by Girard (1996) as ‘the scapegoat effect’ where ‘... two or more people are reconciled at the expense of a third party who appears guilty or responsible for whatever ails, disturbs, or frightens the scapegoaters.’ (p.12).

Cyberbullying has been shown to have a serious effect on both males and females and the responses from the Focus Group interviews are consistent with the literature. The female informants in these focus groups reported cyberbullying experiences in which their physical appearance was insulted and the use of online forums in which they were socially ostracized, to a greater degree than was the case for male informants. They tended to be the victim of female perpetrators who were members of their social

grouping. The effects of cyberbullying were reported as devastating and as having long-term effects on the adolescents – in particular, on the females who placed greater emphasis on social cohesion and being accepted.

Figure 5.4 below summarises the findings regarding impact of cyberbullying behaviour.

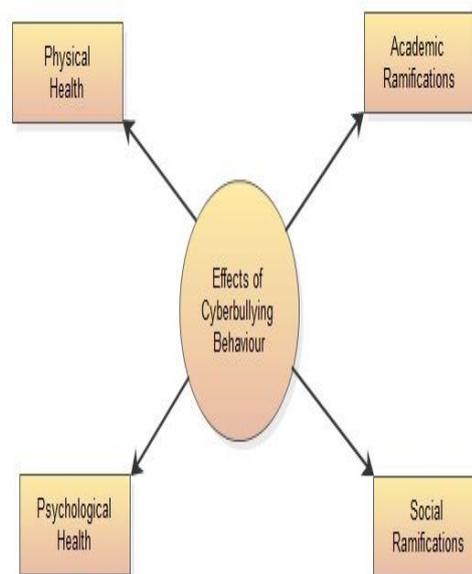


Figure 5.4. Impact of Cyberbullying Behaviour.

#### **5.4 Factors Influencing Non-Reporting Response**

The main objective of this research is to examine the reasons why adolescents resist reporting their experiences to adult caregivers. These focus group interviews provided particularly interesting insights into those reasons. Both male and female participants appeared to share broadly similar responses to cyberbullying and showed significant reflection when discussing those reasons (Field notes: appendix E). Whilst more female students took direct action and stated that they confronted the perpetrator face-to-face to resolve the issue, other students (both male and female) stated that they deleted their online accounts, created a new online account or ‘cut off contact’ with the perpetrator.

One male student (MS24) stated:

I didn’t tell anybody because I felt like I was able [to deal with the issue]. It was something that I had to deal with myself; I had to address it myself; it was happening to me; it wasn’t anybody else’s concern.

This sentiment was echoed by other students, particularly amongst the male participants, that they would be deemed a “snitch” or weak if they informed an adult of the situation. One male student (MS29), identified a myriad of issues arising for those who would choose to report an incident of cyberbullying behaviour:

... if you just deal with it yourself then the problem will be finished, like face the person or if they’re anonymous just ignore it or create a new account. It’s better than telling an adult cos the issue is finished; but like if you tell an adult it never goes away and they just kinda’ keep asking about it, you know: “How’s this person now, like what are they doing now?” – this kind of stuff, and it can be like an interrogation and when they get involved it can even make things worse ... parents don’t know a lot about social media ... and it really has nothing to do with the school in the first place.

Other participants in the focus groups stated a lack of confidence in either teachers or parents in dealing with the issue. One female participant (FS29) suggested a lack of understanding as a factor:

I think it’s a weird thing to go to an adult with. I mean they belong to a different generation, like a different world, they just think differently.

Others felt teachers or adults could not be trusted to deal with the situation adequately, as one female student (FS36) stated:

If you do tell your parents they can make it much worse for you. I know that if I had told them about some girls harassing me they would have gone into the school and complained to the principal and made a giant deal about it and then everyone in your class would be laughing at you. So I think that parents should be left out of it.

Another female student recounted that the Guidance Counsellor in her school had placed the blame for the cyberbullying experience on her (the student). She states, 'I was trying to make them aware, but then I was told that I was bringing it on myself and that it was my fault and stuff which was really hurtful.' Her tone of voice in stating this was such that it was noted in the field note (appendix E) as it indicated that she still felt angry about this. This reflects other student experiences where teachers do not identify the root cause of the problem and the cyberbullying issue remains unaddressed, and can lead to (as one male student stated), the victim of cyberbullying being 'victimized twice over'.

Whilst the adolescents in the FGIs did not necessarily report to adult caregivers, they did respond to the behaviour in a variety of different ways. For example, one female student, knowing the online perpetrator, confronted the bully. This ended with the perpetrator seeking friendship once again. However, as was to be expected, the offer of friendship was declined, as trust had been broken.

Other responses from the focus group participants included the deletion of their accounts on Facebook, Ask.fm and other social sites, whilst others deleted references to the same individuals or blocked communication with them.

One unusual response involved a female student creating separate accounts, using one account as a "sympathy account" in a bid to gain attention and win sympathy, a response that was described by a female student (FS20) as follows:

... It's a cry for help, like self-harming for the sake of getting sympathy when they're being bullied. I guess they're trying to verbalise what's happening in a way they feel comfortable with.

This is in line with an observation made by a female adolescent (previously noted under theme 2), that some allegations of cyberbullying may in fact be attention-seeking behaviours. However, whilst such behaviour may indeed take place, the responses provided by this set of participants indicate that their cyberbullying experiences were real and the effect significant.

The literature states that gender may play a part in response behaviours and the observations of this focus group confirmed the importance of gender. For example, one male student (MS24) stated that he felt the onus was on him to deal with the cyberbullying issue directly himself. He stated:

I didn't tell anybody because I felt like I was able, it was something that I had to deal with myself; I had to address it myself; it was happening to me; it wasn't anybody else's concern; so I just had to ... I cut off the connection ... I confronted them in person and then they said: 'Oh well, then I didn't realize. I thought you were being sarcastic about it'. Of course they would [say that]. I just basically stopped talking to them and they stopped talking to me; we keep our distance from each other now.

It would appear that there is a non-spoken (albeit cultural) rule amongst male adolescents that seeking adult intervention is perceived as a form of weakness. As one male student (MS43) stated:

If there was something happening and you get your parents involved you then become the guy who got your parents involved. You have to be able to stand up for yourself, or at least try.

The consistency of this type of response from male participants of the focus groups indicates that many boys consider they should be able to deal with it themselves. This perspective is not unique as the literature provides much evidence of such beliefs regardless of country or social class grouping (e.g. Rigby and Slee, 1992).

The students who comprised these focus group perceived a cultural and generational gap between them and their parents in relation to reporting cyberbullying experiences. As one female student (FS29) noted:

I think it's a weird thing to go to an adult with. I mean they belong to a different generation, like a different world. They just think differently.

Further insight into the reasons behind adolescent resistance to involve parents, was provided by a male student (MS29) who noted that parents can cause a problem to endure out of concern:

Cos you see, if you just deal with it yourself then the problem will be finished, like face the person or if they're anonymous just ignore it or create a new account. It's better than telling an adult cos the issue is finished; but like if you tell an adult it never goes away and they just kinda keep asking about it, you know: 'How's this person now, like what are they doing now?' – this kind of stuff, and it can be like an interrogation and when they get involved it can even make things worse ... parents don't know a lot about social media ... and it really has nothing to do with the school in the first place.

Across both genders, there was concern regarding parental over-reaction that could subsequently affect the student in the school context. As one female student (FS36) observed:

If you do tell your parents they can make it much worse for you. I know that if I had told them about some girls harassing me they would have gone into the school and complained to the principal and made a giant deal about it and then everyone in your class would be laughing at you. So I think that parents should be left out of it.

The dilemma to report (and deal with consequences) or not report was succinctly summed up by one male student (MS114):

It's sort of a vicious cycle; an idiotic vicious cycle [reporting cyberbullying] because if you don't tell someone you get silently tortured, but if you do tell then everyone thinks you're someone who would tell on them. So if you do tell you get hated, and if you don't tell you get tortured.

In addition, this group of informants also considered that such parental concern could result in a form of double-punishment for the victim. One male student (MS30) described it as follows:

Actually, I think that if you do tell your parents they might actually remove you from like whatever social site it is you're on, which is not exactly what you want so you're like being doubly-punished for something you didn't bring on yourself.

The need for personal privacy was referenced many times. For example, in certain cases, when a student did report to a parent or teacher, the subsequent response became so invasive that it was perceived as a breach of privacy, as described by one female student (FS33):

I know my mum hates me having a pass code on my phone because like I think a couple of years ago I got like three texts in the one night that were a little threatening and she got really, really annoyed. I told her but she got really annoyed and then made me make my phone completely acceptable to her but like they're conversations that I don't exactly want my mum to be reading ... Nothing bad! But I just don't want her to be reading them. So like there's the whole thing of: 'Oh, should I let her read the messages or will she want to see all my other conversations then and be checking; like checking up on everything else that I'm doing?'

This type of experience applied across both genders, as noted in the following observation, by a female student (FS47):

My older brother, he got bullied a few years ago. He told my parents and they forced him to print off every Facebook conversation he had, and after that me and my older brother just talk to each other now ... they [the parents] confronted the other parents with my older brother and after that we don't tell them.

The reasons for this over-reaction were attributed to parental anxiety regarding the consequences of cyberbullying. As one male student (MS33) commented:

... the vast majority of them are just fed the suicide/horror stories and they completely overact, you know. I tried to tell my parents there's an argument going on in this post and the parents could very well completely over-react and their solution is to remove my access in the first place.

It was clear from the observations of this group of Irish adolescents that, whilst a perceived lack of adult understanding of modern social media and consequent inability to help was a factor that influenced their resistance to report cyberbullying

experiences to their parents, the greater concern related to the issue of their online privileges being revoked out of adult concern and over-protection. This finding is in line with the work of Juvonen & Gross (2008) and Mieczynski (2008) who found that students did not report cyberbullying to parents due to fears of losing online privileges.

It appears that the issue of control is a key issue for the adolescents who comprised these focus group. For example, the student responses suggested that even though the student would, in many cases, not entirely rule out confiding in an adult, yet they wished to control the issue – on their terms. These concerns played a significant part in the decision not to report to an adult caregiver.

Whilst reporting to parents was not considered a viable option amongst the majority of the focus group participants due to a fear that it might exacerbate the problem, neither was reporting to teachers considered a reliable solution to online bullying behaviour. It was expressed in the response of one male student's (MS35):

[I would] definitely not tell a teacher. A teacher after my parents, maybe.

This sentiment and the concurrent fear of parents being informed of the problem was echoed by another male student (MS40) who stated: 'I definitely wouldn't tell a teacher unless I could really trust them not to tell my parents.'

Another female student (FS93) felt that cyberbullying issues are not school-related and therefore outside the remit of school-staff responsibility:

Personally, I don't really get why it would help telling teachers anything. I just wouldn't tell a teacher personally ... not unless it was school-related, but if it was cyberbullying no. I don't get why teachers come into it.

However, this differentiation between parent and teacher support was not unanimous amongst all students, as the level of trust and bonds between students, teachers and parents varied.

The strength of response of many of the students in relation to informing a teacher of the fact that they were experiencing cyberbullying was remarkably strong, particularly by the female informants in the focus groups. When probed for reasons for their rejection of teachers as a potential line of help, the students related experiences when they had informed teachers but not been believed or accused of being the cause of the problem. In such instances, the student felt they had been twice victimised. Understandably, they felt confused, hurt and any trust in adult support was compromised. The following experience as recounted by a female student (FS42) is quite significant:

I went to a Guidance Counsellor about bullying and I was told that it was my fault, so I don't trust Guidance Counsellors as regards bullying ... my mum always knew and she said: "Go to your Guidance Counsellor because the school need to know". I was trying to make them aware but then I was told that I was bringing it on myself and that it was my fault and stuff, which was really hurtful.

Many other female students were in agreement and stated that they too have not been believed or had been accused by teachers of being the problem. Although not exclusively so, it appears to have been a predominantly female experience. The reasons for this remain undetermined and require further research.

An unusual example of school-staff failing to act or report bullying and blocking the student from taking the initiative and reporting to the Principal was reported by a female student (FS88):

I told my teacher about like once every week or something and I'm like: 'Ok, if you're not going to do anything, I'm going to tell the Principal', and she [my teacher] said: 'No, you don't have the right to go to the Principal about this', so then the next year I told my R.E. teacher and I was like: 'Can I go to the Principal about this?' and she was like: 'I can't let you go since I never knew about it from last year.' So that's probably why people don't want to tell teachers about it.

Whether this is an isolated case or quite common is not quite clear but it certainly shows an inability by parents and school-staff to deal effectively with the situation and a perception amongst female adolescents, in particular, that the response from teachers to reporting of cyberbullying behaviour can further compound the problem.

Whilst it is impossible to judge the reasons behind the behaviours reported above, it may be that teachers' reticence results from an understanding that in some cases cyberbullying can be a cyclical problem with the victim responding in kind, thereby making it difficult to discern who is the bully and who is the victim. In such cases, both are seen as participants in online bullying behaviour. Consequently, an online "bully" can, in fact, be a "bully-victim".

This personal experience of a male student (MS48) exemplifies such a situation:

... I was also physically bullied some time back and I lashed out at the guys who threatened me but the thing with cyberbullying is it's psychological and you're trying to get back at the people who caused all the trouble but to everybody who isn't aware of what is happening on the internet it looks like you are bullying them instead of them bullying you so I understand why people claim that they're being bullied when in fact they are bullying the other people. They try to make it out that the person they're bullying is actually bullying them whenever that person goes to the teacher.

Such an interpretation is consistent with previous findings in the literature regarding the bully-victim dynamic (e.g. O'Moore, 2013, O'Moore and Minton, 2011, O'Moore, et al., 1997, Olweus, 1997; 1993). Nonetheless, it points to the urgent need for a systematic process which will enable teachers to examine allegations of cyberbullying thoroughly, so that adolescents do not feel failed by the system.

In summary, several explanations for non-reporting consistently emerged from these focus group interviews. These included parents not being au-fait with social-media technology or over-reacting and exacerbating the problem; students of both gender feeling responsible for resolving their own issues based on the 'expectation amongst ... classmates' that parents shouldn't be involved; the "macho" element involved for male students in resolving the cyberbullying problem; a stronger trust in peers and siblings to assist with overcoming cyberbullying; as well as fear of parents breaching adolescent privacy by looking into 'private conversations' on Facebook, Ask.fm and other social media sites.

These reasons were predicated on concerns that included fear of peer retaliation, shame at being perceived as being weak or untrustworthy by peers, fear of not being believed, not wanting to worry parents, concern that parental response will be ineffectual or even make the situation worse, were significant factors in their decisions not to report their cyberbullying experiences to adults. These reasons are consistent with findings obtained via research conducted in other countries including the work of Sampson (2002).

These adolescents' resistance to confiding in teachers related specifically to the fact that school guidance counsellors and teachers were perceived as not understanding the complexities of the issue, incapable of taking an objective approach to identifying those responsible for the cyberbullying behaviour and blaming the person who reports the problem, or simply incapable of providing a solution.

Overall, the students tended to favour support from their siblings or peers at school in the first instance, and predominantly in the case with boys, to deal with the issue themselves. Parents, teachers and other adults (eg. relations or other school staff) tended to be viewed with distrust and lacking in understanding of the adolescent social world and the dynamics involved.

### **5.5 Factors influencing choice of reportee**

The most common choice of reportee for this group of Irish adolescents was their peers or older siblings. Female informants were more likely to confide in peers than was the case for males. The reasons why females choose to confide in their peers has already been discussed in the literature review section of this research and includes the bonding and social cohesion that takes place amongst females when discussing troubles, the empathy of the peers and their ability to relate to the situation as well as their knowledge of the technological context of the problem.

Students report that they share the same environment and the same issues. Therefore, it would seem empathy is a key factor in choosing a peer over an adult when it comes to speaking about a cyberbullying issue. One male student (MS46) sums it up as follows:

I would choose a friend first, because they are more aware of what my position is like; they can imagine what it would be like whereas parents, generally out of fear, make assumptions

Although, some students would not rule out confiding in an adult care-giver, the initial turning to a peer-friend for advice was considered by many in the focus groups to be the most logical and practical solution to dealing with cyberbullying incidents. Confiding in a peer-friend was considered a primary option before making any secondary decisions, as one male student (MS26) stated:

Me and my friends all talk to each other if they have a problem [online]. It's better to have a friend that you trust more so, and then they'll give you advice as to who to tell – whether it's a matter for the teacher, whether it's a matter for your parents or if it's a matter for the school principal.

Two things are of particular interest arising from this insight: firstly, the influence of peers on choice of person to whom the victim should report; and secondly that adults may in fact be considered that person on the recommendation of either a peer or sibling.

One unexpected finding that emerged (only from these focus group interviews) relates to the fact that a majority of adolescents who comprised these focus groups had confided in their older siblings and the effectiveness of the support that they received.

A second finding was that many of the informants reported their sibling informing them that they too have experienced cyberbullying when at secondary school.

The third, particularly valuable insight relates to the fact that many of the informants recounted that their siblings stated that they were only now capable of articulating their cyberbullying experiences. It was related that many of the male older siblings had never informed anyone of their cyberbullying experiences and many of the female older siblings had only confided in a close friend at the time of the experience. It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that for some adolescents the reluctance to report their cyberbullying experiences to another can be explained by the need for psychological and physical separation from the experience; the perspective that time and a new peer environment can provide.

Because an older sibling had previously experienced cyberbullying behaviour, he was, therefore, best placed to guide his younger sister in resolving the issue. One female student (FS189) describes her experience as follows:

I told my older brother and like he's been cyberbullied when he was younger but he couldn't tell anyone 'cos my parents didn't know anything about computers or online bullying and his teachers didn't understand the situation either. If he did go to them they'd just say, "Well, it's not a school issue" or something, so when he went to college he escaped from it, but he knew what I was going through and that helped me a lot.

Other students confirmed similar reporting cyberbullying experiences to siblings first. Another female student (188) stated:

My sister had the same thing [cyberbullying] happen to her, so when I told her about what was going on she could help me to sort the problem, but like, when she was cyberbullied it was all a new type of experience and nobody knew how to deal with it or who to go to for help.

Again, perceived adult lack-of-understanding and empathy were key reasons why students would hesitate in confiding in an adult. There was also the embarrassment of adults seeing the online conversations, as the following male student (MS105) states:

Probably if it was a case of school-related bullying I'd directly complain to someone like a teacher or tell my parents but if it was a case of cyberbullying I'd probably confide in a friend because I don't think adults really understand the dynamics of online bullying; they don't really "get" our social environment online so it would be a waste of time and effort trying to explain to them and also having to show them conversations could be embarrassing.

Another male student (MS46) confirmed the choice of peers and justified it on the basis that:

... they are more aware of what my position is like. They can imagine what it would be like whereas parents, generally out of fear, make assumptions.

The empathy provided by peers was a key factor in choice of reportee. As one male student (MS47) commented:

If I had to choose to go to somebody I'd probably go to somebody who actually didn't like the bully; you know have a good session giving out about them and afterwards you'd kinda think: "Hang on – this person, this thing is wrong with them; this other thing is wrong with them; why do I care about their opinion?"

Such empathy has been described as "getting it". Thus, a female student (FS92) stated:

I'd tell my friends first because I feel like they're the only ones who kind of "get it" ... I would eventually tell my parents if it got really bad, but I'd prefer first to tell my friend, because I feel like a parent wouldn't be able to relate to the situation and I if I had a friend I would kind of feel like I have like support ... And if the bully tried to like bully me again, my friend would be there [for me] ... I don't really get why it would help telling teachers anything.

The ability to "get it" is directly associated with the perceived generational gap that relates to technology-enabled bullying, a perception that emerged consistently from the focus groups regardless of age or gender. This was related by one male student (MS108) as follows:

Probably, if it was a case of school-related bullying I'd directly complain to someone like a teacher or tell my parents but if it was a case of cyberbullying I'd probably confide in a friend because I don't think adults really understand the dynamics of online bullying; they don't really "get" our social environment online so it would be a waste of time and effort trying to explain to them and also having to show them conversations could be embarrassing ... I'd probably chat to some of my friends or my best friend who knows more about computers and stuff ... and I'd make sure that it didn't sound like it was a big deal; I'd just keep it very low-level.

Many referred to siblings as their confidant and as the person who enabled them to face the bully. As expressed by a female student (FS26):

I told my brother [about my being cyberbullied] but I'm close to my brother ... Then I felt confident enough to go up to her [the bully] and say it.

Two important insights emerged in relation to the siblings of these adolescents and the experience of cyberbullying.

The first surprising insight obtained from this group of Irish adolescents relates to the frequency of reporting to older brothers and sisters who had progressed on to third level education or employment. When probed for the reasons for this, it was not simply empathy provided by an older sibling, but more importantly that the sibling understood what the adolescent was experiencing, as they themselves had experienced it. The following quote from a female student (FS188) indicates this:

My sister had the same thing happen to her, so when I told her about what was going on she could help me to sort the problem, but like, when she was cyberbullied it was all a new type of experience and nobody knew how to deal with it or who to go to for help.

A male student (MS163) stated a similar experience:

My brother, he's in college now but was cyberbullied in secondary school. He told nobody about it back then, but when I told him about what was happening to me, he told me that the same type of thing has happened to him in school. It really helped me to know he'd been through it and knew what it was like.

Another female student (FS189) related her cyberbullying experience to an older brother who had also been cyberbullied and had told nobody. She stated:

I told my older brother and like he's been cyberbullied when he was younger but he couldn't tell anyone 'cos my parents didn't know anything about computers or online bullying and his teachers didn't understand the situation either. If he did go to them they'd just say, "Well, it's not a school issue" or something, so when he went to college he escaped from it, but he knew what I was going through and that helped me a lot.

The second interesting insight relates to the fact that the siblings of these adolescents felt incapable of reporting their experiences when younger and only with the perspective of time now feel capable of expressing what happened to them, in order to help and encourage their younger siblings. For example, one of the female informants (FS191) observed:

He [my brother] told me that he never said anything. He was too embarrassed to tell anyone because they [the bullies] had posted some embarrassing comments about him ... Now, he can talk about things better and tell me about it, but back then no way. I'm just lucky that I have an older brother that I can

relate to who's been through all this himself. Like, it's only when he was in college that he could talk about it but my parents had no idea what was going on at the time.

Another female adolescent (FS192) commented:

I told my older sister. She's left school now, but she told me that she still remembers what happened to her back in school even through it was ages ago. So she knows what happened to me, 'cos it happened to her too.

A further and more mature explanation for choice of peer rather than parents, relates the fact that even in the case where victims do confide in their parents and those parents are sympathetic and sensitive to the dynamics involved in the adolescents life and peer group interactions, the difficulty of tracing the perpetrator and holding them accountable ensures that parental involvement is unlikely to be effective and therefore the problem is likely to continue unabated. In fact, the student can be exposed to ridicule later as experienced by one particular female student (FS121):

I told my parents and the school, but they [the bullies] said I was bullying them and because it was on Ask.fm I couldn't prove it was them as individuals. I mean who said what in the statements they made about me and they spread the word that I had got my parents involved, but I know it was them.

In certain cases, the bond between adolescent and mother is strong enough to confide in as recounted by this female student (FS86) when asked who she would report to:

I'd tell my mom ... It's like when I was bullied in school, she did listen to the bullies side and my side and while the bullies got all the teachers on their side, my mom was actually like: 'Actually, no! They're not telling the truth; they are bullying my daughter.' She talked to their parents and their parents didn't know about it as well; so I'd tell my mom.

Therefore, based on the insights obtained from these adolescents, it is would appear that in some cases the decision not to involve parents may in fact stem from the adolescent's rational evaluation of the fact that their parent is unlikely to be able to stop the behaviour and bring about an effective change to the situation. Where that evaluation is positive, on the other hand, the adolescent may report to his or her

parent. It is therefore conceivable that an evaluation of effectiveness is the dominant factor influencing adolescent reporting choice.

Some students confide in the School Janitor and seek his advice or help. The reasons given were based on the fact that he was not a teacher ("authority figure") and they therefore felt more confident and relaxed enough to have a 1-1. She also stated that it is mostly boys who report speaking with the School Janitor. Apparently, knowing that teaching staff talk amongst themselves, boys did not want to be seen to be weak and needing help and also did not want teachers talking about their problem. She quotes one male student who stated his intent as: 'I'm going to talk to someone who has nothing got to do with education, but that will be there to listen.'

Whilst, as noted in the previous section, many of the adolescents who comprised these focus groups were adamant that they would never consider confiding in a teacher, nonetheless, a small group of younger students (aged 13-14) expressed a more positive approach and a greater likelihood of confiding in teachers rather than parents or friends. (This was noted in the field notes - Appendix E). The rationale for this choice was provided by a male student (MS37) who viewed the teacher as being the best option to report to given that they may know the perpetrators:

I'd probably tell a teacher cos if someone's cyberbullying you there's probably a large chance that person knows you from the school so if you tell the teacher, the teacher can deal with it ... I'd definitely tell the teacher before my mother or father.

Another female student (FS32) favoured telling a teacher before a parent but, interestingly, viewed School Policy as a potential problem rather than being a help in the situation. She stated:

I'd prefer to tell a teacher I could trust first, and then maybe tell my mom, but I'd like to be able to decide to tell my mom, but the school might end up telling my parents because of school policy like: "Do they know what's happening" and has school policy been followed and everything.

It may be said that an environment conducive to reporting cyberbullying behaviour has strong potential to bring about a positive end result. Though certain students

chose not to report cases of cyberbullying, those who did tended to confide in a peer or sibling. A key concern revealed in the focus group interviews, therefore, was the fact that, for many students, the availability of an adult caregiver was not a motivating factor for reporting such behaviour. Nor did the existence and awareness of anti-bullying school policies have any significant influence on reporting behaviour.

Figure 5.5 below summarises the key issues that arose during the semi-structured focus group interviews which influenced the reporting/non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour.

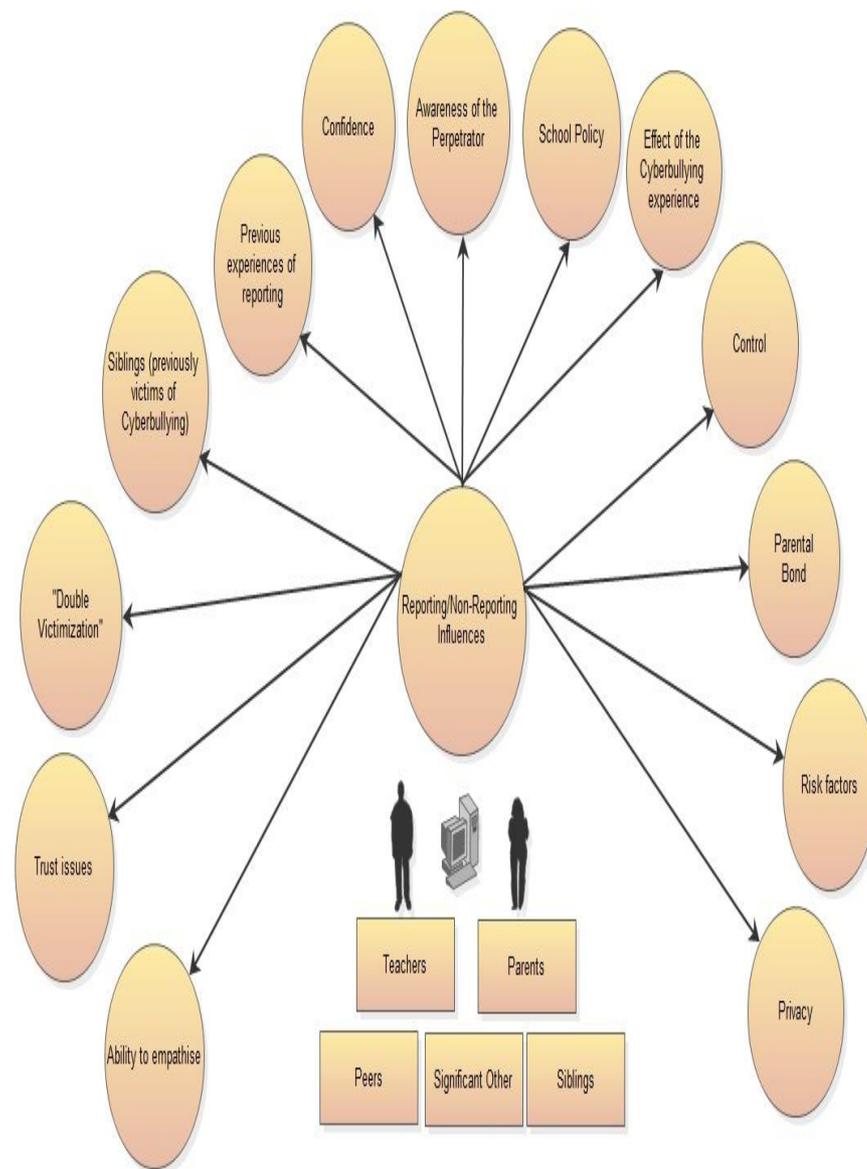


Figure 5.5 Reporting/Non-Reporting Influences of Cyberbullying Behaviour.

## 5.6 Summary

In summary, it would seem that what constituted cyberbullying behaviour and the concept itself varied amongst students. Alternative perceptions of cyberbullying behaviour included teasing or online banter. Some students turned to peers and siblings who could empathise with them based on prior similar experiences, knowledge of modern technology, trust and an understanding of their environment. Conversely, these very same factors prevented students from turning to an adult caregiver since adults were considered lacking in knowledge, empathy and the skills required to deal adequately with cyberbullying behaviour.

Regardless of age or gender, some informants expressed a fear of parental over-reaction should they be informed of cyberbullying, an over-reaction resulting in withdrawal of internet privileges or increased invasion of their mobile and online communications. It appears that the issue of *trust* and *control* is a key issue for the adolescents who comprised these focus groups. The student responses also suggested that even though the student would, in many cases, not entirely rule out confiding in an adult, yet they wished to control the issue – on their terms. These same concerns played a significant part in the decision not to report to an adult caregiver.

Some of the comments expressed by both male and female informants point to a more nuanced dynamic underlying why they resist confiding in an adult caregiver. Their observations indicate that many of the students actively weigh up alternative courses of action in terms of their “costs” of reporting, including the cost of social ostracization. Researchers such as Kahneman and Tversky (1979) have suggested (Prospect theory) that decisions are framed under conditions of risk, where loss is viewed as more significant than a gain. In the case of this group of Irish adolescents such framing involves a weighing of the significant losses of peer acceptance, personal privacy and control over use of social media against the uncertain gain that may result from informing an adult care-giver. In the next chapter, the research objectives and justification for the study are briefly reviewed. Key issues pertaining to the research objectives are discussed in greater detail.

## **CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION**

### **6.0 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the study findings in the context of existing literature and knowledge of the factors influencing adolescent cyberbullying reporting response. The chapter starts by revisiting the research aim and justification for the research. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the study findings treated under the two main headings: (i) Reporting Inhibitors and (ii) Gender-based Issues. Reporting inhibitors are considered in terms of adolescents' framing of the risks associated with reporting – both reporting to parents and reporting to teachers. The implications of adolescents' lack of trust in teachers as a reporting source and the impact of their negative personal or observed experiences on reporting intention are examined. For the purpose of clarity, gender-related outcomes are treated in two sections – the first discusses the influence of gender on adolescent reporting response, whilst the second section focuses on the impact of cyberbullying when examined through the lens of gender. Deriving directly from this discussion, a revised model of adolescent cyberbullying reporting that is consistent with the three pillars of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), previously described in the literature review (pp. 59-61), is proposed and its contribution to the literature considered.

### **6.1 Research Objectives Reviewed**

This research set out to explore the nature of adolescent reporting responses to cyberbullying behaviour. Specifically, it sought to identify the factors influencing adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences to adult caregivers. In doing so, it also provided insights into the cyberbullying experiences of this sample of intellectually-gifted youth and the impact of those experiences. The research aim was achieved through focus group interviews and supported with field notes. These interviews explored the experience of cyberbullying and its impact, the context of that experience, the reasons why these adolescents did not report to teachers, parents and adult caregivers, and finally the reasons underlying their choice of reportee on the occasions when they did report.

## **6.2 Research Justification Reviewed**

As described in the Literature Review, social media and communications technology have become an embedded part of modern Irish society. The appeal of multi-functional modern communication technologies (such as smartphones), combined with the necessity to be “connected” via constant social interaction, (particularly amongst the younger Irish demographic), has resulted in a need to understand and identify the key social issues linked to these technologies. One such key issue is the phenomenon of cyberbullying and many studies have shown that this has been linked to depression, poor self-esteem and suicide. There is a dearth of research regarding the reasons underpinning Irish adolescents non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour and experiences. This resistance to report cyberbullying may create an environment in which depression and other clinical and health issues have the potential to manifest. Resistance to reporting is evident amongst adolescents in general. However, no study has been conducted in Ireland on adolescents who are intellectually gifted, despite the fact that there is evidence that gifted children often experience bullying and cyberbullying. There can be no “one glove fits all” approach to understanding cyberbullying experience and the students in this study provided valuable insights into the experiences of cyberbullying behaviour amongst intellectually gifted students and further insights into the reasons for their non-reporting behaviour. These insights contribute to the body of research on cyberbullying understanding and prevention, as well as to the work of educators, parents and those involved in policy formulation and implementation. The key issues that emerged from these findings and their implications are now discussed both in terms of their contributions to theory and associated implications for practice.

## **6.3 Reporting Inhibitors: Evaluation of Risk**

The results of this study provide insight into the factors that influenced this sample of adolescents towards a non-reporting decision. The perception of reporting as risk behaviour and the evaluation of consequences associated with that behaviour emerged as a significant influence on the adolescent’s decision regarding whether to inform an adult or teacher about cyberbullying experiences. These risks relate specifically to two potential consequences of reporting: the first being a perceived loss of control over the situation and the personal consequences related to this lack of autonomy for the adolescent, with the second risk relating to a deficit of adult-adolescent

consultation regarding how to address the situation effectively including consideration of the adolescent social context. The adolescents' evaluation or framing of the potential consequences of reporting has in some cases been informed by previous reporting experiences. The fact that non-reporting behaviour emerged as such a deeply embedded response for this sample of gifted adolescents confirms that these perceived risks operate as significant inhibitors of cyberbullying reporting.

### **6.3.1 Framing of the Reporting Decision**

This study unwraps several subtle and dynamic reasons underlying adolescents' resistance to confiding in parents or teachers by reporting bullying experiences. The consistency of that resistance points towards this being a carefully evaluated response. For example, adolescents in focus groups revealed that they weighed up whether reporting would result in a positive or negative outcome in making their decision as to whether to report cyberbullying behaviour. The potential outcomes of reporting were uncertain for these adolescents, and their decision-making processes are consistent with Kahnmann and Tverskey's (1979) Prospect Theory, which suggests that decisions are framed under conditions of risk, where loss is viewed as more significant than a gain. In the case of this group of Irish adolescents it would appear that such framing involves a weighing up of the significant losses of personal reputation, peer acceptance, personal privacy and control over use of social media against the uncertain gain that may result from informing an adult care-giver.

This evaluation or 'weighing up' of alternatives (which is consistent with the findings of Syvertsen et al. 2009) is in line with the expectation that perceived consequences of social inclusion or exclusion rate as highly influential for adolescents, and whilst the findings confirmed this, it is worth noting that there are subtle gender-based distinctions at play. For example, the dilemma of telling and thereby being labelled a snitch and getting peers into trouble, versus suffering the on-going torment of cyberbullying was a key factor influencing male reporting behaviour in particular. This is consistent with the work of Willard (2007b) who found that students who have experienced cyberbullying fear that if their peers become aware that they have informed adults, they may be perceived as weak and bullied even more intensely. However, for girls, the dilemma related to actively weighing up alternative courses of action in terms of their "costs" of reporting, a cost which for them related particularly

to social ostracization. Based on these findings, it would appear that any attempt to increase adolescent reporting behaviours must in the first instance address these perceived risks and their implications for adolescents, in order to increase reporting outcomes. The perceived risks are now discussed in detail.

### **6.3.1.1 Expectation of Parental Over-Reaction**

The results suggest that part of adolescents' evaluation of whether to report to parents related to fear of over-reaction and consequent revocation of existing online privileges. For example, the majority of the informants, across all age and gender categories, expressed a fear of parental over-reaction should they be informed of the cyberbullying incident, an over-reaction which would result in withdrawal of the adolescent's Internet privileges or increased invasion of their (ICT) privacy, an outcome which was described as a form of double injustice. This finding is consistent with the work of Juvonen & Gross (2008), whose online web-based survey of almost 1,500 (predominantly American) adolescents found that students did not report cyberbullying to parents due to fears of loss of online privileges. However, their results indicated that those fears applied in particular to female adolescents aged 12-14 years. On the other hand, this current study extends our understanding by providing evidence that whilst similar fears exist for Irish students, they exist across both genders and across a broader spectrum of ages (13-17 years). Furthermore, it provides insight into the strength of those adolescent fears via narrative examples. These findings suggest perceptions of adults' lack of understanding of modern social media, allied to an equal lack of understanding on their part of the degree to which adolescent culture has changed radically to a situation where social inclusion is now heavily dependent on ICT-based communication and participation. For an adolescent to be excluded from such communication could be described as a type of solitary confinement or akin to social death. Support for this interpretation is found not only in the self-reporting of the adolescents who participated in this study, but equally in technology usage results. This points to a very significant behavioural change in terms of increased adolescent usage of social-media sites, mobile phones and other technological devices providing social communication.

Neither is the increased dependency on technology-based communication evidenced in this study unusual when examined more broadly. For example, one of the most

authoritative providers of data on the Internet's impact, the Pew Research Centre, profiles teenagers' use of Internet technology, and in particular social media website usage between 2005-2015. Their recently published results show that digital communication has become not just ubiquitous, but is in fact central to teenagers' lives and social wellbeing. Pew suggests that the reason for this is that these technologies are meeting adolescents' developmental needs: allowing them to participate and thereby define their identity with their peers, establishing their independence and impressing members of the opposite sex. Whilst such teenage communication behaviours have always happened, they are now facilitated exponentially by social media websites. The increased dependency of adolescents on technology-enabled communication is not necessarily a bad thing. For example, for the female respondents in this study in particular, such technology usage transcended basic functional communication and provided a positive social-bonding and supportive exercise. This is consistent with the view of researchers such as Valkenburg et al., (2006) who suggest that most children benefit from technology-based communication with their cognitive and social skills increasing, as do their friendships and self-confidence. This interpretation brings a new understanding of adolescents' reliance on these technologies as part of social inclusion and identity expression.

It is not surprising therefore, that the threat of removing access to these technologies would be perceived by the adolescents who participated in this study as a direct attack on their identity and social acceptance, thereby dramatically reducing their potential reporting response. Whilst the issue of how parents can protect their children from cyberbullying nonetheless remains a challenge, this understanding of how communication technologies are meeting adolescent developmental needs will provide parents with a more subtle understanding of adolescents' perspectives and the factors that should be considered and discussed with them in advance of cyberbullying incidents, as much as when considering an effective response. Consequently, it should enable them to address the issue in a more sensitive and successful manner.

One particularly important contribution of this research is that it extends our understanding of the importance of *perceived control* as a key factor influencing Irish

adolescents' reporting decisions: control over continued access to technology-mediated communication as well as control over the decision as to how the cyberbullying experience will be addressed. The student responses suggest that even though the student would, in many cases, not entirely rule out confiding in an adult, they were highly anxious about the need to control the outcome on their terms. Consequently, concerns regarding parental over-reaction and resulting loss of control over how the situation should be addressed, played a significant part in their decision not to report to an adult caregiver. Such parental over-reaction indicates a lack of listening to adolescents, a lack of consultation with them, and a lack of appreciation of their fears. As a result, it is no surprise that the majority of this group of informants expressed lack of confidence about the potential for successful adult intervention and a fear that such intervention could, in fact, exacerbate the problem. Studies in the US (e.g. De Lara 2012; Juvonen and Gross, 2008) have identified such concerns as factors inhibiting adolescents from confiding in parents. This study confirms that Irish adolescents share those concerns.

Whilst parental concern and the wish to protect their children from abuse via technology-mediated communication is perfectly understandable, it is not surprising that adolescents would resist reporting to parents who are then seen to act unilaterally without regard to adolescents' fears regarding consequences. One implication of this finding is that parents are most likely to provide effective help to adolescents if they communicate with their child in an autonomy-promoting manner, one in which healthy media habits are established long before a cyberbullying incident occurs. Such an environment is likely to encourage reporting of such incidents, as the adolescent will be more secure of his or her needs being considered in formulating an appropriate response. This finding and its implications represent an opportunity for parents who are attuned to the emotional needs and concerns of their children, - (i.e. parents who listen, who actively consult with their children as to the most appropriate response and who are attuned to their situation) – such parents are more likely to engender adolescent trust and confidence that they will respond in a way that is appropriate and where the context and needs of the adolescent are viewed as paramount. These findings are consistent with those of Willard (2006) who found that adolescents did not report cyberbullying behaviour due to a perception that 'adults, teachers, or parents will not understand' and this lack of understanding would

lead to an over-reaction (p.29). Therefore, this knowledge extends our understanding by showing that the type of approach most conducive to encouraging adolescent reporting of cyberbullying should be consultative and collaborative, rather than hierarchical and authoritative.

### **6.3.1.2 Lack of Trust in Teachers**

Adolescents need to be able to trust their chosen reportee. However, the study findings showed that some of these adolescents did not have confidence in teachers as a reportee. In some cases, they had a deeply entrenched resistance to reporting to teachers. That lack of confidence derived from two factors that were repeatedly referenced. Firstly, a consistent theme emerged of teachers “taking over” the problem and making it worse, rather than working with the adolescent on achieving a satisfactory outcome. This again points to the importance of perceived control in influencing adolescent reporting of their experiences. A parallel theme emerged of dissatisfaction with the way in which the teacher treated the reporting adolescent, where the reporter was regarded as the source of the problem. As a result, in some cases, reporting a cyberbullying experience to a teacher was perceived as having potential to exacerbate a problem situation rather than resolving it. The concerns of this group of Irish adolescents and the potential of those concerns to influence the reporting decision confirm findings obtained in other countries such as in America (e.g. Underwood 2003). However, these findings also have implications for theory on a number of levels. The first relates to the perceived legitimacy of teachers as a credible agent for reporting cyberbullying. The majority of schools have a policy for dealing with bullying (and cyberbullying). Indeed, the results of this study confirm this fact. However, there appears to be a disconnection between the existence of that policy and its enactment, a fact that has either been observed or experienced by some of the students who participated in this study. Consequently, some of these students did not perceive teachers as competent or trusted authority figures when it comes to reporting cyberbullying experiences. To some degree this reflects a changing perception of teachers in Ireland. Over the past two decades the blanket assumption that students perceive all teachers as legitimate and trusted authority figures has been questioned (Arum, 2003). Legitimate and trusted authority is made up of perceptions of fairness, a willingness to accept an authority’s decision, and an obligation to follow the authority’s rules (Tyler and DeGoey 1995). This study shows that these

perceptions of fairness are lacking in relation to how reports of cyberbullying are addressed by teachers. Consequently, there is no interest on the part of some adolescents to engage with teachers on this issue, and consequently the reporting silence persists.

The second implication of this lack of trust from some students in teachers (in relation to cyberbullying reporting) is that it is likely to affect these student-teacher relationships on a broader level, such as discipline in classroom settings. For example, schools are comprised of a complex web of social exchanges. Within that web, authority and trust generation is negotiated in social relationships and within the context of legitimacy (Weber, 1947). Positive teenager-teacher relationships are constructed both inside and outside classrooms and their results are evident in student academic engagement. For the few younger (male 13-year-old) students in this study who considered that they would turn to a teacher for help if they ever experienced cyberbullying, this was based on their positive personal relationships with a particular member of teaching staff, rather than a general trust in school staff or confidence in the school anti-bullying policy. Whilst this distinction is important and points to a positive interaction experiences for these students with their teachers, it has to be noted that the teacher-student relationship has natural boundaries that must be respected. Therefore, the diminished level of trust in teachers that was expressed by older students in this sample may very well be a reflection of discipline-related factors and other dynamics that also need consideration.

In summary, whilst scholars frequently reference the importance of trust between teachers and students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), insight into the reasons for its absence is in short supply. The results obtained in this study provide insights into what influences trust generation between teachers and students. It provides granular evidence and self-reported insights into the reasons for why teachers are predominantly not viewed by some of this sample of gifted adolescents as trusted authority figures in relation to reporting of cyberbullying. Moreover, the fact that students recounted that they had observed non-satisfactory outcomes for other students who had reported cyberbullying incidents, and that this had subsequently influenced their own non-reporting decisions, is in line with social cognitive theory which contends that when individuals observe others performing a behaviour and

view the consequences of that behaviour, they use that information to guide their own subsequent behaviour. Clearly, consistent fair treatment of those adolescents who do report cyberbullying influences more than the adolescent concerned. It lays the path for others to report to teachers. These insights provide valuable learning points for those involved in anti-bullying policy development and its implementation in schools.

### **6.3.1.3 Negative Reporting Experiences**

The degree to which this group of Irish adolescents were so deeply entrenched against reporting cyberbullying to teachers is unsurprising. It confirms findings obtained by Slonje and Smith (2008) in the UK who found that teachers were rarely informed, as well as those obtained by O'Neill and Dinh (2013), which found that only 6% of Irish students (aged 9-16) reported their cyberbullying experience to a teacher. De Lara (2012) provides similar findings from her sample of US adolescents. However, whilst these studies have reported frequency of non-reporting, none of them has provided insight into the reasons underpinning that resistance. However, this study extends our understanding of this issue by showing that reporting to teacher resistance derives from adolescents' personal or observed experiences, rather than social influence as is frequently cited. It provides detailed insights into influencing factors, such as the sense of betrayal that adolescents recounted when they had reported their experiences to teachers, but were not taken seriously, or were blamed for the incident. Worryingly, several students reported incidents where school staff failed to act on reported cyberbullying, such as a female student who was blocked from progressing her concerns to the Principal. Whether in the vast scale of cyberbullying experiences, this remains an isolated case or is more common is not quite clear, but the findings obtained in this study certainly point to a concern on behalf of adolescents regarding the perceived ability of school-staff to respond both proportionately and effectively to adolescent experiences of cyberbullying. Such experiences may perpetuate a perception amongst female adolescents in particular that teachers resist helping victims of cyberbullying and further compound an already difficult experience. Just as De Lara (2008) found with her (US) sample of students, these Irish adolescents reported that the bullying continued unabated, and as a consequence they then withdrew from confiding in teachers.

Moreover, the study findings have important implications in relation to an apparent disconnect that would seem to exist in many school environments between the written anti-bullying policy and adolescent experience of its implementation. It is important to note, however, that these findings are based on the perception of the adolescents in this study and may not reflect that experience of teachers. Therefore, further work is required that focuses on the experience and perception of the teaching community in relation to this issue. This would not only provide a balanced perspective on the issue, but also would also enable greater understanding and provide a more objective picture regarding this issue. However, at present, and based on the experiences of these adolescents, there does not appear to be any systematic or transparent process that is consistently followed by schools when cyberbullying is reported. In many cases, neither the student nor their parent has any knowledge of how the complaint is being processed and to obtain that knowledge required that they proactively insisted on its provision. Clearly, this is neither a satisfactory nor effective way of dealing with cyberbullying complaints for students, parents or teachers. Such insights have practical implications for principals, teachers, boards of management and policy makers regarding the need to systemise responses to reported cyberbullying incidents and the needs for greater clarity in communicating at each stage of that response. Without that level of transparency, neither students nor their parents are likely to have trust in schools to successfully address bullying incidents, and non-reporting will continue. Researchers such as Moore and Minton (2011) have speculated that the explanation for adolescent non-reporting in Ireland may in part derive from adolescent's perception of themselves as being more capable than teachers of dealing with their own negative online experiences or potentially a lack of confidence in the school's abilities to deal with bullying (p.40). The findings obtained in this study confirm that speculation, but additionally provide empirical evidence that the lack of confidence derives directly from negative experiences (or observed experiences) of informing teachers, and furthermore that those negative experiences are more widespread than was previously thought. As past experience predicts future behaviour, adolescent resistance to confide in teachers is therefore unsurprising.

It is difficult to understand why the teachers in whom these Irish adolescents had confided their cyberbullying experiences were perceived to have been unhelpful

without eliciting the perspective of those teachers. This study sought to explore the experiences of a specific group of intellectual gifted adolescents and needs to be seen as such. However, it is possible that it relates to adolescents' and adults' differing interpretation of what constitutes cyberbullying – an issue that has been frequently cited by some researchers (such as De Lara, 2012; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefhooge, 2002). In addition, as teachers are as prone to bias as any other professional, it is also conceivable that the reputation of the student might influence the teacher's evaluation of whether cyberbullying did take place and more importantly who provoked it. For example, in their (2012) study, Holfeld and Grabe reference the observation made by a teacher who indicated that a student's reputation can influence teachers' perceptions of the honesty of their report and that, if a student has a poor reputation at school, teachers may be less likely to believe them when they come forward with critical information. However, as the students who comprised the focus group samples in this study are high achievers, it is difficult to see how this explanation could reasonably apply to so many of them. It should be pointed out that whilst the experiences and perceptions of students are not disputed, it is important to remember that context may also play a part in influencing perceptions of teacher passivity in the immediate aftermath of a cyberbullying complaint. For example, from a teacher's perspective it may be difficult to immediately ascertain the veracity of a complaint of cyberbullying and the teacher may perceive the need for further investigation before taking action. In part, this is due to an awareness that online disputes and bullying behaviour may have originated in the school environment or elsewhere offline with the victim responding in kind, which at times can make it difficult to discern between bully and victim, or indeed identification of the original perpetrator. As a result, recognition that the online "bully" can, in fact, become a "bully-victim" is an important factor that teachers often bear in mind and one which is supported by previous findings in the literature regarding the bully-victim dynamic (for example, O'Moore, 2013, O'Moore and Minton, 2011, O'Moore, et al., 1997, Olweus, 1997; 1993). Nonetheless, it points to the urgent need for the implementation of a more effective, systematic and transparent process in schools, one which will enable teachers to examine allegations of cyberbullying speedily and thoroughly in a way which allows them to gain the trust of students. It is hoped that the new anti-bullying policy (DES, 2013) instituted for all Irish schools (primary and post-primary) will go some way to addressing these concerns given that the guidelines

now incorporate responses to cyberbullying behaviour. However, based on the reports of the adolescents involved in this study, which were obtained in 2014, it is clear that a school-wide systematic response process has not yet been satisfactorily implemented on a national level.

In summary, insights gained from this research indicate that Irish adolescents frame their reporting decisions in terms of the likelihood of negative consequences. Many do not report cyberbullying experiences due to the fact that parents are not viewed as being au-fait with social-media technology and would over-react when told about cyberbullying, thereby exacerbating the problem. Student trust in teachers to effectively address cyberbullying was particularly low due to negative personal or observed experiences of consequences for those who had reported their experiences. There appears to be no systematic process for dealing with cyberbullying that is consistently followed by all teachers and communicated to students and parents. This creates a random and untrustworthy outcome for students who do report cyberbullying, one that can only have negative repercussions for teacher-student relationships in the classroom.

#### **6.4 Gender-Related Outcomes**

Whilst various factors influencing reporting behaviour were found to be shared by both male and female participants in this dissertation, certain distinctions arose between both genders when choosing to report or not to report, the choice of reportee, and impact experienced. This is now discussed in more detail in tandem with findings from the literature.

##### **6.4.1 Gender-Influenced Reporting Behaviour**

The literature suggests that gender may play a part in influencing behaviour and the findings of the focus groups confirm that fact in relation to reporting of cyberbullying behaviour. For example, whilst fear of consequences of reporting emerged as a persistent concern that informed the reporting response of all adolescents, the type of consequences that were feared varied according to gender. Male adolescents' resistance to report appears to stem from a culturally derived "macho" perception of the need for self-reliance and the perception of asking for help as a weakness. As a result, the male adolescents in this study were highly resistant to asking adults for

help, but also less likely to confide in peers. This is a particularly worrying finding in an Irish context in light of the fact that Irish male adolescent suicide figures remain six times higher than is the case for girls and over twice the EU average (McMahon et al, 2014). These findings confirming male Irish adolescents' resistance to report are consistent with those obtained by Holfeld and Grabe (2012) who found that over half of their (US) sample felt they could handle cyberbullying experiences on their own and wanted to minimise the significance of the cyberbullying they were experiencing. As fear of being perceived as weak remains a predominant concern for adolescent males and reporting to an adult is equally negatively construed, it is difficult to see how reporting behaviour can be changed without attempting to address these perceptual issues in the first instance. This is more likely to be successfully achieved through being addressed at a school policy level in which a zero-tolerance of bullying policy is seen to be actively enforced, where male reporting is repositioned as a strong behaviour that is commended and thereby legitimized, and where parents of male students are encouraged to keep lines of communication with their sons open and to recognise signs of cyberbullying.

Whilst female informants in this study were also reluctant to confide in adults about their cyberbullying experiences, they were not as entrenched as males in that resistance. A small number of female students stated that should they ever experience cyberbullying they would approach a parent (usually their mother). Two key elements may influence such a decision – (i) a strong developed bond between the parent and child; (ii) trust in a parent based on knowledge of the parent's persona/temperament and capabilities in resolving the problem. Notwithstanding whether this is case, it should be noted that these particular students had never actually been cyberbullied and as Minton and Moore (2011) found, intention to report does not always manifest in actual behaviour. However, a key gender-based difference related to the fact that female students did not perceive informing peers of their experiences as a weakness, but rather welcomed it as a supportive and bonding behaviour. In part, this can be explained by the work of Tannen (2004; 1995) on cultural and social expectations that are impressed on children from an early age. She found that males consider asking for help as putting them in a weaker one-down position, whilst females tend to socialise in pairs and perceive talking about their troubles with friends as a connecting experience that enables greater bonding. It is

worth noting that whilst a minority of the female informants admitted informing their female parent of their experiences, no male informant admitted informing a parent of either gender of his experiences of cyberbullying. One implication of this finding is that it points to the fact that school-based or social club initiatives, which could enable male-male or male-female discussions regarding cyberbullying experiences, are likely to represent more effective contexts for encouraging adolescent expression of cyberbullying experiences. One additional point of note is that although cyberbullying was not as frequent an experience for the male adolescents in this sample, when it did occur, they tended to perceive it differently, viewing it as a normal rite of passage in school. This is consistent with the findings of De Lara (2012). The reason for this may relate to the fact that males tend to socialise in an activity-based hierarchical manner with less emphasis on verbal communication (Tannen, 2004), than would be case for females. In such hierarchical structures (e.g. sports), some individuals naturally emerge as more dominant than others and as a result, what would typically be perceived as bullying language or behaviour is frequently described as simply normal male banter within that context. That male dominance dynamic translates equally to the technology-mediated communication environment, where male-male communication may be less frequent, but is likely to be more abrasive than would be the case for females.

#### **6.4.2 Gender and Cyberbullying Impact**

The findings of this study suggest that cyberbullying exerts a greater emotional impact on female adolescents due to their increased need for social cohesion and resulting fear of social ostracization. In the main, female adolescents exhibited a greater need to fit in with their peers and be socially accepted, and consequently threats to their social cohesion are perceived as more significant. As a result, they tend to internalise the cyberbullying experience to a greater degree than would be the case for males. A key implication of this finding is that for any attempt to successfully address the impact of cyberbullying on females, it must be sensitive to the social context within which the student exists and not seek to weaken membership of their social grouping. It points to the need for the reportee, whether principals, teachers or parents, to recognise the importance of such social dynamics for females when seeking to resolve cyberbullying incidents.

The fact that females are more strongly impacted also relates to the differing nature of the cyberbullying experience for girls. For example, female students in this study reported being the subject of relationship gossip and negative comments regarding their personal appearance, far more frequently than was the case for male students. Their cyberbullying experiences were predominantly relationally focused with the express intention of ensuring humiliation and social exclusion of the individual, maximizing the scope of their public humiliation and their sense of ostracization. Although not exclusively the case, the majority of females in this study reported that the cyberbullying had been effected by female peers who made comments via technology platforms, disseminating them widely and repeatedly, whilst in some cases, groups of girls cyberbullied a common target on an on-going basis. The tendency of females to focus on the appearance of other females may be explained in part by the Two-Culture theory, which proposes that the distinctive play styles of the two sexes manifest themselves in distinctive cultures that develop within boys and girls groups as children grow older (Maccoby, 1998; Crombie & Desjardins, 1993). Girls do tend to rely on more indirect forms of aggression than is the case for boys, and therefore these findings are in line with previous work (Kowalski and Limber, 2007) in other countries, which found that girls engaging in cyberbullying behaviour outnumber boys. Whilst the results of this study confirm that finding and suggest that girls tend to rely on more indirect forms of aggression as typified in cyberbullying, it is worth noting other factors (such as context) which may provide further explanatory details behind female-female cyberbullying. For example, many of the students reported that they knew of peers who engaged in cyberbullying, but would never behave that way in public, which raises the issue as to why they would do so in an a technology-mediated context. This may be partly explained by digital or online identity, which is the psychological identity of the individual in the cyberspace environment. It facilitates the opportunity for individuals to create a persona and to enact a behaviour that is different to their usual perceived personality and behaviour in the physical world. Other variables influence this difference in persona and behaviour, particularly the opportunity to remain anonymous and unidentified. Students reported that when cyberbullying perpetrators were challenged, such students tended to “water down” their virtual or online behaviour, attempting to excuse it. The perceived social unacceptability of female aggression and the benefits

of digital anonymity may therefore encourage the increased adoption of female-female cyberbullying.

Male adolescents also differed from females in terms of how they dealt with cyberbullying through one-to-one confrontation, thereby lessening its impact. However, direct confrontation infers that the perpetrator can be identified, which is not always the case, particularly for female-female cyberbullying. In many cases, female adolescents reported removing themselves from particular social groups online, an outcome that confirms the findings of Nansel, et al. (2001) who found that non-reporting behaviour can result in the adolescent choosing to self-ostracize from previous social groups in order to control social interaction problems. Awareness of the implications of such actions provides valuable indicators for the adolescent's parents and those concerned with their emotional and social well-being. The intensity and duration of adolescent females' experiences of cyberbullying also differed from that of male informants, with a number of female students describing experiences that had persisted unremittingly over a period of years. Such findings regarding a greater number of female adolescents experiencing cyberbullying is paralleled by a number of studies in other countries, including that of Holfeld and Grabe (2012) in the US. The intensity, duration and personal nature of this cyberbullying behaviour increased the impact on the victim. This is unsurprising as psychological research shows that acceptance and belonging amongst children with peers and family is critical to their healthy psychological development (e.g. Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Crick & Zahn-Waxler, 2003). This study therefore confirms those findings and extends our insight by providing a level of detail regarding the experiences that was previously unavailable.

Whilst being the target of social aggression can be a devastatingly hurtful experience for both genders (Sharp, 1995), the female participants in these focus groups reported a more pronounced distress. This finding is consistent with research by Bauman and Newman (2012), which found that perceived levels of distress associated with cyberbullying were significantly higher among adolescent females than their male counterparts. The fact that some of these female informants were still distressed by experiences, which in some cases had taken place 2 years previously, confirms not only the psycho-social effects resulting from cyberbullying, but also that indirect

bullying is more harmful than its direct form (Bauman, 2010; Bauman and Summers, 2009; Baldry, 2004; Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Sharp, 1995) for Irish adolescents. For example, the serious psychosocial effects of cyberbullying experiences reported by the female adolescents in this study, such as a desire to avoid school, confirms the negative effects of cyberbullying on educational outcomes. Therefore, repeated school absences may provide an indicator or warning signal to a parent or teacher that all is not right in the adolescent's world and indicate the need for vigilance to identify if cyberbullying is causing these outcomes.

The reasons why the female adolescents in this study reported greater distress as a result of cyberbullying experiences relate to the fact that they feared social humiliation amongst their peers to a greater degree than was the case for males. As the desire for emotional and social attachment is stronger amongst females than males (Crick and Zahn-Waxler, 2003), adolescent girls' friendships tend to be more exclusive than those of boys (Hallinan 1980), and they are particularly sensitive to the importance of protecting social relationships (Collins & Laursen, 1992). Adolescent girls' friendships also tend to be more exclusive than those of boys (Hallinan 1980). As a result, the psychological distress reported by adolescent girls who have been the target of social aggression is likely to relate to their sensitivity to the importance of protecting social relationships, a sensitivity that is paramount for them during this developmental period (Collins & Laursen, 1992). It is therefore unsurprising that this group of female informants reported such distress. Reference was made to suicidal thoughts, either in relation to themselves, or as related to them by their friends who had experienced cyberbullying. Again, such references are consistent with findings obtained in other countries including that of Schenk (2011). The findings of these focus group interviews should not be interpreted to indicate that male adolescents are less distressed by their experiences of cyberbullying, but simply that the female members of this group of informants reported greater distress outcomes.

It is worth noting that the informants in this study did not lay emphasis on the technology platform that was used. For both genders, it was the *context* and *nature* of the incident that distressed them more than the method of how it was enacted (i.e. the technology platform). It would appear, therefore, that form is not the distinguishing feature associated with level of distress, a finding that confirms research conducted in

other countries (e.g. Bauman and Newman, 2012). The devastating impact of these experiences on the individual can be understood through the lens of social impact theory (Latane 1981) which contends that extent of impact is the result of social forces including the strength of the source of impact, the immediacy of the event, and the number of sources exerting the impact. The differing nature of the cyberbullying experience for this sample of Irish female adolescents is consistent with that obtained from the international literature (Kowalski and Limber, 2007; Maccoby, 1998; Crombie and Desjardins, 1993; Paquette & Underwood, 1999; Underwood, 2003; Sharp, 1995; Collins and Laursen, 1992). However, the results of this study extend existing work in this area in two key ways; *Firstly*, as the first study of its kind in an Irish context, it confirms that cyberbullying experience exerts a greater impact on Irish female adolescents, thereby providing considerable support for the body of researchers who contend that gender-based impact outcomes may be culture independent. *Secondly*, the majority of international studies on cyberbullying have measured and captured impact in a broad-based way, but did not provide granular self-reported descriptions of the actual nature of the impact. On the other hand, this study provides powerful narratives, which were self-reported and based on the experience of a large sample of female adolescents. These have implications for those involved in provision of adolescent female education, as well as for parents. For example, the unique insights that they contain have potential to generate greater awareness of and sensitivity to the extent of cyberbullying impact on female adolescents for teachers and policy makers, as well as parents. They also provide an urgent impetus for the reformulation of school policies to specifically address female-female cyberbullying – in terms of prevention, addressing existing complaints, and post-experience support provision.

As previously stated, for both genders, the most common choice of reportee was their peers or older siblings. However, female informants were more likely to confide in peers than was the case for males. Reasons for this included the bonding and support that takes place amongst females when discussing troubles, the empathy of the peer and their ability to relate to the situation and understand its impact on the adolescent. In addition to peers, the effectiveness of the support that the adolescents in this study received from their older siblings was particularly evident. There are several reasons that peers and siblings were considered the most trusted and also the most competent

in dealing with cyberbullying for several reasons. The first is that they share communication in the virtual world of social media, it is clear that there is strong commonality between adolescents in terms of social interaction and this interaction is exclusive of adult infringement. It is far easier to relate issues to others within the same social circle who may also experience the same or similar issues, and therefore understand its impact; there is also the possibility that peers may be already familiar with the issue, which facilitates having to explain to an adult. The other student or older sibling may know the perpetrators and the social dynamics relevant to the bullying episode enabling a more accurate and balanced response than is possible with an adult. A second reason for confiding in peers or siblings relates to the fact that many female adolescents favoured speaking with a close peer as a confidante prior to speaking with an adult as problems resolved by peers sharing the same social group tended to be less “complicated” and have less far reaching consequences. It meant they were not snitches and not perceived as weak. A third reason for confiding in peers or sibling related to the lack of repercussions. Adolescents tend to relate their problem to a peer or sibling rather than an adult in the first instance; this usually takes the form of advice regarding the best way to proceed; it is a safe approach; if peers cannot assist there is always the option to go to a parent or teacher. Finally, peers and siblings can empathise regarding problems; this was particularly noticeable amongst female students sharing the same social groups; common experiences led to shared feelings, something to which adults could not relate.

A valuable insight gained for the first time from this study relates to the fact that several of the informants described how their siblings had recounted to them that they had themselves been cyberbullied and it was only now that they felt capable of articulating their cyberbullying experiences to someone else and at the time of its occurrence had not told their parents or teachers. The reluctance to report their cyberbullying experiences until a period of time had passed may be explained by the need for psychological and physical separation from the experience; the perspective that time and a new peer environment can provide. Moreover, the trusted nature of siblings as a reporting source has implications for parents, as an older sibling may be able to provide support that would otherwise be absent for many adolescents. It also has implications for teachers responsible for delivery of social and personal development classes, as past pupils will represent a more legitimate source of

authority for discussion of how best to deal with cyberbullying than do teachers. Similarly, it represents an opportunity for those involved in provision of social club/ after-school club activities for adolescents, as it points to the greater legitimacy of older siblings to generate open forum discussions about how to deal with cyberbullying, and the greater acceptability of their advice and support for adolescents who refuse to discuss their experiences with adults.

### 6.5 Model of Cyberbullying Reporting Response

The model of cyberbullying reporting response that emerges from this research (Figure 6.1) is based on both the survey and interview findings. In line with the work of Moore and Minton (2012), it distinguishes between adolescent reporting intention and actual reporting behaviour. Moreover, it draws on the strong theoretical foundations of multiple trust, perceived risk, education studies and psychology-based conceptualizations. The three main factors which it proposes as influencing cyberbullying reporting behaviour are consistent with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), which maintains that the intention to engage in behaviour is predicted by three factors: beliefs and outcome evaluation, normative beliefs, and control beliefs i.e. perceived self-efficacy and control over the performance behaviour.

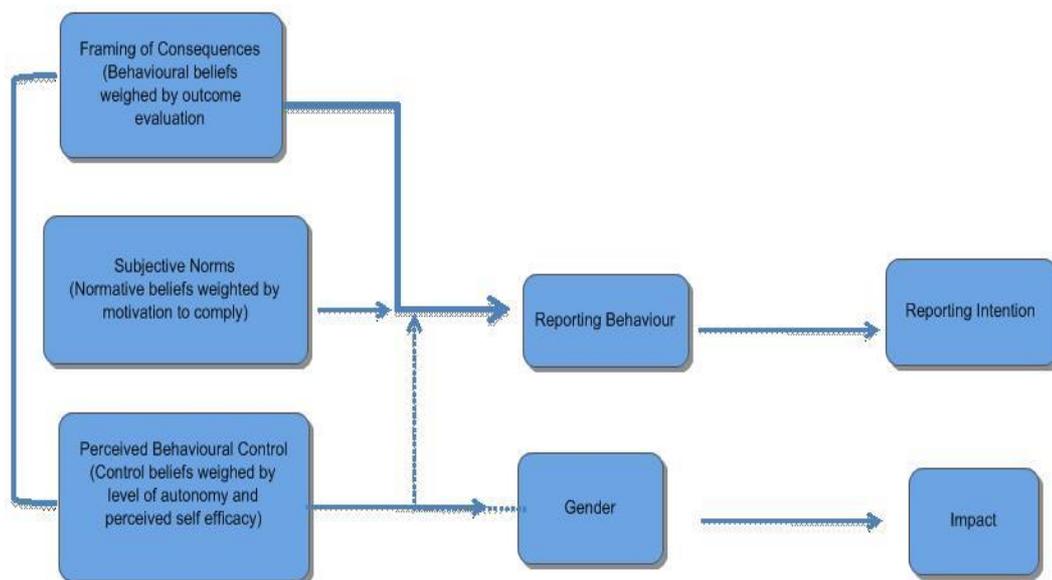


Figure 6.1. Revised Model of Cyberbullying Reporting Response derived from this study.

This model incorporates the results of this study in the following ways. *Firstly*, it shows that adolescents evaluate and frame their reporting decision in terms of their beliefs regarding the costs or potential consequences of that reporting behaviour, consequences such as parental over-reaction and withdrawal of communication platforms, potential loss of autonomy in resolving the issue, perceived credibility and trustworthiness of teachers to effectively resolve the problem (based on experience or observation) and beliefs as to whether reporting will negatively impact their existing social group positioning. *Secondly*, the model recognises that peers and siblings exert a significant influence on adolescents' reporting intentions and behaviour. In doing so, it incorporates understanding provided by social cognitive theory, as well as the work of social influence researchers such as Underwood (2003) and Bandura (1999), who have shown that adolescents' beliefs and behaviour are influenced by others with whom they interact, in this case peers and siblings. *Thirdly*, the model also recognises that adolescents' control beliefs influence their reporting response. A control belief is the individual's perception that they have the skills, resources and opportunities to engage in a particular behaviour. In this case, the adolescents' control beliefs relate to their autonomy and perceived self-efficacy in dealing with the cyberbullying issue. For example, when autonomy in dealing with the issue is respected, the adolescent is more likely to report to an adult. Similarly, control beliefs regarding self-efficacy in dealing with the cyberbullying incident will influence the adolescent's reporting decision. This recognition of the role of control beliefs on intention and behavioural outcomes is consistent with social psychology models such as the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen, & Fishbein, 1980), the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), and psychology models specific to IT usage such as the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behaviour (Taylor and Todd, 1995). In particular, it points to the need for the adolescent to maintain control over the reporting behaviour in terms of potential outcomes. That requires increased awareness and greater sensitivity to the importance of this issue on the part of adults. *Fourthly*, these three factors are interlinked. For example, if the adolescent's evaluation of the potential outcomes of reporting are negative, even if his or her level of self efficacy in dealing with the situation is low and parental or teacher intervention is highly desirable, the adolescent is unlikely to seek their intervention by informing them of the

cyberbullying experience. Similarly, even if peers encourage reporting, in cases where evaluation of consequences is negative, the adolescent's motivation to comply with peer wishes is likely to be weak. However, the opposite will also apply where consequences of reporting are positive, but peer influence dictates that it is unacceptable to inform parents or teachers. In summary, the weighting attributed to these three core influences will determine intention to report cyberbullying and must inform any school or parental intervention. *Finally*, the model recognises that gender moderates the relationship between evaluation of reporting risks and actual reporting outcomes, with males framing risks in terms of image and self-perception, whilst females evaluate reporting risks in terms of social costs. Both however influence reporting outcomes. Similarly, gender moderates the relationship between normative influence and actual reporting outcomes, with girls more likely to perceive confiding in peers (and to a lesser extent to parents) as a legitimate social action, than would be the case for males.

By distinguishing between intention and behaviour, this model provides a more accurate representation of the fact that adolescent intention to report does not necessarily manifest in reporting behaviour. In many cases, other factors must be considered for that outcome to be achieved, such as the weighting attributed to peer influence or the weighting of consequences. This distinction between intention and behaviour incorporates the work of researchers such as Mayer et al., (1995) on Risk Taking in Relationship (RTR) and is consistent with social psychology models such as the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985), the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behaviour (Taylor and Todd, 1995) and the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen and Fishbein, 1980). Distinguishing between framing evaluation beliefs and behaviour also allows other factors that cause reporting intention to progress into behaviour to be identified. For example, this model recognises that reporting behaviour is subject to normative influences such as peer sanctioning of the activity itself. This is consistent with the research findings and with the literature. For example, social psychology models such as those mentioned above, consider social influence such as normative beliefs as a determinant of action. In summary, this model is a representation of Irish adolescents' reporting responses. Based on the study findings, it provides a more accurate understanding of the factors that influence reporting beliefs and behaviour. It shows that a combination of three

sets of beliefs: framing beliefs, normative beliefs and control beliefs, as well as the weighting attributed to each of them, can be used to explain the individual's progression from intention to report cyberbullying to actual reporting behaviour.

This model has both potential practical and theoretical value. It provides increased insight into the nature of the reporting response as observed in the behaviour of adolescents who have experienced or observed cyberbullying. By providing a more refined understanding of the predictors of cyberbullying reporting response, it makes a valuable contribution not only to cyberbullying research but also to the overall body of social science, educational studies and gifted education research. That understanding has implications for parents and educators. This research provides parents with greater insight into what adolescents fear most when they confide about their cyberbullying experiences, it points to the need for consultative approaches, and emphasises the effectiveness of siblings in evaluating how to approach the cyberbullying problem, as well as providing insights into the role of gender in influencing reporting outcomes and the nuances which result in differing impacts on male and female adolescents. That understanding can be used to more effectively manage the relationship between parents and their children both now and into the future. One of the most valuable insights provided by this research relates to the reasons why adolescents do not report to teachers based on the gap between stated anti-bullying school policies and lived or perceived experience of same.

The new model that emerges from the present research is valid in an Irish context. It is not claimed that this model will necessarily hold true in other cultures. The model is based on in-depth interviews with adolescents. The advantage of interviewing in this context is that it enables a dialogue to develop and to ensure that there is a clear understanding of concepts as well as exploring issues that might not be within the fixed confines of the survey. For these reasons the interviews provide significant levels and depths of insight into the factors that predict Irish adolescents' reporting intentions and behaviour post experience of cyberbullying. These factors include the adolescent's framing of consequences (which has been shown to be central to reporting intention), as well as the reporting experiences of peers, evaluation of school policy credibility, peer and sibling influence, and perceived self-efficacy in dealing with the problem. The interviews establish that lack of trust in teachers, which

relates to the absence of a systematically enforced anti-bullying policy, is a critical inhibitor of adolescent reporting for this particular sample. They also provide a previously unavailable level of granularity in relation to the greater impact of cyberbullying on female adolescents. While this study advances our understanding of the factors that influence gifted adolescents' non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour, the impact of that experience and the factors that influence choice of reportee, further testing is required in other countries in order to establish whether the findings are culture independent, i.e. robust regardless of culture. Future research is also needed to progress towards a full understanding of the factors that influence adolescent reporting of cyberbullying in other cultures. Other researchers may, therefore, use the findings obtained in this study as a basis for investigating the factors that influence adolescent non-reporting of cyberbullying in other countries. The theoretical and practical recommendations arising from this research are outlined in the next chapter.

## **6.6 Summary**

This chapter discusses the study findings in the context of existing literature and knowledge of the factors influencing adolescent cyberbullying reporting response. The chapter starts by revisiting the research objectives and justification for the research. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the study findings treated under two main sections. Firstly, reporting inhibitors are considered in terms of adolescents' framing of the risks associated with reporting to an adult caregiver – both parents and teachers. The implications of adolescent lack of trust in teachers as a reporting source and the impact of their negative personal or observed experiences on reporting intention are examined. For the purpose of clarity, gender-related outcomes are treated in two sections – the first discusses the influence of gender on adolescent reporting response, whilst the second section focuses on the impact of cyberbullying when examined through the lens of gender. The issue between intention to report and actual behaviour was also discussed in detail. Deriving directly from this discussion, a revised model of adolescent cyberbullying reporting that is consistent with the three pillars of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985) is proposed, based on the findings from this study, and its contribution to the literature considered. This model provides a valuable graphic framework and foundation for future research in this field of study.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.0 Introduction

This research explored gifted adolescents' experience of cyberbullying. Specifically, it identified the factors that influence these adolescents' reporting responses: whether or not they report their experience and the reasons underlying their choice of reporting response. In addition, it explored perceptions of the effectiveness of adult interventions to address cyberbullying. In this chapter, key findings of the study are highlighted, implications of these findings are discussed and recommendations are made in light of the study findings and their implications. The limitations of the research are discussed and directions for future research are outlined.

### 7.1 Key Findings

The key findings obtained in this study relate to the development of an emerging model of cyberbullying reporting for gifted adolescents. Originally introduced in chapter 6 as figure 6.2, this tentative model has emerged from the literature reviewed in chapter 2 and the research findings presented in chapter five. This emerging model provides a back drop to the conclusions which are discussed in this final chapter and is consistent with the three pillars of Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985)

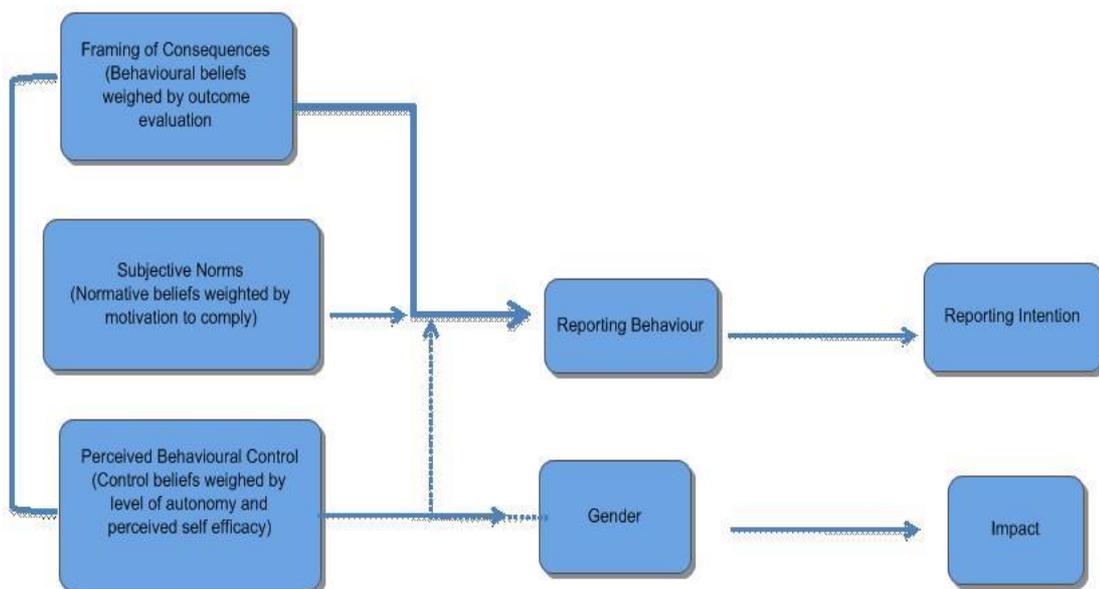


Figure 7.1 Emerging model of cyber bullying reporting.

The summary conclusions of this study are presented using Figure 7.1 as follows:

- When one considers framing of consequences and motivation to comply in the model above the following conclusions have been drawn. Gifted adolescent students understand the key elements of cyberbullying behaviour. However, intent can, at times, be difficult to establish as perceptions between both parties (perpetrator and target) can differ regarding online banter and serious intent to hurt or humiliate the intended target.
- Considering perceived behavioural control and level of autonomy from the model above. Adults are sometimes not perceived to be fair and balanced in their response to reports of cyberbullying in this sample of gifted adolescents. In some cases, the reporting adolescent was blamed or dismissed by teachers in particular. Reporting to parents was viewed as having potential for parental over-reaction with resulting removal of Internet privileges.
- In this sample of gifted adolescents, subjective norms were evident which were weighted by motivation to comply. approaches to cyberbullying behaviour vary across genders with female perpetrators focusing on personal attributes (e.g. physical appearance, dress, etc.) and attempts at social ostracization. With boys, the approach tends to be more general and less specific in nature.
- The impact of cyberbullying differs between both genders, with female informants of gifted adolescents reporting a more pronounced impact resulting from indirect bullying by their peers.
- Preferred methods of dealing with cyberbullying behaviour in this sample of gifted adolescents involved direct confrontation or indirectly blocking further communication (including “unfriending”) perpetrators on social media accounts.

- Framing of consequences can be linked to reasons for non-reporting with fears of (i) being labelled a “snitch” or less than “macho” where the culture supports a code of silence; (ii) social ostracization due to reporting cyberbullying incidents; (iii) lack of trust in adult caregivers to successfully resolve the problem; (iv) previous negative experiences with adult caregivers when such experiences were reported; (v) a sense of ability by the individual gifted adolescent in being able to deal with the situation or with the cooperation of siblings or peers.
- It was evident from the focus group interviews however that younger students (13-14 years old) tended to confide in teachers; older students (15-17) tended to confide in either peers or siblings.

The research findings enhance our understanding of cyberbullying in two main areas: (i) Factors influencing/inhibiting reporting response; and (ii) Gender-based outcomes (reporting response and impact).

### **7.1.1 Factors influencing/inhibiting Reporting Response**

Key to gifted adolescents reporting cyberbullying behaviour was a framing of the risks involved in such reporting to an adult caregiver. Linked to Figure 7.1 under framing of consequences weighted by outcome, there was a perceived lack of trust in some cases between the gifted adolescent and the teacher or parent. This perceived lack of trust was based on previous experiences or failure in the teacher or parents’ ability to successfully bring about a positive resolution to the problem. On review of the evidence, there were limited sources found of similar studies which focused on establishing the role of a framing dynamic. Specifically, in the context of cyberbullying which points to the need for adults understanding adolescents’ weighing up of factors relating to specific concerns reporting cyberbullying to parents. These factors include fear of loss of control over the situation and fear of parental over-reaction and withdrawal of privileges which link to perceived level of control and autonomy identified in the emerging model in Figure 7.1. In addition, there was a pre-conceived expectation or norms in some cases on how the gifted adolescent was expected to deal with the issue and school culture overruled formal

school policy, rendering such policies to be ineffective and impractical. Such concerns were considered to influence social standing amongst peers (i.e. reporting or being a “snitch” was considered to be “uncool” and the expectation was that the individual should personally deal with the issue. Allied to these factors were the individual’s perceived control beliefs (i.e. self-reliance and autonomy in making the decision to report or not; this was influenced on the individual’s maturity and self-confidence). Planned behaviour in gifted adolescents was not, however, always effected in practice. If self-efficacy was high and trust in adult caregivers was low this influenced reporting response. Similarly, if self-efficacy was low and there were no previous negative experiences by adult caregivers, the resulting outcome could be influenced by peer advice or peer assistance in resolving the issue.

This understanding can enhance parents and educators approach and insight into cyber bullying in gifted adolescents and points to the need for consultative approaches. It also emphasises the effectiveness of siblings and peers in evaluating how to approach the cyberbullying problem; it provides insights into the role of gender in influencing reporting outcomes and the nuances which result in differing impacts on male and female adolescents. That understanding can be used to more effectively manage the relationship between parents and their gifted children.

### **7.1.2 Gender-Based Outcomes**

Certain differences were identified between both genders (subjective norms) with regard to concerns relating to reporting cyberbullying behaviour in gifted adolescents. One significant difference was that whilst male adolescents tended to have concerns that reporting would identify them as being weak and less than “macho”, females were more concerned about social ostracization from their peers. However, this study also found that this difference between genders also meant that males were less reliant on peers for support whilst females turned to peers for emotional and practical support in resolving the issue. This is of concern given the higher rates of suicide amongst Irish male adolescents which, according to McMahon et al (2014) were found to be six times higher than was the case for girls and over twice the EU average.

A point worth noting is that, regardless of gender, a close-knit bond between parent and gifted child may facilitate open dialogue in discussing the issue in the first

instance. Trust, empathy and respect are values deriving from such a bond. It is fair to say that the closer the relationship between parent and child, the greater the chance of an open environment for dialogue when issues such as cyberbullying arise. However, the current study shows that there are differences between both genders regarding reporting behaviour. Whilst a minority of female adolescents stated that they informed their mother of cyberbullying behaviour experienced, no males said that they had informed a parent of such behaviour.

In terms of gaining insight from focus group interviews, females experience greater emotional stress than males. Females placed greater emphasis on social cohesion and being accepted as part of a larger social group than males. It is important, therefore, when addressing female experiences of cyberbullying behaviour, that the reportee be sensitive to the social context of the female adolescent. There can be no “one glove fits all” approach to both individual and gender-specific cases of cyberbullying behaviour.

In many cases, gifted female adolescents stated they removed themselves from certain online social groups and discontinued one-to-one friendships in school. These virtual and physical relationships are not always mutually exclusive of one another. It is important that parents are attuned to these social adjustments at the physical level, as they can be an indicator of online group social behaviour that can result in “ganging up” on an individual target. Following on from this family dynamic, the valued support of siblings was confirmed in this study. Many gifted students clarified in the focus group studies that older siblings had experienced similar behaviour at school, thus being empathetic and more experienced in dealing with such behaviour.

## **7.2 Recommendations**

A number of recommendations are proposed based on the findings of this study. These are relevant to a number of stakeholders when working with gifted adolescents and are discussed below.

### **7.2.1 Parents**

The study has highlighted that gifted adolescents’ concerns regarding parental over-reaction and adolescents’ resulting loss of control over how the situation should be

addressed, play a significant part in adolescents' decisions to not report to an adult caregiver. It is likely that many parents may not even be aware of the concerns that inhibit gifted adolescents from reporting their cyberbullying experiences, schools and Parents' Associations/ Councils have a unique and important role to play in increasing parental awareness. The following list is not intended to be prescriptive and simply provides some potential options that schools may consider:

- a) The Parents' Association or Council may consider it valuable to provide information evenings for parents that focus on developing greater awareness amongst parents of gifted adolescents regarding (1) the central role that communications technologies play in adolescents' lives and (2) how to effectively deal with cyberbullying when it comes to their attention. As many parents will not understand the degree to which adolescents depend on social media communications platforms, this type of discussion forum would provide a much-needed opportunity to learn from other parents and how they effectively dealt with cyberbullying incidents.
- b) There is a need to highlight the importance of parents opening channels of communication with their children regarding technology usage in an autonomy-promoting manner, one in which healthy media habits are established long before a cyberbullying incident occurs, and one in which the gifted adolescent will be more secure that his or her needs will be considered in formulating an appropriate response to such incidents. This could be achieved through provision of an information leaflet in information packs that are provided to parents in advance of their children joining the school.

Where it is deemed appropriate, schools may decide to highlight adolescent concerns, regarding reporting cyberbullying at parent-teacher meetings, at information evenings and at seminars specially designed to generate understanding of the gap between parent and adolescent perceptions on this issue. The Parent's Association or Council is a particularly valuable organisation as these parents are speaking from their own experience of parenting a child and as a result their advice often has greater impact. It would also be useful to consider inviting parents of past pupils who experienced

cyberbullying, to such information evenings to discuss how they identified and successfully addressed cyberbullying of their children.

### **7.2.2 Teachers**

This study has shown that sensitive treatment of the problem by teachers and an empathetic approach are key in promoting confidence in reporting cyberbullying behaviour in gifted adolescents. Whilst many teachers automatically do this, the findings of this study with this particular sample of gifted adolescents indicate that such an approach cannot be ah-hoc, but instead needs to be systematically embedded in school culture. The following recommendations are made for dealing with gifted adolescents when addressing cyberbullying behaviour:

- a) An emphatic and non-judgemental approach, placing emphasis on listening and allowing the student to discuss the experience and its impact on them;
- b) Open consultation with the student (and parent) regarding how best to address the situation, without exacerbating it and without compromising the social positioning of the student.
- c) Involvement of a school counsellor to support the student, if required.

Without sensitivity, reporting resistance cannot be overcome. Establishing such clear and more consultative lines of communication that are sensitive to gifted adolescent concerns is likely to generate greater trust in teachers and a reduction of the perceived risks associated with reporting, which in turn would develop an environment where reporting to teachers is perceived as being 'safe'. This enhances a positive development of school culture regarding these issues. It appears therefore, that in the first instance parents and teachers need to consult with adolescents regarding how to deal with cyberbullying incidences. There is no default solution to each individual problem and being heavy handed is likely to exacerbate the issue rather than alleviate it. Therefore, whilst school policies and a willingness to address cyberbullying is most definitely necessary, the ways in which it is addressed should involve the adolescent's wishes and be sensitive to their context.

### 7.2.3 School Managers

Schools face a greater challenge in successfully encouraging gifted adolescents to report their cyberbullying experiences to teachers. A critical point for many students is the perceived enforcement or practice of school anti-bullying policy. The majority of students reported that their schools did have a policy in relation to cyberbullying. However, in practice, the enforcement of this policy and how it permeated in terms of how teachers treated gifted adolescent students who encountered cyberbullying varied considerably. For the majority of respondents, whilst the school had a written policy, its existence was not a key factor in their decision to report experiences of cyberbullying behaviour. In the few cases where anti-cyberbullying policies were enforced successfully, the respondents were confident in reporting cyberbullying as they had seen that previous incidences were dealt with speedily and effectively. In short, cyberbullying was simply not tolerated in such environments due to the *active* culture of these schools.

As with most organisations, school culture is driven from the top and permeates through each layer of the establishment. Therefore, it is recommended that Principals implement a systematic, documented and transparent process for addressing cyberbullying with gifted adolescents, and one that will enable teachers to examine and address cyberbullying allegations speedily, thoroughly and transparently, so as to gain the trust of students. The following recommendations are not designed to be prescriptive. They are suggested as options that may assist in dealing with cyberbullying of gifted adolescents:

- a) Provision of a document to all new and existing staff regarding the systematic process to be adhered to in relation to all reported cyberbullying incidents.
- b) Inclusion of a discussion item in staff meetings that relates specifically to incidences of cyberbullying and how they are being addressed in line with the school cyberbullying policy. This would have the dual effect of increasing teachers' awareness of cyberbullying incidents, as well as increasing their sensitivity when relating to students.

- c) Provision of a copy of the school anti-bullying policy to all new students joining the school as well as their parents. This would outline the steps that will be followed should cyberbullying be reported to teachers. Such proactive communication of the specific steps that the school has committed to follow in addressing cyberbullying is likely to inspire greater confidence in both students and their parents that teachers will systematically address cyberbullying once reported. In tandem, this increased parental and adolescent awareness is likely to enhance school responsibility and transparency in addressing reported cyberbullying.
- d) Good governance is key to execution of all policy. The Boards of Management of many schools ensure that their school has an updated policy that clearly documents steps for addressing reports of cyberbullying; that the policy has been communicated and provided to teachers, adolescents and parents; that the minutes of staff meetings show that cyberbullying incidences have been identified and discussed at group level, and that the steps in addressing these incidents have been documented and are in line with school policy.

It is reasonable to suggest that such a systematic approach by school staff to cyberbullying behaviour will be observed by potential perpetrators, as much as those who have experienced such behaviour. The clear signal is that such behaviour will not be tolerated. However, this can only be achieved when the school policy is seen to be a practical and systematically enforced working policy with clear ramifications for those involved in such behaviour. In short, the school policy needs to be executed in practice and reflect an active culture on this issue, rather than being just an officious piece of paper.

#### **7.2.4 Class Prefects**

As adolescents have greater trust in their peers than in teachers, the school cyberbullying policy and the action plan for how cyberbullying will be addressed should be communicated to Class Prefects. Form teachers should then facilitate these students to communicate the fact that reporting of cyberbullying is a positive action

and that the issue will be sensitively and speedily dealt with by the school. In doing so, they will legitimize reporting behaviour for gifted adolescents, thereby removing the taboo of being less than “macho” or a “snitch” for breaking the previously accepted code of silence, which is particularly the case for boys. As a consequence, reporting of bullying behaviour can be cleverly repositioned as a strong and correct behaviour across all student age categories. In turn, positive outcomes based on initial reports of cyberbullying experience further strengthen the reporting culture within the school.

### **7.2.5 School Management**

the practical implications of this study point to the need for schools to develop a pre-emptive support framework which de-legitimizes female bullying of other females. Because social acceptance is a priority for many female adolescents, many of these adolescents display mimetic behaviour in their social grouping by collective bullying of another female. However, in the main, they have no awareness of the serious psychological impact of this behaviour on the victim. That increase in awareness can be developed in school-based Social and Personal Development Classes, where small-group “think tanks” are created to discuss the significant impact of cyberbullying behaviour on other females and where each person’s individual responsibility for their behaviour is highlighted. The benefits gained from collective bullying including gifted adolescents (i.e. social cohesion) can be further weakened by a greater emphasis on and legitimization of positive behaviours. For example, whilst cyberbullying is rightly negatively positioned, a greater emphasis and endorsement of kind female-female behaviour should be encouraged. This can be achieved via public acknowledgement and rewarding of positive female-female behaviour at school ceremonies, weekly assemblies and other similar events.

Whilst expression of female aggression is not usually socially acceptable, the fact that so many female adolescents use the anonymity offered by the Internet in order to engage in cyberbullying of their peers indicates that such aggression is a very definite reality that is unlikely to diminish in the future. Therefore, educators must be practical in their evaluation of how to channel that aggression into more positive routes of expression. This can be achieved via greater encouragement of female participation in sports activities and debating events that enable the expression and

release of aggression in a more productive and healthy way, whilst increasing social cohesion.

The Department of Education & Skills requires teachers to undertake Continuous Professional Development (CPD) courses. Therefore, it would be particularly helpful for Irish Colleges of Education and Universities to provide CPD modules that focus on increasing teachers' awareness of interventions that can successfully address gifted adolescent student cyberbullying. Moreover, at present the Department of Education is considering offering university-accredited courses in governance to school management boards. Should this initiative progress further, it would be helpful for the Schools of Education who would be developing and delivering this course to include modules that educate boards regarding their role in monitoring school execution of anti-cyberbullying policies and the need to proactively focus on elimination of student cyberbullying.

### **7.3 Limitations of the Research**

A number of limitations apply to the research as identified in this study. The first relates to the sample of participants. The second limitation relates to transcript confirmation and the final limitation relates to the need to hear the voice of teachers before formulating new school policies. These are discussed below.

#### **7.3.1 Limitations of the Participant Sample**

Access to a representative sample is always difficult to achieve in any study. The study explored the experiences of a specific group of intellectually gifted adolescents and needs to be seen as such. The sample size was limited as was the cultural context of the study. Whilst the findings regarding the nature of the cyberbullying experiences of gifted adolescents are similar to those obtained in other countries using general adolescent samples, a similar study using a sample of Irish adolescents drawn from the general population is necessary in order to state with confidence whether the results obtained in this study reflect the broader adolescent population.

#### **7.3.2 Limitations relating to Transcript Confirmation**

The focus group interviews consisted of three groups of adolescents who were coming to the end of their summer camp period in the Centre for Talented Youth. Due

to the fact that the focus groups were scheduled for the final week of their summer camp which was full of competing activities and the fact that the interviews took place in a group rather than individual situation, it was not possible to transcribe the interviews and present those scripts back to the students within the same week in order to gain their confirmation that this was indeed exactly representative. However, as the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the researcher is confident that the adolescents' narratives are accurately captured and represented therein. Moreover, whilst ideally the researcher does seek confirmation of transcript from individuals who participate in research interviews, as this sample of 59 students were interviewed in a group format rather than individually, it would have been difficult to obtain and have confidence in such group confirmation.

### **7.3.3 Limitations of Perspective**

The purpose of this study was to explore the reasons for gifted adolescent non-reporting of their cyberbullying experiences. The findings obtained provided significant insight into the experience of cyberbullying amongst this sample, including the reasons for that non-reporting response. Whilst some of these students (not all) were critical of how teachers had responded to their complaints, it is worth noting that due to the study focus, neither teachers nor principals were afforded the opportunity to counter those claims or indeed to provide their perspective as to why they responded in such a way. Therefore, whilst recommendations have been provided as to how schools could potentially modify or operationalize their approach to bullying with this particular group of adolescents, a note of caution should also be expressed, given that teachers did not participate in this research and as a result, their voice has not been heard. It is very possible that a teacher/school perspective on the cyberbullying complaint would provide a very different understanding of the teacher's response and of the reasons for that response, as compared to that of the student. The recommendations therefore serve as a guiding template whose purpose is to assist, rather than a definitive implementation list for all schools.

### **7.4 Additional Contribution**

The main contributions of this research to the literature and to our understanding of cyberbullying have already been outlined in detail. However, it is worth noting that whilst previous research has mostly focused on general aspects of cyberbullying

behaviour, such as technology usage, behavioural traits of perpetrators and reactionary responses by the targets of such behaviour, to-date, there has been very limited research on specific minority groups. The studies that have delved beyond research into general characteristics of cyberbullying have tended to be cross-comparative studies based on gender, age, culture and/or ethnicity and have employed general adolescent populations. Many recent studies have incorporated these influential variables in the study of cyberbullying behaviour and research in this field is gradually evolving into more unique and specific areas. However, whilst the study of this technology-enabled form of modern bullying has evolved considerably since previous decades to incorporate various unique aspects of the phenomenon, there are still significant gaps in the literature, which have not been addressed. One of these gaps, until now, has been the study of a specific minority group and their experiences of cyberbullying behaviour; that group (researched in this dissertation) were gifted youth. Their perspectives on cyberbullying behaviour will help us to understand the social and emotional impact on this unique group of adolescents and their responses to such behaviour.

Furthermore, this research has identified and addressed these gaps in the literature pertaining to the reasons why gifted children do not actively seek out the help of an adult caregiver in the first instance prior to an experience of cyberbullying behaviour. It has identified the importance of trust in a confidant and why this trust is lacking where adults (and, in particular parents) are concerned.

## **7.5 Directions for Future Research**

The model that emerges from this study enhances our understanding of the factors that influence gifted Irish adolescents' reporting response to cyberbullying. However, further exploration and testing of this model is required in other countries in order to establish whether it is culture independent (i.e. robust, regardless of culture). For example, adolescents from countries such as Japan or China which place a stronger emphasis on collectivism (rather than individualism as per Western European countries), may differ considerably in terms of the reporting risks that are considerations for them, and as well as the weighting which they attribute to peer influence and their perceived level of autonomy in dealing with cyberbullying.

As this study comprised a sample of gifted adolescents, a comparative study between the findings in this study and a general sample of Irish adolescents using the variables applied in this study would be valuable in providing insight as to whether impact of and responses to cyberbullying behaviour are influenced by cognitive ability. Furthermore, cyberbullying research into more unique critical areas aligned to this study would benefit similar marginal groups such as individuals with special needs (e.g. autism and ADHD). Such research would help identify and act as a predictor in safeguarding those most vulnerable in society by studying their behaviour and examining their experiences when online. There is currently a lack of research in this critical area and a greater understanding would help educators and caregivers in implementing protective measures for the most vulnerable in society.

While a school-specific approach was intentionally not used in this study, it would be interesting to test this model in relation to (i) boarding schools and (ii) denominational schools in order to determine whether the factors influencing reporting in this model remain consistent.

During the course of this research a number of factors emerged as worthy of further consideration. One such factor is the adolescent's perceived self-efficacy in dealing with cyberbullying and its influence on reporting intention. Where perceived self-efficacy was high, the adolescent was confident of dealing with the issue themselves, predominantly through online interaction. The four antecedents of interaction readiness (Liu, 2003) are the perceived risk of the interaction, the potential value of the interaction, congruency between the individual's technology expertise and the technology challenges of the mechanism, and the individual's traits (e.g. sociability). An investigation of the influence of all four antecedents of interaction readiness might provide greater insight into the factors that influence the adolescent's reporting response.

Whilst this study used an adolescent sample of gifted students, the perspectives of adult caregivers would provide different perspectives on the issue of non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour. Whilst this research has uncovered negative experiences by this sample of students, the opinions of school personnel may help identify alternate aspects to the lack of reporting cyberbullying experiences by adolescents to teaching

staff. It would also provide a more balanced perspective on the issue and provide a potential basis from which both adolescents and adults could understand each other's perspective.

Finally, the data collected in this research represents a single point in time. It would be interesting to return to 13-14 year old students in a number of years to see whether their reporting intention perspectives prevail and whether increasing familiarity with both the Internet and online communication interactions have changed their perspectives. Finally, although it would reduce its parsimony, the model might benefit from greater deconstruction of the variables as in Decomposed Theory of Planned Behaviour (Taylor and Todd, 1995), based on future research.

## **7.6 Conclusion**

Successful intervention and resolution of cyberbullying incidents is to a large degree dependent on such incidents being reported to an adult caregiver. However, adolescents who have been cyberbullied consistently resist informing others of their experiences and the literature has not been able to definitively identify the reasons for this, nor whether those reasons vary across culture. In part, this is due to the fact that studies into unique aspects of cyberbullying behaviour, and comparative to research into traditional (face-to-face) bullying, are in an embryonic stage. Of those studies that exist, many have been exploratory and descriptive in nature, employed small groups of respondents and focused on general cyberbullying behaviour. Consequently, the question as to whether the experiences of cyberbullying for gifted Irish adolescents differs from that of adolescents in other cultural contexts has been a matter of speculation, as has our understanding factors that influence adolescent non-reporting of their experiences. This research has contributed significantly to our understanding of this issue, by identifying the factors that influence Irish adolescents' non-reporting behaviour, as well as providing detailed insight into their experiences of cyberbullying with gifted adolescents. It is hoped that these insights will be used to facilitate the development of more effective strategies for addressing this problem and thereby reducing gifted adolescent cyberbullying. It is further hoped that the findings from this research may be of benefit to future research, in particular, to facilitate the development of reporting measures and protective strategies for the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in mainstream society.

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## APPENDIX A: CTYI LETTER OF SUPPORT

The Irish Centre  
Talented Youth

Dublin City University  
Dublin 9  
Ireland  
Tel: 353-1-7005634  
Fax: 353-1-7005693  
Email: [ctyi@dcu.ie](mailto:ctyi@dcu.ie)  
[www.dcu.ie/ctyi](http://www.dcu.ie/ctyi)

10 June 2013

This is to certify that CTYI supports the doctoral research of Mr. Justin Connolly. The issue of cyberbullying is a very relevant and topical subject in the area of gifted education. CTYI is happy to allow Mr Connolly to collect data from CTYI students in the form of an online survey and subsequently follow information in the form of focus groups.

  
Colm O Reilly  
Director



## **APPENDIX B: PLAIN LANGUAGE STATEMENT**

**Centre for Talented Youth Ireland (CTYI)  
Dublin City University, Glasnevin Road, Dublin 9**

**Project Title:** An Examination of the Factors that Influence Gifted Adolescents' Resistance to Report Cyberbullying Experiences

**Researcher: Justin Connolly**

**Tel: (086) 1774331 Email: justin.connolly@yahoo.co.uk**

**CTYI Research Supervisor: Dr. Colm O'Reilly**

**Tel: (01) 7005633 Email: colm.oreilly@dcu.ie**

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Dear Sir/Madam

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study that seeks to understand the factors that influence gifted adolescents' resistance to report their cyberbullying experiences. Please take whatever time you need to discuss the study with your family and friends, or anyone else you wish to. There is no obligation to participate and the decision to let you child join, or not to join, is up to you.

Most current research into the phenomenon of cyberbullying has been at a more broad or general level, and whilst many international studies have been undertaken, little information is known about the reasons for non-reporting to an adult caregiver, particularly by gifted children. It is hoped that the information provided during the class-time discussion will enable the researcher to gain greater insight into the rationale behind adolescent non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour to a parent or other adult caregiver.

Your child will be asked to participate in a group discussion during a standard class session. This will be no more than 40 minutes maximum. It is expected that students of both genders

and of mixed-aged groups will be in attendance. Your child can stop participating at any time during the session and may leave the classroom at any time if he/she so desires.

A trained counsellor will be present at the session as will a teaching assistant should an individual student require assistance. Students will not be asked any questions directly, but are welcome to volunteer any information they wish when questions are asked by the researcher. The session will be recorded for analysis but the data will be held securely and destroyed within Personal details will neither be requested nor noted in the transcription of notes from the discussion. Access to the recorded (anonymous) data will be held exclusively by the researcher and the recordings locked in a secure cabinet until such time as they shall be destroyed – five years from the time of recording. Written responses to the questions asked will be coded in a manner that is suitable only to the research. For example, transcription from a female respondent will be assigned a unique number, where FS designates a female student and MS designates a male student. The computer used to store the transcribed data is password protected.

Although it is reasonable to expect that shared mutual experiences of cyberbullying behaviour can assist those bullied in such a manner in realizing that they aren't alone in their experience, nonetheless, we can't guarantee that your child will personally experience from participating in this study. At the very least, it is anticipated that others will benefit in the future from the information we find in this study as the research findings shall be disseminated at conferences (nationwide and internationally) and in written journals.

As stated, participation in this study is voluntary. Your child has the right not to participate at all or to leave the class discussion at any time. Deciding not to participate or choosing to leave the study will not compromise your child's enrolment in the CTYI summer school programme and it will not harm his/her relationship with the school. The director of the course has been informed and given his consent to this study. It has also been authorised by the Research Ethics Committee at DCU. Should any issues arise that merit your attention, call Dr. Colm O'Reilly (Director CTYI) at (01) 700 5633 or email: colm.oreilly@dcu.ie if you have questions about the study. Alternatively, you may contact the researcher for this

project, Justin Connolly at (086) 1774331 or email: [justin.connolly@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:justin.connolly@yahoo.co.uk) for further information.

Should permission be granted for your child to participate in this research, please complete and detach the form below and return in an envelope marked 'Private' to Dr. Colm O'Reilly, CTYI Centre, Dublin City University, Glasnevin, Dublin 9.

**Permission for my child to participate in Cyberbullying Research.**

As parent or legal guardian,

I \_\_\_\_\_ [CAPITAL LETTERS]

authorize (child's name) \_\_\_\_\_ [CAPITAL LETTERS]

to become a participant in the research study described in this form.

Child's Date of Birth: <day>/<month>/<year> \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

Parent or Legal Guardian's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed Date: <day>/<month>/<year> \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_\_

Upon signing, the parent or legal guardian will receive a copy of this form, and the original will be held in the researcher's records and destroyed within 30 days of receipt of letter.

## APPENDIX C

### DCU Research Ethics Committee Approval for this Research Project

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath  
Dublin City University



Dr. Colm O'Reilly,  
School of Education Studies

8<sup>th</sup> July 2013

**REC Reference:** DCUREC/2013/175

**Proposal Title:** **An Examination of the Factors that Influence Adolescent's Resistance to Report Cyberbullying Experiences.**

**Applicants:** Dr. Colm O'Reilly, Mr. Justin Connolly

Dear Colm,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal. Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee. Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Donal O'Mathuna'.

Dr. Donal O'Mathuna  
Chairperson  
DCU Research Ethics Committee



**Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht**  
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## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDING TEMPLATE

- *What does cyberbullying mean to you? How would you define it?*
- *If you were cyberbullied, how did it happen?*
- *How did it affect you?*
- *Did you report it and if so who did you speak to? Why did you choose that particular person?*
- *If you didn't report it, why not?*
- *Do you know of others who have been cyberbullied? What have they done about it?*
- *Regardless of whether you report cyberbullying behaviour or not, how do you respond to cyberbullying behaviour? For example, do you retaliate against the cyberbully?*
- *How can adults (parents/teachers) help in preventing cyberbullying behaviour?*
- *Does your school have an anti-bullying policy in place that you consider effective in stopping all forms of bullying?*

## APPENDIX E: FIELD NOTES

FG1:

Good behaved nice (age/gender) in attendance: 17.

Smiles in attendance state girls tend to focus on physical aspects (appearance).  
Not so predominant among males.

Gender expires with SSC → nice! v. Perand!!  
- Tone angry.

Import - Gender v. explicit! Used & engaged.

Consequences aware → "Kill yourself" (both m/f)  
→ long lasting

Young male would consider reporting  
to teacher → knowledge of perpetrator.

APPENDIX E: FIELD NOTES (cont/...)

Present: ~~to~~ 19

FG2.

Females more energized in describing experiences or observations, but more detailed about explaining reasons why targeted.

A lot of nodding in agreement about confiding in siblings as a better reporting option.

Majority of group quite eager to participate in discussion.

Good mix of students (m/f).

Older students (+15) seem more reflective in discussing why they don't report to parents - seems like something they have previously thought through. Remains consideration to report.

School Janitor → reporting option

→ mostly boys.

Why? → Teachers talking amongst themselves  
→ perception of weakness ←

APPENDIX E: FIELD NOTES (cont/...)

FG3

PRESENT: 21-23

book blend nice (w/f) → consistent with last two groups.

Females → personal insights (similar to previous groups).

Female reports → maybe teacher who's trustworthy → free to choose whether tell mom or not → problem with school policy interfering in choice.

Group seems relaxed → (visage).  
Most eager to participate. Lots of hands up!

Maybe females highly engaged in discussion but seem detached from experience now → tone/voice calm.

\* Similar experiences amongst all three groups  
CB behaviors differed by gender. Some shared experiences & responses → delete a/c  
→ "unfriendly" person