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The Psychological Experience of Cyberbullying Among Transgender Adults

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Abstract

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MA, National University, 2016

BS, Brandman University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Although Internet use can be helpful, it can also be a toxic environment, especially toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Researchers have demonstrated that cyberbullying victimization can affect anyone; however, very few analyze these experiences by gender identity. The focus of this qualitative study was to understand the experiences of harassment that gender-minority individuals encounter in an online environment. Data included in-depth interviews with 14 transgender or nonbinary adults. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), participants were asked to share their experiences with navigating on social media and the impact of what cyberbullying means to them. The theory that supported this study was the minority stress theory (MST). Central themes are detailed, including harassment issues, adverse reactions to cyberbullying, utilizing humor in response to bullying, and anonymity and cyberbullying. Additional themes reviewed include lack of online safety, educating the public, empathic concern for others, and how cyberbully victims have maintained or developed resilience. The results may lead to possible improvements in policy, research, and service development by promoting safety and awareness among this minority population. If society better understands how transgender individuals experience cyberbullying, preventative factors could be developed, meaning that the transgender community would be better protected. Developing a greater understanding of the participant's experiences can promote awareness of cyberbullying and the crimes associated with it; thus, contributing to positive social change.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

According to Olweus (1994), bullying or victimization can be defined as an adverse action when someone intentionally causes or attempts to inflict harm or discomfort upon another individual. Olweus's definition of bullying has been used as the foundation for various research and literature on cyberbullying as well (Kofoed & Stosur, 2019). Although cyberbullying is popular on social networking websites, other forms of electronic bullying are also common, such as texting and instant messaging. Sociocultural factors, such as gender stereotypes, sexism, and beliefs toward sexual and cultural diversity, can impact the phenomenon of bullying behavior (Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2019). Compared to cisgender individuals in the United States, the transgender community is particularly at risk for victimization. While anyone can be subject to bullying behavior, transgender individuals often experience widespread prejudice, discrimination, violence, and other types of stigmas (White Hughto et al., 2015). The damaging effects of cyberbullying can cause significant emotional and psychological distress to the victims. The effects of cyberbullying can vary from individuals experiencing depression, social isolation, anxiety, and reduced self-esteem (Best et al., 2014; Mikhaylovsky et al., 2019).

In this study, I explored the experiences of transgender individuals who have experienced and were victimized by cyberbullying behavior. This chapter includes a discussion of an outline of the study, including previous research on cyberbullying, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research question. This chapter also

includes overviews of the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, and its limitations.

Background

For this study, I focused on the lived experiences of transgender people who have been victimized by cyberbullying behavior. According to Fabbre and Gaveras (2020), individual stigma is experienced as ongoing awareness regarding someone's characteristics that defy gender norms, which often manifests into internal issues. The researchers from this study discovered that transgender older adults experience stigma at various levels, which severely impacts their mental health and well-being (Fabbre & Gaveras, 2020). Because transgender individuals experience stigma in various contexts throughout their lives, these experiences may take an additional impact on their health; however, this issue remains understudied (Hughto et al., 2015).

Although bullying can occur in various forms, online victimization, such as cyberbullying, has undeniably increased (Craig et al., 2015). Cyberbullying can be defined as the intentional and repeated harm via technology, such as sending offensive text messages to others (Choi et al., 2019; Peker, 2020). According to Schneider et al. (2012), sexual minority youth and young adults (SMYYA) are especially at a higher risk of both forms of bullying compared to non-SMYYA individuals. To combat this issue of victimization, it would be imperative to educate others on the ramifications and consequences of cyberbullying behavior. Additionally, a need for competence in cyberbullying intervention and prevention methods should also be considered (Heller, 2015).

The information from this study contributes to the existing body of research and knowledge by exploring the lived experiences that cyberbullying has on transgender adults. I addressed the gap in the literature through the narratives provided by the participants. The participant's narratives offered unique insight into the nature of stigma and self-awareness. The results of this study also provided insight into what strategies are used to cope with cyberbullying victimization and preventative safety measures.

Problem Statement

Many people rely on the Internet to interact with each other; however, the Internet can also be an unhealthy environment, especially for the LGBT community. According to Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) cyberbullying has dramatically increased as technology has become more accessible and continues to develop. Lucassen et al. (2018) discovered that Internet use could also be problematic due to specific safety and personal security concerns for gender minority individuals. Subsequently, some Internet users may find the desire to test their own identity, compare themselves with others, and share their personal experiences, all of which put online communities at risk of exposing users to invalidation and transphobic messages (Cipolletta et al., 2017). Additionally, Krueger and Young (2015) discovered that tweets on social media were characterized by messages related to socially conservative ideas or actions that harm transgender individuals. For example, these themes included descriptions of discriminatory policies, violence experienced by gender minority individuals, and reports of ignorance regarding transgender-related issues (Krueger & Young, 2015). Reisner et al. (2016) suggested that additional research should study the mental health burden of trans people; specifically, concerning the effects

of stigma, discrimination, and social and structural factors that affect this underserved population. Zou et al. (2013) also encouraged future researchers to attempt to discover potential differences in the relationship between bullying and health within sexual minority groups. Transgender individuals are considered an essential aspect of the sexual minority umbrella; however, sexual orientation measures fail to capture these identities, which has resulted in only a few studies that have included them in their samples (Kahle, 2020). Although there have been cyberbullying studies on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer [LGBQ] and transgender young individuals, very few analyze these experiences by gender identity, and many fail to note what percentage of the sample were transgender/gender diverse [TGD] (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). This lack of representation makes it difficult to know whether this group's risk of experiencing cyberbullying is the same as their LGBQ peers (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). Borgogna et al. (2019) suggested that future qualitative studies may be able to explain the specific factors by which transgender individuals experience minority stress and other issues that contribute to the adverse mental health outcomes. The current study is essential to the field of forensic psychology, particularly victimology, because it adds to the ongoing understanding of the negative impact that online harassment has on the transgender community.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze the psychological experiences of cyberbullying with transgender adults. According to Reisner et al., (2015) there are virtually no national, representative sample studies of gender minority health in the

United States. Furthermore, Abreu and Kenny (2018) found that transgender individuals' experiences are either combined with sexual identity or entirely ignored in most studies. For example, in studies where transgender participants are included, results are developed from only a small sample of participants, with as little as only 0.25% of the sample comprising of gender-expansive individuals (Abreu & Kenny, 2018). Research on this specific topic can potentially lead to improvements in policy, research, and service development. Furthermore, I anticipate that this information can promote better intervention efforts related to reducing cyberbullying and the harm associated with it.

Research Question

The primary research question for this study was: What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that I used to explore the essence of participants' experiences with being victims of cyberbullying behavior was the minority stress theory (MST). According to Meyer (2003), the foundation for a model of minority stress is not discovered in one theory; however, a minority stress model is inferred from several sociological and social psychological theories. Although the minority stress model was initially conceptualized for sexual minorities, it can also be similarly applied to gender-variant individuals (Poteat et al.,2014). Because this theory was designed to understand the experiences of minority individuals, including transgender people, I deemed it appropriate for this study. This chapter includes a brief overview of the concept; a further extensive examination follows in Chapter 2.

Minority Stress Theory

The MST was the interpretive lens that helped develop the framework and foundation for the study. The MST suggests that sexual minority groups experience increased levels of stigma-related stress correlated with their minority status, which can lead to higher rates of psychopathology, including disordered eating behaviors (Convertino et al., 2021). Minority stressors embedded in the context of anti-trans prejudice are conceptualized as risk factors for mental health concerns as well (Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). According to Davies and Kessel (2017) the gender minority stress model suggests that transgender individuals experience four distinct external stress types, including (a) victimization, (b) rejection, (c) discrimination, and (d) identity nonaffirmation. Furthermore, gender minority stress theorists also integrate the correlation between stigma, stress, and protective factors (Anderson, 2019). Not only can minority-specific frameworks offer insight into the increased susceptibility of transgender individuals to cyberbullying, but a gender-minority theorist may also examine how distal and proximal factors contribute to stigma (Testa et al., 2015). Distal factors can be defined as gender-related discrimination, gender-related rejection, gender-related victimization, and nonaffirmation of gender identity (Testa et al., 2015). In contrast, proximal factors consist of internalized transphobia, negative expectations, and concealment (Testa et al., 2015).

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative method for this study. Qualitative research is consistent with understanding the association between cyberbullying and psychological distress among

transgender adults. My focus was to understand the experiences of harassment that gender-minority individuals encounter in an online environment. In this study, I used an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). According to Creswell (2013) a phenomenological study describes a similar meaning among several individuals regarding their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. I asked participants to share their experiences with navigating on social media and what cyberbullying means to them. The experiences or contextual issues that influenced how I approached this topic were: the participant's stories of conflict, gender nonconformity, and discrimination factors. Guided by the minority stress framework, I created a document comprised of open-ended questions to assess minority stressors specific to trans and gender diverse people's experiences. The questions provided a way to gather detailed information from the participant's experiences related to cyberbullying, and to better understand their resilience when overcoming these challenges. Developing a greater understanding of the participant's experiences can promote awareness about cyberbullying and the crimes associated with it; thus, contributing to positive social change.

Definitions

General definitions and keywords were used in this study. Definitions create a general understanding of the terminology frequently used.

Cisgender: Refers to an individual whose gender identity is the same as their sex assigned at birth (Wichaidit et al., 2021).

Cyberbullying: Any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that frequently conveys hostile or aggressive messages intended to impose harm or discomfort on others (Tokunaga, 2010).

Nonbinary: Refers to transgender individuals with a gender identity not aligned with their assigned sex at birth and identify outside of the traditional male-female binary (Reisner & Hughto, 2019).

Transgender: People who have an assigned sex at birth that differs from their current gender identity or expression (MacCarthy et al., 2015).

Limitations

The potential limitations of this study included having difficulty recruiting participants for interviews. Maintaining a clear separation of my role as a researcher and not allowing any biases to affect the study's outcome was not challenging for me. An ethical limitation that I considered was that the topic of bullying and harassment can be a sensitive subject to analyze. Questions that I asked the participants may have been potentially distressing to some individuals, so I provided them with appropriate resources such as crisis hotline contact numbers.

Significance and Summary

In this study, I explored the psychological experiences of cyberbullying and its impact on transgender adults. Results from this study will lead to possible improvements in policy, research, and service development by promoting safety and awareness among this minority population. This study's findings may also improve the promotion of cyber victimization and cyberbullying interventions, which include special considerations for

sexual minority individuals. If society has a better understanding of how transgender individuals experience cyberbullying, preventative factors can be developed, meaning that the transgender community would be better protected. Lastly, better acceptance among the general population and understanding of the transgender population's experiences may also decrease the occurrence of transphobic events, as specified by previous studies (Aparicio-García et al., 2018).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

I used various academic sources for this literature review. Research conducted regarding victimization, specifically cyberbullying, can be discovered from multiple disciplines. Although there have been studies on LGBQ and transgender young people on cyberbullying, few researchers have analyzed these experiences by gender identity, and many fail to identify what percentage of the sample were transgender/gender diverse [TGD] (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). This lack of representation makes it difficult to know whether this group's risk of experiencing cyberbullying is the same as their LGBQ peers (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019). I organized this review by recurring central themes derived from the literature that is relevant to the study. I used a thematic format to categorize the themes into subsections in which I address different aspects of the topic being discussed. In this review, I developed background knowledge needed for the reader to comprehend the study's problem and intention. Lastly, I also reviewed theories that pertain to the study of cyberbullying, along with relevant methodologies.

Literature Search Strategy

I collected information from scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles that are located throughout library databases, including EBSCOhost, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, and ScienceDirect. Additionally, I used different academic journals such as the International Journal of Cyber Criminology, International Review of Victimization, Journal of LGBT Health Research, and the International Journal of Transgenderism.

I described the selected articles on cyberbullying and transgender individuals here. The keywords searched were *LGBT, transgender, cyberbullying, bullying, social media, depression, mental health, discrimination,* and *risk factors*.

Prevalence of Cyberbullying

Regarding the prevalence of cyberbullying, a small yet increasing number of international studies have attempted to measure the extent of digital harassment and abuse among adult populations (Powell et al., 2020). As technology rapidly evolves, the occurrence of cyberbullying also changes as well. For example, Kowalski et al. (2019) reported that the prevalence rates of cyberbullying vary throughout studies, and different reasons can cause these variations. Examples include how cyberbullying is defined, time limits used to determine if cyberbullying occurred, the conservative versus liberal criterion used to determine if cyberbullying occurred, and the sample's demographic characteristics (Kowalski et al., 2019).

When comparing data to a nationally representative U.S. sample, rates of bullying were estimated to be 29% of the youth population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009); whereas Zou et al. (2013) noted the prevalence of bullying among their lesbian, gay and bisexual [LGB] sample to range from 23.5% to 67.0%. Webber and Ovedovitz (2018) sought to determine the prevalence of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration at a U.S. Catholic university. A sample of 187 undergraduate students were asked about their cyberbullying experiences in a 20-item closed question survey. The researchers found that eight students (4.3%) indicated that they were victims of cyberbullying at the university level, and a total of 14 (7.5%) students revealed that they had participated in

bullying at that level. Likewise, Patchin (2019) also discovered that out of a sample of 4,972 middle and high school students, approximately 37% of them having experienced cyberbullying within their lifetimes.

A systematic scoping review of cyberbullying empirical studies was conducted by Brochado et al. (2017) to understand how the prevalence of cyberbullying has been estimated across studies. Regarding the nature of cyberbullying involvement, the researchers discovered a high variability in cyberbullying estimates between different countries. Regarding cyberbully victims, the highest median occurrences were found in the group of studies from Canada (23.8%, varying between 1.9% and 65.0%) and China (23.0%, varying between 11.2% and 56.9%). In contrast, the lowest median prevalence was detected in studies from Australia (5.0%), Sweden (5.2%), and Germany (6.3%) (Brochado et al., 2017). In addition to cyberbullying estimates, researchers also identified inconsistencies in literature regarding the role of gender and cyberbullying. An example of this would be how some studies insist that victimization rates are higher among women (Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Smith et al. 2008); whereas others show that rates are higher among men (Campbell et al., 2013; Forssell, 2016).

Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) explored the frequency of cyberbullying and its impact on LGBT and allied youth. Participants in this national study (n = 310) consisted of students between the ages of 11 and 18 who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or with a same-sex attraction, or as an LGBT-allied youth. The researchers utilized past literature on electronic harassment and bullying to develop the 174- item cyberbullying survey instrument. Regarding the participant's race/ethnicity, biological sex, sexual

identity, and gender identity/expression, Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) asked participants how frequently they had been harassed in the past 30 days. Results indicated that 14% of LGBT and 15% of allied participants reported being harassed based on their race/ethnicity; 19% of LGBT and 15% of allied participants reported being harassed based on their biological sex (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012). Additionally, the authors revealed that 60% of LGBT and 8% of allied participants reported being harassed based on their sexual identity, and 41% of LGBT and 17% of allied participants claimed to have been harassed due to their gender identity/expression. Additional responses indicated that 63% of LGBT and 47% of allied participants had observed incidents (or was aware) of cyberbullying in the past 30 days at their school, and 29% of LGBT and 29% of allied participants claimed to have frequently witnessed these incidents (three or more times a week) (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012).

In 2013, a sample of 5,680 youth, ages 13–18 years old, were surveyed about their online experiences of bullying/harassment and safety. To analyze differences between non-LGBT and LGBT youth, Palmer et al. (2013) examined the specific experiences of the 1,960 LGBT participants included in the dataset. Although the rates of cyberbullying can vary throughout studies, Palmer et al. (2013) discovered that more than four in ten LGBT youth (42%) reported having been bullied or harassed online, with 8% reporting that it occurred at least once a week during the past year. Subsequently, more than one quarter (27%) of the participants also claimed to have been harassed at least once in the past year via text message (Palmer et al., 2013). Overall, the researchers concluded that

70% of LGBT youth said they had been bullied at least once in the past year by at least one method (Palmer et al., 2013).

Types of Cyberbullying

Digital harassment and abuse are often described as a series of harmful, interpersonal behaviors experienced via the Internet, mobile phone, and other electronic communication devices (Powell et al., 2020). Similarly, the term cyberbullying can be defined as any behavior performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that frequently communicates hostile or aggressive messages intended to cause harm on others (Tokunaga, 2010). These damaging behaviors can include offensive comments, targeted harassment, verbal abuse, and threats, as well as sexuality and gender-based harassment and abuse (Powell et al., 2020). Although cyberbullying is frequently prevalent on social networking websites, other forms of electronic bullying are also common. For example, in 2019, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that during the 2016–17 school year, 15 out of 20 percent of students who reported being bullied had experienced harassment online or by text (Caffrey, 2019). These findings are congruent with a similar study from Navarro et al. (2013) who discovered that victims of cyberbullying spend more time on the Internet and engage in activities online such as e-mailing, chatting, and instant messaging. To obtain these results, Navarro et al. (2013) had participants from rural public schools (10–12 years; $n = 1068$) complete a self-report questionnaire that measured being cyberbullied, Internet use, and parental mediation strategies. The researchers used logistic regression analyses to investigate the correlation between cyberbullying victimization and online activities. The results showed that

Internet use, specifically online communication, increases the likelihood of cyberbullying victimization (Navarro et al., 2013).

Subsequently, Park et al. (2014) discovered that individuals who frequently use the Internet and social networking sites were also more likely to engage in, become victims of, and witness cyberbullying behavior. The researchers analyzed the relationship between cyberbullying and perceived social support, using the Internet, and social networking services (SNS). The analysis showed a positive relationship between using the Internet for information and cyberbullying victimization, and a negative relationship between using SNS for reading and cyberbullying perpetration and victimization (Park et al., 2014). Regarding types of internet usage, information use was positively correlated with cyberbullying victimization, whereas entertainment use was negatively associated with cyberbullying perpetration for the adolescent group alone (Park et al., 2014). Overall, bullying someone online, being a victim, and seeing someone else being bullied positively correlated with adolescents' time online and utilizing social networking sites (Park et al., 2014).

Consistent with past research, Smith et al. (2008) discovered that bullying by phone and text message was most prevalent; however, although mobile phone/video clip bullying was less common, it was perceived to have a more negative impact. Likewise, Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) asked participants about their use of desktop, laptop, and cell phones and found that 75% of LGBT participants reported using a desktop computer and 78% of allied participants used a desktop computer. Regarding laptop and cell phone use, 50% of LGBT participants used laptops compared to 55% of allied participants,

whereas cell phone use accounted for 81% of LGBT and 83% of allied participants (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012). Lastly, when asked how often participants use different forms of communication technologies, Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012) found that surfing the web was the most frequent use of technology for both the LGBT (M = 5.19; SD = 1.20) and the allied participants (M = 4.70; SD = 1.43). The researchers used descriptive statistics to give an exploratory analysis of this study and to arrive at these findings.

To analyze bullying and cyberbullying experiences, digital self-harm, sexting, and sextortion, Patchin (2019) distributed two different online surveys to a nationally representative sample of 4,972 middle and high school students. When participants were asked about the types of cyberbullying experienced in the past 30 days, results revealed that mean or hurtful comments accounted for (24.9%) and spreading rumors online accounted for (22.2%,) (Patchin, 2019). Regarding race, Kowalski et al. (2020) discovered that texting and social media were the most common forms of technology used by both White and Black respondents and the most common method by which cyberbullying occurred. Similarly, Park et al. (2014) found that higher levels of information and communication technology use were correlated with cyberbullying behavior. This widespread use of texting can be concerning since users can readily disclose their personal information and share their locations with strangers.

A study conducted by Peled (2019) confirmed significant relationships between cyberbullying, instant messaging, and undergraduate students' academic, social, and emotional development. Data for the study were collected from a sample (N = 638) using

the Revised Cyber Bullying Survey, which analyzed the frequency and media used to commit cyberbullying. The College Adjustment Scales was also used, which analyzed three characteristics of development in college students (Peled, 2019). The author conducted correlation analyses to confirm significant relationships between cyberbullying and undergraduate students' academic, social, and emotional development. Results indicated that cyberbullying is performed through multiple electronic media such as e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, text messaging, and social networking sites (Peled, 2019). Although various methods can be used to digitally bully an individual, Peled (2019) found that instant messaging (IM) was the most common cyberbullying method among the students. Of the students, 57% had experienced cyberbullying at least once or twice through different media types. A significant percentage, 57.4% (366), of the respondents reported being cyberbullied at least once, and 3.4% (22) reported being cyberbullied at least once a week (Peled, 2019).

Types of People who Bully

Individuals who engage in cyberbullying behavior can be someone who the victim knows or a stranger. A cyberbully can be anonymous and may solicit the aid of others, including "friends" online (Willard, 2007). Unlike physical bullying, where individuals are present, cyberbullying crimes are hidden in the secrecy of cyberspace. This anonymous environment allows online perpetrators the opportunity to engage in bullying behaviors without supervision, resulting in the absence of accountability (Burton et al., 2013; Livazović & Ham, 2019). According to Cooper and Blumenfeld (2012), cyberbully perpetrators do not have to take accountability for their actions and are

frequently not afraid of being punished. Similarly, Mikhaylovsky et al. (2019) found that Internet aggression is often prevalent among teenagers since the bully's identity can be anonymous. Cyberbullying researchers Patchin and Hinduja (2006) also discovered that cyberbullies may choose to harass their victims privately. A study conducted by Barlett (2015) showed that with the lack of power differential, anonymity is an essential predictor of cyberbullying behavior and a mediator in the relationship between positive attitudes toward cyberbullying and cyberbullying frequency. These findings suggest that cyberbullying is likely to occur when someone realizes that cyberbullying is anonymous and that the negative consequences are rare, given anonymity (Barlett, 2015). The author provided empirical data to suggest that perceived anonymity is a significant component in predicting online harassment. Seeing as cyberbullying has become an ongoing issue throughout society, it is crucial to determine what variables predict the frequency of this harmful behavior (Barlett, 2015).

Elevated levels of psychological impairment have also been discovered among cyberbullying perpetrators. For example, according to Schenk et al. (2013) college students involved in cyberbullying behavior had more psychological distress, higher aggression, and endorsed more suicidal behaviors. Similarly, Burton et al. (2013) discovered that being a cyberbully correlated with perceived difficulties in emotions, conduct problems, and substance abuse. Although anyone can engage in bullying, various characteristics often describe an individual's participating role. For example, a study conducted in 2019 examined adult participant roles in cyberbullying and whether sex, age, and time spent online predicted engagement in cyberbullying. Two hundred sixty-

four adults from 31 countries completed measures to analyze their experiences and participating roles in cyberbullying. Betts et al. (2019) discovered that sex and age predicted cyberbullying involvement and that females and older participants were more likely to belong to the seldom victim and bullying group. The authors found that males and younger individuals were more common to belong to the frequent victim and occasional bully groups. These results are like previous studies, which discovered that boys had a higher percentage of cyberbullying perpetrations than girls (Livazović & Ham, 2019; Lee & Shin, 2017). In a nationally representative sample of 4,972 middle and high school students in the U.S., Patchin (2019) reported that approximately 15% of the sample participants admitted to cyberbullying others at some point in their lifetime. Posting hurtful comments online was the most common type of cyberbullying they reported during the previous 30 days (9.3%), and roughly 11% of the sample reported cyberbullying using one or more of the 11 types reported, two or more times over the previous 30 days (Patchin, 2019). Compared to females, males reported significantly more involvement in every type of cyberbullying behavior that was asked (Patchin, 2019). However, Park et al. (2014) found no gender differences in bullying, victimization, and witnessing online.

Schenk et al. (2013) described cyberbullying perpetrators as having more psychological distress, aggressive tendencies, and participating in more illegal activities than those who do not cyberbully. College cyberbullies were also discovered to have higher aggression and endorsed more suicidal behaviors (Schenk et al., 2013). To arrive at these findings, the researchers attempted to investigate the psychological

characteristics, suicidal behaviors, aggressive tendencies, and illegal behaviors of college cyberbullies. The sample consisted of 799 participants (71.6% female, 28.4% male) aged 18 to 24 years old. Participants were separated into cyberbullying and control groups, where a control group (n =79) was matched with the cyberbully group based on sex and age (Schenk et al., 2013). Participants of the study were considered cyberbully perpetrators if they reported having engaged in any form of cyberbullying four times or more since they have been in college. In contrast, control participants recognized never cyberbullying anyone or being victims since they have been in college (Schenk et al., 2013). To obtain results, participants completed an anonymous survey, the demographic questionnaire, IEQ, SCL-90-R, SBQ-R`, Proactive/Reactive Aggression Questionnaire, and IBC. Analysis of the cyberbully group showed that 19 of the 79 participants had also been victims of cyberbullying four times or more and self-identified as victims of cyberbullying in college (Schenk et al., 2013). When participants were asked questions regarding motives for their cyberbullying behaviors, the most common reasons why they engage in that behavior toward a victim were: dislike, anger, hatred, revenge, and out of jealousy (Schenk et al., 2013).

In a comparable study, the phenomenon of bullying was analyzed by examining the impact of sociocultural factors, such as gender stereotypes, sexism, and beliefs toward sexual and cultural diversity on bullying participation as a bully and a bully follower (Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2019). Participants consisted of 1,165 adolescents who were administered a self-report questionnaire that included scales related to the analysis of bullying, gender stereotypes, sexist attitudes, and rejection of sexual and cultural

diversity (Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2019). The authors concluded that bullies often describe themselves as less expressive and more instrumental; they display more hostile sexist attitudes and fewer benevolent sexist attitudes. Furthermore, cyberbully perpetrators tend to be introverts, lack self-esteem, and often struggle to express their anger in appropriate ways (Livazović & Ham, 2019). These findings support Schenk et al. (2013) who also discovered that cyberbullies and cyberbully/victims are usually more aggressive than their uninvolved peers and will plan out and orchestrate their aggressive acts. Furthermore, bullies may also exhibit more negative attitudes toward homosexuality, more positive ones toward lesbianism, more negative behaviors toward gender-nonconforming people, and more negative attitudes toward cultural diversity (Carrera-Fernandez et al., 2019). Lastly, these findings validate those from Kanwal and Jami (2019) who also found that cyberbully-victim participants derived more happiness while bullying and revengeful attitudes.

According to Park et al. (2014) frequent Internet use is associated with online bullying, victimization, and witnessing, and online information activities increase cyberbullying behavior as well. To investigate the relationship between levels of online activities and cyberbullying behavior, the authors implemented a face-to-face survey with 1200 adolescents; 585 (48.8%) were female, and 615 (51.3%) were male. To obtain results, Park et al. (2014) asked participants whether they had ever engaged in, were victims of, or encountered someone else engaging in the following behaviors in the past 12 months. To calculate the cyberbullying variables, the authors added up the four types of bullying that occur via electronic methods—voice calls, texting, instant messaging,

and social networking sites. Results from this study indicated that 20.4% of participants reported having bullied others online, and 19.8% reported having done so face-to-face, at least once in the past 12 months. Regarding cyberbullies, 75.2% admitted to having bullied someone face-to-face, and 65.5% of those who had experienced face-to-face bullying were also bullied online (Park et al., 2014). Interestingly, cyberbullying victims were also found to be perpetrators as well. For example, 64.4% of the cyber-victims reported having bullied someone else online, and the majority of cyberbullies (87.8%) and victims (80.6%) have also witnessed cyberbullying (Park et al., 2014).

Types of People Who are Victims

Based on Patchin's (2019) findings, approximately 37% of participants in a nationally representative sample of 4,972 reported having experienced cyberbullying in their lifetimes. Thirty percent of the sample described being cyberbullied in one or more of the 12 specific types reported two or more times over the course of the previous 30 days (Patchin, 2019). When it comes to using technology, anyone can become a target for cyberbullying behavior; however, those who belong to the LGBTQ community are often prone to attacks because of their perceived status in the community (Thompson, 2013; Palmer et al., 2013). According to Rodriguez-Hidalgo and Hurtado-Mellado (2019) bullying, and discrimination can have a damaging effect on the development and health of adolescents who identify with non-heteronormative sexual orientations. Rodriguez-Hidalgo and Hurtado-Mellado (2019) sought to increase knowledge about adolescents' prevalence, frequency, and predictors of homophobic victimization. The authors utilized a set of self-reports composed of several questionnaires to obtain data from 820

participants. Results from the study indicated that adolescents suffer from homophobic victimization, regardless of their sexual orientation; however, homosexuals and bisexuals experience it more often than heterosexuals (Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019). Additionally, minority adolescents are also more prone to be the victims of bullying as well (Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al., 2019). These findings are consistent with previous research from Palmer et al. (2013) who also discovered that LGBT youth were four times as likely as non-LGBT youth to say that they were sexually harassed online (32% vs. 8%) and three times as likely to say that they had been sexually harassed via text messages (25% vs. 8%).

When comparing data to a nationally representative U.S. sample, rates of bullying were estimated to be 29% of the youth population (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009); whereas Zou et al. (2013) noted the prevalence of bullying among their LGB sample to range from 23.5% to 67.0%. A similar yet more recent study sought to analyze sexual orientation differences in the percentage of victims and bullies. Participants of this study conducted by Garaigordobil and Larrain (2020) included 1,748 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 (52.6% girls, 47.4% boys), 12.5% non-heterosexuals, and 87.5% heterosexual. Participants completed four assessment instruments, which then rendered results through descriptive and comparative cross-sectional methodology. Researchers confirmed that the percentage of victims were significantly higher in non-heterosexuals; however, the percentage of heterosexual and non-heterosexual aggressors were similar (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020). Likewise, Palmer et al. (2013) found that one in four LGBT youth (26%) reported having been bullied online, specifically based on their

sexual orientation or gender expression in the past year. Furthermore, one in five (18%) also said they had been bullied and harassed via text message based on their sexual orientation or gender expression (Palmer et al., 2013).

Powell et al. (2020) implemented a similar study that focused on the experiences of sexually diverse adults (n= 282) who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual, as well as gender diverse adults (n= 90), including women, men, and transgender individuals. The authors surveyed 2956 Australian adults and 2842 British adults (aged 18 to 54) regarding their experiences of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV). The survey investigated the nature, scope, and impact of positive and negative social experiences online. The researchers discovered that when compared to heterosexual, cisgender individuals, transgender individuals experienced higher rates of digital harassment/abuse, as well as higher rates of sexual, sexuality, and gender-based harassment and abuse (Powell et al., 2020). Furthermore, transgender participants are more likely to report having experienced someone threatening to physically harm them, harass them for a prolonged period, and someone sharing embarrassing details about them (Powell et al., 2020). These results validate those from DeSmet et al. (2018) and Palmer et al. (2013) who also discovered that non-heterosexual (LGBQ) youth are more frequently victimized by bullying than heterosexual youth.

According to DeSmet et al. (2018) severe psychosocial issues are often associated with cyberbullying behavior. The authors attempted to measure traditional and cyberbullying involvement among heterosexual and non-heterosexual adolescents. A cross-sectional school-based survey was given to 1037 participants aged 12-18 years old.

The authors measured cyberbullying by using validated single items for victimization and perpetration. Furthermore, it was also matched with items on certain types of cyberbullying victimization (by messaging and posts, by sexual images, by embarrassing personal images). DeSmet et al. (2018) discovered that cyberbullying victimization among non-heterosexual youth increased with age, whereas cyberbullying victimization among heterosexual youth did not. Victimization and perpetration rates may differ based on the individual's age and gender, and victimization may be higher for sexual forms of cyberbullying (DeSmet et al., 2018). For example, cyberbullying victims are more likely to be female and are most common among middle school and college students (Beran et al., 2012; Holfeld & Leadbeater, 2015). Relevant to these results, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) surveyed 258 youth (male: 32.56% [*n* = 84], female: 67.44% [*n* = 174]) to determine whether gender predicted cyberbullying victimization. The researchers concluded that most participants reported being bullied online (54.9%, n = 129), with a higher percentage of female participants (female: 59.4%, n = 92; male: 46.8%, n = 37) reporting ever experiencing cyberbullying, and with the highest occurrence among urban female respondents (64.5%, n = 40). Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) also discovered that a larger number of females reported that cyberbullying is most likely to happen "all the time" (66.2%, n = 100) compared with male participants (56.8%, n = 42). Furthermore, most cyberbullying victims first experienced cyberbullying between 11 to 13 years (25.3%, n = 56) or 14 to 17 years (23.5%, n = 52).

As previously mentioned, females reported being bullied more than males (Campbell et al., 2013; Fenaughty & Harré, 2013; Forssell, 2016; Livazović & Ham,

2019; Smith et al. 2008). Patchin (2019) validates this statement by discovering that adolescent females are more likely to have experienced cyberbullying in their lifetimes (38.7% vs. 34.5%). While surveying a nationally representative sample of 4,972 students between the ages of 12 and 17, Patchin (2019) discovered that the types of cyberbullying tend to differ based on gender. For example, girls were more likely to say that someone spread rumors about them online, whereas boys were more likely to say that someone threatened to harm them online (Patchin, 2019). Although many of the previously mentioned studies indicated that females reported being cyberbullied more than males, Forssell (2016) surveyed 3371 adults and discovered the opposite. The researcher found that participants who labeled themselves as cyberbullied 54.2% (n = 13) were men, 45.8% (n = 11) were women, and 70.8% (n = 17) had a supervisory position. Results also indicated that 9.7% of the respondents could be labeled as cyberbullied per Leymann's cut-off criterion (Forssell, 2016).

In addition to sexually diverse individuals falling victim to cyberbullying behavior, racial minority individuals may also be prone to this behavior. Kowalski et al. (2020) surveyed 235 females and 213 males to examine the relationship between race and cyberbullying victimization and perpetration. One participant identified as a transgender female, and three preferred not to answer. Out of the participants, 54.4% identified as White, and 32.3% identified as Black/African American. To examine the outcomes correlated with cyberbullying victimization, participants completed measures of self-esteem, depression, loneliness, and suicidal ideation. Kowalski et al. (2020) discovered that more than 45% of both White and Black participants indicated that they had

been victims of cyberbullying at least once, therefore suggesting that both White respondents and Black respondents may be equally susceptible to traditional and cyberbullying victimization. Interestingly, Edwards et al. (2016) found that youth of color were less likely to experience cyberbullying than Whites; however, they experience suicidal ideation and attempts at about the same rates when they experience cyberbullying behavior. Consistent with these findings, Palmer et al. (2013) also discovered that White LGBT youth experienced higher levels of online and text-based bullying and harassment compared to LGBT youth of other races/ethnicities. Kahle (2020) also validates these findings by highlighting that the occurrence of bullying victimization is higher among sexual minority youth.

In a nationally representative sample of 3,453 US adults, Casey et al. (2019) examined the subsample of 489 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer [LGBTQ] participants, including 282 Whites and 201 racial/ethnic minorities, and an oversample of 86 transgender individuals. The researchers analyzed 25 questions regarding lifetime experiences of discrimination, including personal experiences of discrimination and perceptions of discrimination in the nation. Multivariable models were used to estimate adjusted odds of discrimination between racial/ethnic minority and White LGBTQ participants. Regarding interpersonal forms of discrimination, Casey et al. (2019) found that 38 percent of transgender adults reported having personally experienced slurs, and 28 percent have experienced microaggressions associated explicitly with their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Casey et al. (2019) reported that LGBTQ adults in America share similar, yet diverse experiences of consistent and widespread

discrimination centered on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Furthermore, some of the most reported experiences of stigma included slurs, microaggressions, violence, threats, and sexual and nonsexual harassment (Casey et al., 2019). Peled (2019) validates these findings by noting that relationships and sexual orientation can play a significant role in bullying among university students due to their age and how many are away from home and experiencing different types of relationships for the first time. Lastly, Park et al. (2014) also found that individuals who frequently communicated with their mothers had experienced less cyberbullying behavior. According to Cook et al. (2010) the quality of the relationship that a child or adolescent has, is the strongest predictor of bullying victimization. This statement validates Livazović and Ham (2019) who found that lower family life quality predicts cyber-victimization and cyberbullying perpetration.

Effects of Cyberbullying

Although the use of social media can provide support for individuals, there are also risks involved. For example, Mikhaylovsky et al. (2019) discovered that most cyberbullying victims showed a high level of anxiety, and 50% of the victims displayed high levels of frustration; thus, reducing self-esteem. According to Cook (2010) a victim of cyberbullying behavior is likely to show internalizing symptoms, engage in externalizing behaviors, struggle with social skills, and be rejected and isolated by peers. Additionally, those who are victims are also prone to personality suppression as well (Mikhaylovsky et al., 2019). Based on past studies, researchers have revealed various negative consequences that are often associated with cyberbullying victimization.

Consistent with previous research, Kanwal and Jami (2019) found that cyberbullying victims experience more significant depression, increased family surveillance, and social isolation. Furthermore, cyberbully victims also reported becoming more vigilant and conscious when navigating through cyberspace (Kanwal & Jami, 2019). In-depth interviews were given to 14 volunteer university students (Eight male and six female) to arrive at these findings. Ten participants from the study were "cyber victims," whereas four were "cyberbully-victim." A thematic analysis of the interviews uncovered different experiences that individuals have online regarding gender and role (victim and cyberbully). Kanwal and Jami (2019) discovered three themes, which include psychological consequences (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive), social consequences (family and peers), and lifestyle change (online, offline, and academic). Smokowski et al. (2014) conducted a similar study that explored school experiences, social support, and mental health outcomes for rural middle school youth. Regarding mental health outcomes, all current and chronic victims of physical/verbal bullying and cyberbullying reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, aggressive behaviors, and lower self-esteem (Smokowski et al., 2014; Cañas et al., 2019).

Garaigordobil and Larrain (2020) analyzed the prevalence and mental health effects of bullying and cyberbullying in LGBT adolescents in a more recent study. The sample consisted of 1,748 adolescents, which included 12.5% non-heterosexuals and 87.5% heterosexuals. The researchers sought to analyze the amount of aggressive behavior endured and carried out from bullying/cyberbullying actions. A descriptive and comparative cross-sectional methodology obtained results that confirmed that non-

heterosexual victims had endured significantly more aggressive bullying/cyberbullying compared to heterosexuals. Furthermore, non-heterosexual victims and aggressors of bullying displayed more significant depression, social anxiety, and psychopathological symptoms but no differences in social anxiety (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020). These results are consistent with Kowalski et al. (2018) who provided an overview of cyberbullying and examined protective and risk factors. The authors found that cyberbullying can lead to adverse behavioral and health-related outcomes, which can harm an individual's psychological well-being. For example, Kowalski et al. (2018) discovered that cyberbullying participation is associated with depression, anxiety, stress, emotional problems, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts. Moreover, the secrecy of cyberbullying may also prepare victims to see danger throughout the public, especially at school (Kanwal & Jami, 2019; Smokowski et al., 2014). This heightened sensitivity to threats may cause victims to perceive discrimination, school harassment, and school danger more frequently (Smokowski et al., 2014).

Understanding the underlying causes of disparities in risk and protective factors among the transgender population is crucial to developing resources for this vulnerable population. For example, cyberbullying has become a public health concern due to the recognized associations among victimization, perpetration, depression, substance abuse, anxiety, insomnia, and educational issues (Burton et al., 2013; Kanwal & Jami, 2019; Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019). Eisenberg et al. (2019) examined the differences in emotional distress, bullying victimization, and protective factors among transgender and

gender diverse (TGD) high school students. The authors utilized an extensive statewide survey to obtain data from a sample of 2,168 TGD youth. The study results indicated that experiences of bullying victimization and emotional distress displayed a pattern of higher rates among students in rural locations (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Regarding emotional distress among TGD students in suburban settings, participants displayed higher rates of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation compared to their peers in nonmetropolitan locations (Eisenberg et al., 2019).

Schneider et al. (2012) discovered various relationships between cyberbullying victimization and elevated psychological distress levels. To validate these findings, the researchers surveyed 20 406 high school students, grades 9 through 12, in the Boston metropolitan area. Results from the surveys allowed the researchers to assess the participant's bullying victimization and psychological distress, including depressive symptoms, self-harming behavior, and suicidality. A controlled analysis revealed that distress was highest among victims of both cyberbullying and school bullying, and that victims reported higher levels of distress and lower academic performances (Schneider et al., 2012). Consistent with previous research, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) discovered that cyberbullying victimization is related to higher rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety, and insomnia, and feelings of anger and distrust among victims who are more likely to withdraw from school and have lower grades. These results are like that of Palmer et al. (2013) and Livazović and Ham, (2019) who also found that online and text message-based bullying is associated with lower academic performance and psychological health. Eisenberg and Neumark-Sztainer (2003) validate these findings by

discovering that research regularly finds that bullying and harassment experiences at school are correlated with adverse outcomes, including lower academic achievement and lower self-esteem, and higher depression.

There are various psychological challenges that victims of cyberbullying behavior may face. According to Hyunjoo et al. (2015) depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem may be associated with the experience of cyberbullying victimization. The researchers of this study explored whether the frequency of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies were associated with psychological adjustments among college students who were victims of cyberbullying (Hyunjoo et al., 2015). A convenience sample of 121 students completed questionnaires. A linear regression analysis discovered that the frequency of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies correspondingly described 30%, 30%, and 27% of the variance in depression, anxiety, and self-esteem (Hyunjoo, et al., 2015). These results are consistent with other cyberbullying research, which discovered that cyberbullying victims had significantly lower self-esteem than individuals who had no experience of cyberbullying (Kessel et al., 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

In a multiple case study, Thompson (2013) analyzed the impact of cyberbullying on students' technology use with five college-age students. The study's purpose was to explore how cyberbullying impacts the participants' use of digital communication and learning during their adolescent years (Thompson, 2013). Various yet similar themes emerged from the analysis of the study. Interestingly, Thompson (2013) found that cyberbullying had little or no effect on the participants’ use of educational and social

technology and that cyberbullying diminished toward the end of adolescent years. These results contradict the findings from Parvaneh et al. (2019) who discovered that more than half of their participants experienced a wide variety of cyberbullying behaviors and were negatively affected emotionally and academically to the point that some had suicidal thoughts.

According to Palmer et al. (2013) bullying often focuses on personal or social characteristics, thus reflecting an underlying bias toward an individual or group of people. This issue is especially concerning for the LGBT community, who are at significant risk of bullying behavior. To explore how connections online have offered new opportunities for bullying and harassment, Palmer et al. (2013) surveyed 1,960 (n = 1,960) LGBT individuals, ages 13 to 18 years. Participants included those who identified as gay or lesbian (63%), one-third (33%) described their race as something other than White, and nine in ten students (89%) attended public schools (Palmer et al., 2013). Regarding the effects of online and text-based bullying, researchers found that LGBT youth who had experienced more frequent bullying online reported significantly lower grade point averages compared to youth who reported less frequent bullying online. In contrast, bullying by text message was not associated with a significant difference in one's grade point average; however, the LGBT participants who experienced both in-person and online/text forms of bullying presented the lowest grade point averages (Palmer et al., 2013). In addition to lower academic performances, the researchers also found that cyberbullying was associated with lower psychological well-being. For example, LGBT participants who reported more frequent bullying online had

significantly lower self-esteem and higher depression levels than participants who experienced less frequent bullying online (Palmer et al., 2013). Interestingly, bullying via text message was not correlated with a significant difference in self-esteem or depression; however, participants who had experienced both in-person and online/text forms of bullying exhibited the lowest levels of self-esteem and highest levels of depression (Palmer et al., 2013).

Victim's Coping Techniques

Coping can be defined as the act of utilizing thoughts, feelings, and actions to acclimate and deal with situations or events that occur throughout life (Neaville, 2017). For victims to protect themselves from the adverse effects of prejudice and discrimination, coping strategies are often used. These strategies used by stigmatized individuals can also be divided into psychological and behavioral responses as well (Swim & Hyers, 2001). For example, a possible psychological response to discrimination that can allow an individual to cope with negative stereotypes and prejudices, is to psychologically disengage or disidentify with a self-evaluative (Major et al., 1998). Psychological disengagement can be defined as a temporary coping technique used by individuals in situations where their self-worth is threatened (Laplante et al., 2011). One of the ways members of stigmatized groups may deal with identity threats is by hiding or concealing their threatened identities (Van Laar et al., 2019). Additionally, people may frequently combine hiding and displaying in "self-group distancing" as an identity management strategy as well (Van Laar et al., 2019).

Contrary to psychological responses, behavioral responses with coping can involve engagement or disengagement with stressful events. Compas et al. (2001) suggested that coping by engagement involves self-regulation efforts that interact with or approach the stressor, whereas disengaging coping methods involve controlling efforts that separate from or avoid the stressors. Strategies used in approach coping can include confrontation, seeking support, and learning to think about the situation differently (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019; Neaville, 2011). For example, the findings from Palmer et al. (2013) discovered that LGBT youth rated their online friends as more supportive than non-LGBT youth rated their online friends.

Consistent with past research, Hyunjoo et al. (2015) considered approach coping strategies as attempts to change the cyberbullying situation and involve problem-solving and searching for social support. In contrast, coping strategies for avoidance were considered efforts to avoid the cyberbullying situation and incorporate cognitive distancing, internalizing, and externalizing (Hyunjoo et al., 2015). When implementing this study, the author's purpose was to explore whether the frequency of cyberbullying, victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies were correlated with psychological adjustments among cyberbullying victims. To obtain results, a convenience sample of 121 college students between 18 and 25 completed questionnaires. Results indicated a positive association between approach coping strategies and anxiety and between avoidance coping strategies and anxiety. As the use of approach coping strategies or avoidance coping strategies increased, so did anxiety for the sample of college students. Regarding coping strategies on depression, Hyunjoo et al. (2015)

discovered that cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies accounted for 30% of the variance in depression, and a positive association occurred between avoidance coping strategies and depression. Lastly, the occurrence of cyberbullying victimization, cognitive appraisals, and coping strategies accounted for 27% of the variance in self-esteem. There was a negative correlation between the frequency of cyberbullying victimization and self-esteem and coping avoidance strategies and self-esteem. Although the frequency of cyberbullying victimization or the use of avoidance coping strategies increased, self-esteem had decreased for the sample of participants (Hyunjoo et al., 2015).

The way that an individual copes with cyberbullying behavior is an essential factor that can either strengthen one's well-being or lead to detrimental outcomes (Orel et al., 2017). As part of a study designed to explore coping strategies used in response to future cyberbullying incidents, Orel et al. (2017) examined 282 adults in a university setting. For this study, the researchers implemented an 11-item questionnaire in which participants were asked to report the probability of using coping strategies on a 4-point Likert-type scale. Results from the study indicated that "blocking" the individuals who bully was found to be the most frequent intention to cope with cyberbullying behavior (Orel et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was also discovered that both genders and victimization status influenced coping strategy intentions as well (Orel et al., 2017).

To learn whether gender, geography, mental health, and socioeconomic status predict cyberbullying victimization, perpetration, and coping patterns, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) surveyed 289 individuals. The study participants were between 16 and

19 years old, including 32.56% [*n* = 84] males and 67.44% [*n* = 174] females. Responses to cyberbullying were inspected using 13 items that assessed how participants coped with cyberbullying experiences and victimization. The researchers analyzed responses to cyberbullying by using 13 items that assessed how individuals cope with cyberbullying and victimization experiences. Although individuals who are victims of cyberbullying tend to use various coping methods that have been conceptualized into various categories, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2015) examined two key modalities in this study: problem-solving coping approaches and avoidance coping strategies. As mentioned in previous studies, strategies used in approach coping can include confrontation and seeking support, such as talking to a friend or another adult about cyberbullying (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019; Neaville, 2011). The second type of approach examined in this study was avoidance coping techniques, including ignoring or seeking revenge. Results indicated that the coping methods used in response to bullying are also highly gendered and overlap with existing social and health inequities (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019). Subsequently, Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) discovered that age was positively associated with using problem-solving coping skills to manage cyberbullying behaviors. The authors found that females and rurality were significantly associated with a lower probability of utilizing coping skills, such as ignoring and seeking retribution. In contrast, male cyberbullying victims may be more likely to use avoidance coping skills due to attitudinal norms that promote males to self-manage issues rather than seeking support from someone else (Slaunwhite, 2015). Findings from this study also support the results from Carrera-Fernández et al.,

(2019); Espelage & Hong (2017); Wright et al. (2018) regarding the recommendation of psychoeducational programs and policies for bullying prevention.

Receiving appropriate social support is essential when it comes to the aid of cyberbullying victimization. Mace et al. (2016) analyzed perceived social support available to victims of traditional and cyber-forms of bullying among heterosexual and sexual minority adults. Five hundred twenty-one bullying questionnaires were completed by the participants who were students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old (M = 19.52 years, SD = 1.99), of which 426 were female (80.7%), 99 male (18.8%), and three did not specify (.06%). Compared to heterosexuals, results indicated that perceived social support was lower for sexual minority individuals only when no bullying behavior was present. In contrast, no significant differences in perceived social support between sexual minority and heterosexual individuals were discovered when they bullied traditionally, cyberbullied, or experienced both forms of bullying (Mace et al., 2016). Seeing as how there were no significant differences, it is suggested that sexual minority adult victims of both forms of bullying experience similar levels of perceived social support when compared to heterosexual victims. Lastly, it is also likely that the source of support heterosexual and sexual minority victims have can influence their ability to cope with the situation as well (Mace et al., 2016).

Previous research has revealed cultural differences when it comes to coping strategies used for peer victimization. To examine how publicity (private, public), medium (face-to-face, cyber), and adolescents' attributions influence their coping strategies for victimization, Wright et al. (2018) surveyed 3,442 adolescents (age range

11-15 years; 49% girls) from China, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, India, Japan, and the United States. Data was collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics, which resulted in differences in the self-blame attribution and aggressor-blame attribution on an individual's coping strategies. Results also indicated that Chinese ($\beta = -0.05$, $p < .01$), Czech ($\beta = -0.09$, $p < .001$), and U.S. ($\beta = -0.08$, $p < .05$) participants utilized social support less for cyber victimization, compared to personal face-to-face victimization. Regarding retaliation, Wright et al. (2018) found that participants from China ($\beta = 0.04$, $p < .05$), Cyprus ($\beta = 0.09$, $p < .01$), the Czech Republic ($\beta = 0.06$, $p < .05$), Japan ($\beta = 0.07$, $p < .01$), and the U.S. ($\beta = 0.12$, $p < .001$) all reported that they would use retaliation more for public face-to-face victimization than personal face-to-face victimization.

Summary and Transition to Chapter 3

Chapter 2 consisted of different reviews on studies related to cyberbullying. The prevalence and types of cyberbullying are described, as well as the types of people who bully. The types of people who fall victim to cyberbullying behavior are presented, and the effects that cyberbullying has on these victims. The way that victims deal with cyberbullying and their coping techniques are also explained.

According to Kowalski et al. (2019) the prevalence of cyberbullying varies throughout studies due to how cyberbullying is defined, time limits used to determine if cyberbullying occurred, the conservative versus liberal criterion used to determine if cyberbullying occurred, and the demographic characteristics of the participants. Although cyberbullying often occurs on social networking websites, other forms of electronic

bullying are also common. For example, cyberbullying is performed through multiple electronic media such as e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, text messaging, and social networking sites (Peled, 2019). These electronic sources can allow for offensive comments to be made, verbal abuse, threats, and sexuality, and gender-based harassment and abuse (Powell et al., 2020). Cyberbully perpetrators have been found to have elevated levels of psychological impairment, such as higher aggression, endorsed more suicidal behaviors, conduct problems, and substance abuse (Schenk et al., 2013; Burton et al., 2013). Lower quality family relations also indicate higher involvement in cyberbullying perpetration (Cook et al., 2010). Unlike physical bullying, where individuals are present, cyberbullying perpetrators can remain anonymous. This anonymous environment allows cyberbullying perpetrators to secretly engage in online harassment without having to take accountability for their actions (Burton et al., 2013; Livazović & Ham, 2019). Although anyone can become a victim of cyberbullying behavior, those who belong to the LGBTQ community are often targets of attack due to their perceived status in the community (Thompson, 2013; Palmer et al., 2013). Kahle (2020) validates this concept by highlighting that the occurrence of bullying victimization is higher among sexual minority youth. Cyberbullying victimization rates may differ based on the person's age and gender (DeSmet et al., 2018). According to Cook et al. (2010) lower family relations quality indicates higher involvement in cyberbullying perpetration. The effects of cyberbullying can cause significant emotional and psychological distress to the victims. Higher rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety, insomnia, and feelings of anger and distrust have been associated with victims of

cyberbullying behavior (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019). Victims often use coping techniques and strategies to protect themselves from the harmful effects of cyberbullying. Approach coping strategies often involve confrontation and seeking support, whereas avoidance coping techniques include ignoring or seeking revenge against cyberbullying behavior (Ronis & Slaunwhite, 2019; Hyunjoo et al., 2015). The literature review presented in this study provides a glimpse into the complex world of cyberbullying and the various aspects of its harmful practices.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In Chapter 3, I describe the recruitment process, participation, data collection, data analysis plan, trustworthiness, rigor, and ethical considerations. Chapter 3 also outlines the methodology that initiated the study into a descriptive, phenomenological qualitative research design. The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the psychological experiences of cyberbullying among transgender adults. Using an IPA approach, I explored the effects of cyberbullying on the lived experiences of this understudied population. Implications from this study may be used for improvements in policy, research, and cyber-victimization crimes by promoting awareness about this crucial issue. Furthermore, the findings from this study include information that mental health and medical providers need about the transgender adults' experiences while being victims of cyberbullying behavior. Although research on cyberbullying with the transgender population is scarce, this study provided detailed information regarding this minority population.

In this study, I explore the thoughts, narratives, and experiences that transgender adults have with being victims of cyberbullying behavior. An IPA approach is frequently used in qualitative studies to explore and understand the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced a similar phenomenon (Alase, 2017). Instead of only determining the cause and effect of cyberbullying on the transgender population, I used a qualitative approach to discover the meaning of this phenomenon for those involved. By using the

characteristics of qualitative research, I attempted to identify how individuals understand their experiences and what those experiences mean to them.

In this chapter I outline why a qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study and explain the research design and methodology. Included in this chapter are the role of the researcher, sampling strategy, validation of the interview instrument, and the process for data collection. I discuss transparency and reflexivity concerning my role as the researcher, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Lastly, I provided specifics about the context of the study, the sampling strategy, participant selection, and measures for the ethical protection of participants. In Chapter 3, I outline the methodology that operationalized the study into a descriptive, phenomenological, qualitative research design.

Research Design and Rational

I utilized a phenomenological qualitative research approach for this study. According to Alipan et al. (2020), the term cyberbullying is considered an extension of traditional bullying in which intention, aggressiveness, power imbalance, and repetition are the main characteristics. Cyberbullying can be problematic because nonverbal cues are typically anonymous when communicating through technology (Alipan et al., 2020). In this study, I attempted to understand what experiences the transgender adult population goes through regarding cyberbullying and digital harassment. The following is the research question that guided this study: What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults?

My decision and rationale to use a qualitative research design was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the experiences that transgender individuals have with being victims of cyberbullying. Rather than using a quantitative approach and simply measuring phenomena, I felt it was imperative to describe and analyze the concept with a more detailed approach. Since the qualitative research process permits researchers to ask open-ended questions, it provided me with a better understanding of why emotional responses develop in the first place. With the lack of research about transgender adults, specifically with cyberbullying, the characteristics of a qualitative research design provided me with greater insight about this phenomenon.

Logic of the Phenomenological Qualitative Approach

According to Creswell (2014), when deciding on a research approach, it is essential that the approach is based on the nature of the research problem being presented, the researcher's personal experiences, and the audiences for the study. Since I focused on the perceptions and understandings of cyberbullying abuse from the participant's own experiences, a qualitative approach was most appropriate for the study. Qualitative research is described as the systematic inquiry of social phenomena in natural settings (Teherani et al., 2015). The phenomena often include how people experience certain aspects of their lives, how organizations and individuals' function, and how their interactions influence relationships (Teherani et al., 2015). Like quantitative research, qualitative researchers also use theory as a broad explanation for the participant's behaviors and attitudes (Creswell, 2014). According to Miller and Barrio (2016) IPA is a modern-day qualitative research method grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and

idiography. IPA is part of the phenomenological psychology approach and focuses on the detailed examination of personal lived experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Because the method of IPA is flexible, the approach strengthens the development of phenomena and focuses on diversity attached to lived experiences, freedom to investigate context, and relationships to life narratives (Miller & Barrio, 2016; Chan & Farmer, 2017; Smith et al.,2009).

In this study, I analyzed the rich details of how the participants make meaning of their experiences of being victims of cyberbullying behavior. Although IPA is a relatively new approach, various empirical studies have used this method with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender expansive, queer [LGBTGEQ] communities (Chan & Farmer, 2017). This operational insight is appropriate for using philosophical foundations and methodological strategies from the historical development of IPA to understand specific types of phenomena more deeply within LGBTGEQ communities (Chan & Farmer, 2017). Because IPA prospers on using questions related to how rather than what, this approach caters much more to the diverse identities and experiences within the LGBTGEQ population (Chan & Farmer, 2017). According to Allan and Eatough (2016), IPA offers a foundation for flexibility by offering adaptive approaches for data collection, data analysis, and highlighting distinctive interpretations within a phenomenon.

Role of the Researcher

When it comes to conducting scientific studies, the role that the researcher plays is especially important. Because a qualitative approach was used, I operated as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis for this study. To possess effective

qualitative research goals, I was required to have social interaction and decent rapport with the participants; according to Roger et al. (2018), this cannot occur without healthy interpersonal techniques and researcher/community networks. Having a confidential relationship between the researcher and the participants, encourages participants to express and describe their thoughts, fears, and assumptions, which are imperative for understanding the procedures (Kiegelmann, 2002). To achieve the goals of obtaining neutrality and minimizing researcher bias and error, I used the following strategies:

- From the beginning of the study, I clarified any researcher bias so that the reader may recognize any assumptions that may influence the results.
- I conducted member checks to establish validity, by requesting the participant's feedback on the credibility of their transcripts and results.
- Regarding transferability, I presented information throughout the study with rich, thick descriptions. By analyzing the detailed descriptions, I was able to capture the thoughts and emotions among the participants.
- Because I used an IPA approach for data analysis, I engaged in different steps to produce multiple readings and transcripts of the data.

Methodology

Context of the Study

Setting

Due to this study's nature and the different geographic locations of participants, there was no specific site for this study. Interviews and data collection occurred via phone or video chat, depending on the volunteer's preference. To ensure confidentiality, I

requested that the participants place themselves in a quiet and private setting to avoid disruptions during the interview process.

Participant Selection Logic

Sample

The research sample that I used for this study is transgender adults who have been victimized by cyberbullying behavior. Sampling was purposive, as participants were required to (a) identify as transgender, (b) have directly experienced being a victim of cyberbullying, (c) have at least one social media account, and (d) be at least 18 years old. I used a purposeful sampling strategy, which allowed me to strategically choose participants based on their criteria and the research question. For further clarification, a cyberbullying victim often includes anyone who had experienced harassment, threats, shamed, impersonated, or discriminated against by using some form of an electronic device (Cyberbullying Research Center, n.d.). Examples of electronic devices include cell phones, iPads or tablets, computers, and online gaming devices. Criteria for determining what constitutes as cyberbullying behavior derived from the National Crime Prevention Council (2020) website, the Cyberbullying Research Center (n.d). website, as well as a study conducted by cyberbullying experts Patchin and Hinduja (2015) on measuring cyberbullying.

As discussed in the literature review, there are various types of cyberbullying behavior. Examples of methods used to cyberbully include (a) posting mean or hurtful comments and pictures; (b) spreading rumors or falsely impersonating someone online; (c) excluding or blocking someone for no reason; (d) Sending someone threatening

emails, instant messages, or text messages; and (e) hacking into someone's account and harassing or discriminating against them (National Crime Prevention Council, 2020; Patchin, 2019; Cyberbullying Research Center, n.d).

For this study, I interviewed transgender adults who directly experienced cyberbullying behavior. The rationale for choosing an adult population is that adult participant roles in cyberbullying remain unclear (Betts et al., 2019). Although much research on cyberbullying focuses on young children and adolescents (Balakrishnan & Fernandez, 2018), the target population for this study is transgender adults who have been victimized by cyberbullying. In addition to the lack of cyberbullying research on adults, very few studies have analyzed the experiences of cyberbullying by gender identity, and many fail to identify what percentage of the sample were transgender/gender diverse [TGD] as well (Atteberry-Ash et al., 2019).

Regarding gender, I intended to recruit an equal number of male and female participants for this study. Out of the 14 participants interviewed, seven were male-to-female, five were female-to-male, and three identified as non-binary. Having a sample of both male and female participants can contribute to a better understanding of gender differences regarding motives, perceptions, and reactions to cyberbullying victimization (Zsila et al., 2019). For example, Zsila et al. (2019) identified significant differences in gender and the impacts of psychological determinants for cyberbullying perpetration and victimization. Furthermore, when exploring the psychological factors and motives of cyberbullying perpetration and victimization, Barlett and Coyne (2014) suggest that gender should be treated as a moderator in research.

Sampling Procedure

I used purposeful sampling for this study. According to Palinkas et al. (2015) researchers frequently use purposeful sampling in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases associated with the phenomenon of interest. Although purposeful sampling promotes researchers to use their judgment when making sampling choices, it also provides strategies that allow them to learn about the phenomenon being investigated (Emmel, 2013). Utilizing a purposeful sampling strategy allowed me to strategically choose the participants based on their criteria and the research question (Patton, 2015).

Although different strategies can be used for purposeful sampling, I implemented a criterion approach. According to Palinkas et al. (2015) participants are selected based on the belief that they have knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest; therefore, they will be able to offer information that is both detailed (depth) and generalizable (breadth). Patton (1990) suggests that it is important to understand potential information-rich cases with criterion sampling since they may expose major system weaknesses that can allow for program or system improvements.

When seeking participants for this study, I posted the recruitment flyer on various LGBTQ social media platforms. To acquire insight into cyberbullying's psychological experience for transgender adults, I asked a series of questions for the screening process. Although there were no restrictions for ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disabilities, I inquired about specific demographics such as age and gender identity. When it came time to conduct interviews with the participants, I asked when they were cyberbullied, how

many times it occurred, as well as open-ended questions pertaining to the general focus of their experiences with having been victims of cyberbullying (e.g., threats, harassment, discrimination, spreading false information). Gathering this relevant information allowed me to analyze the experiences of cyberbullying victimization with transgender participants.

Sample Size

When deciding on sample size, Patton (2002) suggests that the researcher consider the purpose of the inquiry, the depth of information about the topic, and how the data would be applied. The sampling procedures must be described entirely and justified, so that information users have the proper context for assessing the sample (Patton, 1990). Since this research study utilized a purposeful sampling strategy, the number of participants will depend on the number of interviews needed to produce rich, informative data (Patton, 2002). According to Moser and Korstjens (2018) data saturation is reached when no new investigative information occurs anymore, and that the study presents complete information about the phenomenon. For qualitative research, the authors suggest sampling only until data saturation has been achieved. An important criterion is having enough in-depth data displaying the patterns and categories of the studied phenomenon (Moser & Korstjens, 2018). Although there is flexibility when determining the number of participants for a sample size, Alase (2017) proposes that in phenomenological research tradition, there can be between 2 and 25 participants. For my research study, I acquired a sample size of 14 participants. Focusing on a smaller number

of individuals allowed me to extensively analyze the data and obtain in-depth descriptions of the participants' lived experiences.

Consent Process

The regulations I followed to obtain informed consent were derived from the American Psychological Association (2017) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS; 2009) code of federal regulations for the protection of human participants. I provided all participants with detailed written information regarding the study, their rights to decline or withdraw from the study, possible risks, research benefits, and the process of confidentiality. The consent documents were presented in a language that all participants understood. The informed consent incorporated consent for audio recording the interview session and debriefing with the participants. I also aligned the informed consent and research methods to adhere to the IRB's standards and criteria. I discussed the results with the participants and addressed any concerns. Participants were informed that all documents, recordings, notes, and data would be secured, and password protected to obtain access. To protect the participant's identities, I followed the APA (2017) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct guidelines, Section 8: Research and Publication provided the guidelines, protocols, and parameters for ethically conducting research. The following information was described in the informed consent document and given to all participants.

- the purpose of the research;
- how information that is acquired from the study will be used;

- the anticipated level of involvement and amount of time requested from participants;
- the procedures of the study;
- any potential risks or benefits connected with the study;
- the right to not participate and to withdraw from the study at any time and without penalty or consequences;
- the right to privacy and confidentiality, including potential limitations to confidentiality;
- contact information if the participants have questions about their rights while participating in the study;
- the procedures for obtaining resources if the participants experience any adverse effects during the research process.

Interviews

According to Jamshed (2014) semi-structured interviews can be described as in-depth interviews where the participants are asked a preset of open-ended questions. The participants are also prompted to discuss the subject under investigation in detail without the researcher's use of predetermined short-answer questions (Given, 2008). Although semi-structured interviews do not require the researcher to prepare a list of questions, Given (2008) suggests that the researcher is mindful of the critical areas of experience that are expected to be discussed by the participants and to have the ability to explore how they relate to the investigated topic. For this study, semi-structured open-ended

interviews were used as the primary source of data collection. The interviews were conducted throughout four months, with each discussion lasting 25 to 45 minutes. With the participant's permission, I recorded all interview sessions to ensure accuracy when transcribing. To conclude the interview, debriefing was established by reflecting on any questions or concerns that the participants had regarding the study. Chapter 4 will discuss the specifics of interviews, data collection, and analysis in more detail.

Instrument Development

Data for this study was collected through in-depth interviews. Using in-depth interviews provided the freedom to adjust and clarify the questions as needed. Since the interviews were conducted one-on-one, it allowed me to pay attention to the content of the participant's responses, the tone, and the content (Guest et al., 2013). In addition to the detailed information obtained from in-depth interviews, they can also be appropriate to use when exploring sensitive topics. For example, a one-on-one setting can allow the researcher to gain rapport, ensure confidentiality, and extend empathy (Guest et al., 2013). During the interviews, I was mindful not to express assumptions and word the questions so participants could understand what was being asked.

To ensure safety and alleviate potential discomfort from the participants, I designed the interview guide to create an informal and secure atmosphere. Having a comfortable environment will allow participants to relax and focus on the topic being investigated (Patton, 2002). I also attempted to develop rapport with the participants to increase trust and provide reassurance. I achieved this by using verbal comments such as "that must have been difficult for you" to validate their experiences. By briefly

summarizing what the participants said, it demonstrated that I understood their responses. To ensure clarity during the participant's responses, I also probed for follow-up questions, such as "could you please tell me more about that?" or "what makes you feel that way?" According to Given (2008) probing can be described as a specific research technique used by interviewers to develop further explanations from research participants. As with any research study, there are times when the interviewer must ask emotional or controversial questions. Seidman (2006) proposes that for researchers to minimize risks, it is crucial to identify the rights participants have when they participate in the research. This part of the consent document informs participants of their rights and signifies the researchers' obligation to abide by them (Seidman, 2006). Since the topic of cyberbullying can be sensitive in nature, I reassured the participants at the beginning of the interview by clarifying that some questions may be uncomfortable to answer and that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Interview Instrument

Since this study is qualitative, the researcher was the primary instrument used for inquiry and to collect valuable data. Although other instruments focus on the surface aspects of what is occurring, interviews can provide greater insight into the meaning and significance of what is happening (Wilkinson & Birmingham, 2003). According to Agee (2009), the continuous process of questioning is essential for understanding others' progressing lives and perspectives in qualitative studies. To eliminate any researcher's bias that may impact the study, I provided transparency. Given (2008) recognizes transparency as the basic requirement for all qualitative research and that information

should be explicit, clear, and open about the methods and procedures used. In addition to providing transparency, I also created a summary journal that addressed subjective and objective observations after each interaction. The interview instrument included contextual questions and probes to extract greater detail from the participant's responses. The interview questions were designed to address the research question as well.

Ethical Procedures

Treatment of Data

It is imperative that all researchers abide by the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. Regarding the treatment of data obtained from this study, I adhered to Principle E: Respecting the dignity and worth of all people, and the rights of individuals to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination (APA, 2017).

Data Maintenance and Security

Guided by the APA's Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, I ensured that all personal information obtained from the study (e.g., participant files, audio recordings, transcriptions, reflective and analytic notes, computer files) was securely stored. The participant's sensitive information was documented and protected by a password on my computer. The participant's personal information will remain confidential by using aliases for all names, transcripts, verifications, documenting, and disseminating the results. Furthermore, I will only keep the participant's identifying information for a limited time. (e.g., to communicate with participants when collecting data and to send them the results). With those regulations in mind, I will keep data from

the study for five years, then subsequently destroy all documents by deleting files and shredding all hard copies. Taking these precautionary measures will help ensure the safety and privacy of all participants in this study.

Data Access and Ownership

According to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, one of the primary obligations for a psychologist is to take reasonable safety measures to protect confidential information acquired through or stored in any medium (APA, 2017). To maintain confidentiality, myself and the participants will be granted access to the data. Once the findings are published, other researchers who seek to verify the study's data will also be granted access (APA, 2017); however, the individuals must obtain prior written agreement for all other data uses.

Other Ethical Considerations

Conflict of Interest

Although I believe in anti-bullying, especially toward minority individuals, I am unaware of any potential conflicts that might impact this study. I maintained a clear separation of my role as a researcher and not allowed any biases to influence data. To ensure that there was no conflict of interest, I used bracketing, which is a method applied in qualitative research to alleviate the potential effects of biases' that may hinder a study (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

Sensitive Topic

Another ethical limitation to consider for this study would be that the topic of bullying and harassment can be a sensitive subject for participants to discuss. For

example, questions asked to the participants may potentially cause distress to some individuals; thus, having an obligation to refer them to appropriate crisis and social services. During the consent process, I informed all participants about the topic's sensitive nature to address this potential limitation.

Refusal or Early Withdrawal from the Study

Although this study was voluntary, the participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I provided each participant with an informed consent document before starting the study. If a participant decided to withdraw for any reason, I addressed any questions or concerns and promptly terminated the meeting.

Incentives for Participating

Individuals who participated in this study received a gift card to compensate for their time. This gift of appreciation did not appear to have any significant influence when recruiting participants. For example, some individuals did not want the gift card, yet still requested to participate and share their experiences.

Summary and Transition to Chapter 4

In Chapter 3, I discussed the logic for choosing a phenomenological qualitative approach and the rationale for the research design. I discussed the philosophical principles incorporated with an IPA approach and why this method is appropriate for this study. I explained my role as the researcher and how I will operate as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. I described the methodological procedures and why purposeful sampling will be appropriate for determining participants for this

study. Furthermore, I described the instrument development and how data will be collected through in-depth interviews. The ethical procedures are also examined to address any potential biases or safety concerns that may hinder the study's outcome. The consent process details how I aligned the informed consent and research methods to adhere to the IRB's standards and criteria. Lastly, I present ethical concerns, including conflicts of interest, sensitive topics, incentives, and withdrawal from the study.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences that cyberbullying has on transgender adults. The research question that guided this study was: What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults?

In Chapter 4, I present the setting, recruitment procedures, participant demographics, and contextual evidence relevant to the study. I also discuss the procedures used for data collection and the methods used to analyze the data. I present the results from the study by using the voices and lived experiences from the participants. In addition to addressing a gap in research, data that I gathered from this study provided me with information to better understand the lives of transgender adults and cyberbullying. Guided by the research question and subsequent interview questions, the participants offered to share their personal experiences of being victims of cyberbullying behavior. Furthermore, I present the methods taken to confirm the trustworthiness of the results. This chapter concludes with a summary and transitions into Chapter 5.

Setting

Because participants were located throughout the United States and other countries, I obtained data from this study through individual interviews by telephone or audio chat. Although some participants volunteered to conduct the interviews on video chat, some preferred to communicate via telephone. I conducted each interview in a private location that was free from distractions. The in-depth individual interviews lasted between 25–45 minutes. The Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB)

granted research approval on February 19, 2021. The approval number for this study is 02-19-21-0740824. Once permission was granted, I was able to begin recruiting participants. I posted the recruitment flyer on various social media sites, including Facebook and Instagram. The first participant interview was completed on March 4, 2021. Subsequently, I was able to complete six additional interviews by March 21, 2021. Although I had obtained seven participants, I still intended to acquire at least five more. On April 12, 2021, I reposted the recruitment flyer on the previous social media sites to obtain new participants. After two weeks, seven additional participants had contacted me, and all interviews were completed by April 23, 2021.

Demographics

A total number of 14 adults participated in this study. The participants included seven male-to-female individuals, four female-to-male individuals, and three nonbinary individuals. For clarification, nonbinary refers to transgender individuals whose gender identity does not align with their assigned sex at birth and who identify outside the traditional male-female binary (Reisner & Hughto, 2019). According to Liszewski et al. (2018) some transgender individuals have a broad gender identity and may identify as both transgender and nonbinary. The ages of the participants in this study ranged from 25 to 55 years old. Names were not used in field notes or transcriptions, and each participant was labeled with an alias to ensure confidentiality. Participants were asked to share their experiences with navigating on social media and the impact of what cyberbullying means to them. I used a digital recorder to capture the audio data, which was then transcribed. Table 1 displays the participant's gender identity as well as an assigned alias.

Table 1

Participant Group

Gender Identity	Number of Participants	Participant Alias
Male-to-Female	7	P8
		P9
		P10
		P11
		P12
		P13
		P14
Female-to-Male	4	P1
		P3
		P6
		P7
Nonbinary	3	P2
		P4
		P5

Data Collection

Data were collected from 14 participants who volunteered for the study. To recruit participants, I developed a recruitment flyer and posted it on various social media sites to attract volunteers. Since sampling was purposive, the participants were required to (a) identify as transgender, (b) have directly experienced being a victim of cyberbullying, (c) had at least one social media account, and (d) were at least 18 years old. I was eventually contacted by several individuals who were interested in volunteering. Based on the original data analysis plan described in Chapter 3, I aimed to interview between 12 and 15 participants. Because I interviewed 14 individuals, the proposed number of participants was achieved. Upon initial contact with the participants, I sent them an informed consent document, which they acknowledged and returned. Two participants volunteered to be interviewed on video chat, 11 preferred audio-only, and one answered the interview questions by typing out their responses.

Before initiating interviews with the participants, I explained the purpose of the study and reiterated that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Although each interview lasted between 25–45 minutes, I allowed the participants to take their time and speak without restrictions. Furthermore, I also felt that it was essential to build rapport with the participants to help establish a comfortable environment. I digitally recorded each interview audio to ensure accuracy. The interview questions that I asked allowed participants to share their experiences of being transgender while having dealt with cyberbullying. Information that the participants were willing to share included challenges while transitioning, issues with being a victim of cyberbullying behavior, coping skills, types of people who bully, and what their experiences of being transgender meant to them. Upon completing each interview, I transcribed all audio recordings and saved data and notes on a password-protected computer. I preformed member checks by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interview and a summary of the results. I also informed the participants that they were welcome to contact me if they had any questions, clarifications, or concerns.

Data Analysis

For this qualitative study, I used an IPA approach to collect data. IPA is part of the phenomenological psychology approach and concentrates on thoroughly examining personal lived experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). According to Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) the main objective for IPA researchers is to investigate how individuals make sense of their experiences and attempt to understand what the experience is like from the participant's perspective. IPA researchers are also concerned with producing

rich, detailed, and first-person accounts of experiences and phenomena being studied (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

For this study, 14 participants volunteered to share their encounters with having been victimized by cyberbullying behavior. Once the interviews were complete, I collected and transcribed the data, and reviewed all notes. I used an online transcription service to transcribe the audio obtained during the interviews. Thirteen of the interviews were transcribed using the transcription service. One participant was deaf, so I provided them with a copy of the interview questions to respond by typing out their answers. Once I collected and transcribed the data, I used manual coding to dissect the data. Saldaña (2009) suggested that manipulating qualitative data on paper and writing the codes by hand can give the researcher more control and ownership of the work. Once I detected codes, they were then further developed into themes and presented in this study.

When it came time to analyze data, there were various steps involved during the IPA process. Smith et al. (2009) suggested reading and re-reading some of the original data for the first analysis step. During this time, I attentively listened to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts from the interviews. According to Smith et al. (2009) this process is conducted to ensure participants become the focus of analysis and for the researcher to actively engage with the data. Another step during this process is to focus on language use and linguistic comments. For example, identifying pronoun use, laughter, tone, and metaphors are essential components during the analysis process (Smith et al., 2009). Next, I identified developing themes by referring to the comments from the previous steps. I detected these themes in the form of words, phrases, and

sentences. Jeong and Othman (2016) suggested that the data reading becomes more focused and interpretive by detecting emergent themes. Once the developing themes were divided under the research question, I abstracted them and grouped them into different super-ordinate themes. Abstraction can be described as a method of detecting patterns between emergent themes and developing a superordinate theme (Smith et al., 2009).

Once the process of identifying themes and connections is complete and the researcher is satisfied with the outcome, Smith et al. (2009) mentioned the importance of taking notes about how the analysis stage was conducted. With that suggestion in mind, I used a research journal and frequently documented descriptions of the analysis process and observations throughout the analytic data. Next, I analyzed the subsequent participant's transcriptions and repeated the process. Although the previously mentioned approaches are not mutually exclusive for IPA, Smith et al. (2009) suggested using strategies that work for the researcher and the material they have. I discovered eight essential themes that were developed from the codes, which were (a) harassment, (b) adverse reactions, (c) coping with humor, (d) anonymity, (e) lack of protection online, (f) educating the public, (g) empathic concern, and (h) resilience. Commonalities that I discovered among the different participant interviews subsequently served as the results of this study.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

When it comes to evidence of trustworthiness, it is essential to maintain credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability during the process of

research. I achieved trustworthiness of this research study and data collection through these four criteria.

Credibility

Credibility can be defined as the degree to which a research study is authentic and appropriate regarding the level of agreement among participants and the researcher (Mills et al., 2010). To ensure accuracy, I conducted member-checks with each participant. Member-checks were achieved by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interviews and a summary of the findings. I asked participants to review the interview and provide feedback on whether they had any questions, clarifications, or concerns.

Transferability

Transferability of research discoveries refers to the degree in which it can be applied to additional contexts and studies (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). I confirmed transferability in this study by providing the reader with thick descriptive data. Thick descriptive data was accomplished by presenting the reader with a complete account of the context, participants, and research design. I incorporated detailed data, such as direct quotes from the participants, to allow other researchers to analyze whether the results were appropriate to their own study. Providing quotations also enhances readability and provides vividness to the text (Eldh et al., 2020).

Dependability

Dependability can be defined as data reliability over time and under various conditions (Elo et. al., 2014). Delivering clear and detailed descriptions about the process within this study will allow future researchers to repeat the work, therefore viewing the

research design as a prototype model (Shento, 2004). I demonstrated dependability in this study by having the process reviewed by my chair and committee members. Overall, researchers should ensure that the procedures are logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Tobin & Begley, 2004).

Confirmability

According to Mandal (2008), confirmability can be defined as the impartiality of research during data collection and data analysis. I achieved confirmability in this study by demonstrating how the interpretations and results were developed from the data. I also applied reflexivity strategies to ensure confirmability as well. I achieved reflexivity by maintaining a journal to reflect on what occurred during the research process.

Results

The research question for this study was: What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults? I developed interview questions to address the research question so that participants could share their lived experiences. I organized the results of this study by themes and present them in this section. I labeled all names with an alias to conceal the participant's identities. I also quoted and summarized the responses as well. Each participant was asked the same interview questions and was requested to describe their experiences with being victimized by cyberbullying. I manually coded data by identifying common words and phrases among the participants. I identified common themes from the participants despite their different ages and gender identities. I categorized these commonalities into codes and then grouped them into themes. Eight central themes were identified from the codes, which include (a) harassment, (b) adverse

reactions, (c) coping with humor, (d) anonymity, (e) lack of protection online, (f) educating the public, (g) empathic concern, and (h) resilience.

Theme 1: Harassment

Harassment can often be interpreted in various ways. Regarding the experience of cyberbullying on transgender adults, the participants from this study have all indicated that they frequently experience various forms of harassment. Common codes included repeated messages, online to offline harassment, doxing, violence, stalking, threats, invasion of privacy, and name calling. Online harassment was one of the most prevalent themes that were detected from this study. Online harassment can be defined as purposefully abusive, unwanted, frequent repetitive interactions with another individual online (Cross, 2019). Participant P14 reported that she experienced so much bullying and harassment that she had to change her phone number. P14 stated:

> It was just like, disgusting, like, nasty things. You know, basically saying, I need help. She feels bad for my family. I look ridiculous. And like stuff like that. And so, I had to change my number. And then she started emailing me.

P14 also described how she had to delete one of her social media accounts because of the frequent harassment. She stated:

> So, before I came out to everybody, I had two social media accounts. Two Facebook accounts. One as my female, and one is my male account that I had not come out on yet. I ended up having to delete that female account just because it would get so much harassment.

Similarly, P1 also experienced recurrent online harassment on various platforms. For example, P1 stated, “It started on Facebook itself and then did transfer onto Messenger, and I do believe that they did actually follow me on TikTok and tricked me into Google messaging them.” Likewise, participant P5 reported having experienced similar online harassment as well. P5 expressed, “It was a lot of repeated messages with mainly like transphobic slurs in it or homophobic slurs.” P5 continued to share that the bully invalidated his gender by targeting his appearance. P5 voiced, “It was mostly that, and just like, you know, picking out things about me. Like what I'm wearing, you know, and how girly it looks and things like that.” Like P5, participant P10 also disclosed how she would be targeted based on her appearance. She reported, “You argue with somebody about politics or something, they're just gonna be like, ‘Nice dress faggot.’ P10 noted how she also had people continuously send inappropriate messages to her on Facebook. Participant P6 was another individual who experienced online harassment as well. P6 described a time when people online would encourage him to kill himself. P6 indicated, “There were bulletins that people would put out for certain people to kill themselves, and I was a target of that a lot.” P6 continued sharing about how he would frequently receive homophobic and transphobic slurs, stating:

> It was like homophobic and transphobic slurs, even though I was not out, nor did I think I was either at that time. There was a lot of mental health things because it had gotten around school that I had suicidal thoughts, and so they were like egging me on. Like trying to see how much it would take.

When asked why the person was bullying him or what prompted them to engage in the bullying behavior, P6 shared, “It was just that I was different, and it posed a threat to what they were learning from their parents and other people in society.” Participant P2 also expressed how harmful online harassment can be. When P2 was asked what cyberbullying means to them and how it makes people feel, they stated, “Just because it's online does not make it any less abusive than the classic in-person verbal abuse. Gaslighting people online and bullying can cause serious mental health issues.” P2 also shared how they would receive harmful comments that were personal attacks about them. Participant P3 explained how he had received death threats from someone on TikTok. He stated, “I got hundreds of death threats from my first video, which I didn’t say anything controversial either.” P3 described how he shut down his account due to the excessive harassment that he was receiving. P3 reported:

> So after that, I had to shut down the TikTok account as well because I couldn't keep up with the trolls. I'm like, ‘Oh, if I get trolls, I'll just report and delete them, you know? Report and delete. It'll be fine.’ But there were so many, I couldn't physically do it, so I had to shut it all off. Abandoned it for a good couple of days, and when I came back, it had all calmed down.

P8 was another participant who disclosed that they were harassed online as well. P8 shared how she had received messages from an individual who claimed to enjoy frightening women. P8 stated:

> They were talking about how they like to scare women, how they take pleasure in making women feel scared. And even had no regret if they were to hit a woman, they wouldn't care. And then they finalized it by saying girls like me are just a fetish. Guy's want to be with biological women and don't want to be seen with girls like us in the streets. We're just a fetish.

Participant P8 continued to share how she experienced being harassed and misgendered. P8 stated, "But they always tend to say the same sort of things like, 'You are the ugliest girl in the entire world or the ugliest man.' You know anything to try and get to me."

Online to Offline Harassment

Some of the participants also experienced harassment that transferred from being online to offline as well. For example, participant P2 disclosed that they were stalked by a cyberbully stating, "I have had someone stalk me, then bully me over Xanga a long time ago. So I have learned never to give out my phone number and not post a lot of my information online." Participant P11 also expressed concern about having encountered someone who stalked her as well. P11 reported:

> For a while, I had a stalker, and this person decided that they wanted to track me through various things and showed up in various forums, and so forth and so on. That's why I have a closed Facebook account now.

P9 was another participant who shared that the cyberbullying harassment had caused her so many issues where she had to move homes. In response to the harassment, P9 states:

> He’s caused me problems, and I have spent the past five years of my life moving from pillar to post because people just cause problems. They start smashing the windows and everything. Spray painting on the house, ‘You fucking tranny.’

P9 continued to describe how the cyberbullying also caused her to endure harassment within the mountain biking community. P9 shared:

> The abuse that he caused me online caused me a lot more abuse for many other people within the mountain biking community. To a point where I couldn't go down to any mountain biking track in this country—one, without being recognized, and two, without being chastised, just for being trans.

Likewise, P13 also endured some offline harassment as well. P13 stated, “It stayed on Facebook mostly, but they did pull it into real-life, trying to call our jobs and landlords. They actually caused me to lose a job, and they're trying to prevent me from having surgery right now.” P13 continued to describe how the individual would make false claims and “baseless accusations” that were open and public. P13 reported, “Basically, while I was doing a live on Facebook, they would come onto my Facebook Live and start saying horrible things like I'm guilty of criminal acts. You know, and I have no record, no criminal activity ever.” When asked why the person was bullying them, P13 replied, “Just simply because of my transgender identity.”

Doxing

Another type of harassment that was detected during this study was doxing. Doxing is described as searching for and displaying an individual’s personal information

online with malicious intent (Lokman, 2020). The method of doxing may be used to humiliate, intimidate, threaten, or punish the individual (Douglas, 2016). Participant P4 reported that while being cyberbullied, they were doxed, and their private information was posted on Craigslist. For example, P4 stated, “The ads that were put up, there were two different ones. And they were just explicit ways to kill and sexually assault me. And requests for people to do so.” P4 continued to describe how the cyberbully had even posted their address online. P4 noted, “There were instructions with my address and my almost phone number. To like kill and rape me and the ways they wanted that to happen.” P7 experienced a similar doxing incident which caused him to encounter an invasion of privacy. P7 stated, “This person is an adult who was doing the harassment and told a bunch of the kids that I work with to view my personal Facebook, which has my legal name and all photos before I previously transitioned.” P7 also clarified:

> But it’s just those previous pictures, like my high school pictures and stuff is what really freaks me out. Plus, it still has my legal name, which I don’t even go by anymore, and no one at the school uses my legal name.

This incident caused P7 to worry about possible retaliation, stating, “If there’s one kiddo who’s gonna really hate me or I don’t get along with, that they’re gonna try and use that against me, and it’s going to become a bigger issue.” Not only can doxing cause harassment against an individual online, but it can also lead to traditional bullying and violence since the victim’s personal information and locations are often made public (Chen et al., 2019).

Religious Criticism

Another sub-theme that frequently emerged was that participants claimed to have been cyberbullied by someone who used religion as a weapon of harassment. For example, when P12 was asked whether she knew any of the people who were cyberbullying her or if they were strangers, she responded by saying, “Ninety-eight percent of them were strangers, and then the other 2% were my religious nutjob side of the family.” P1 was another participant who described a cyberbullying situation in which he was being harassed by someone who did not believe in people being transgender and that “it was not right.” P1 noted, “Kind of more along of like quote-unquote, godly lines if you will. Religious ways, I guess.” P1 shared that the harassment had started after he changed his name and gender on Facebook. Participant P2 experienced a similar incident which involved the bully sending him private messages in a Facebook group. P2 explained how the cyberbully said that they were going to pray for them, that they were “a beautiful girl,” and that they needed to change what they were doing so that God would love them. To avoid the cyberbullying harassment, P2 notified the moderator of the group about the incident. Unfortunately, the bully made a new account and continued to harass P2. When nothing was done to resolve the issue, P2 decided to leave the group. When questioned about this incident, P2 stated:

> They started pushing conversion therapy. They went on to say that Covid-19 was G-ds punishment for America, allowing trans people to transition, and I could stop killing people if I went to therapy and learned to love myself the way G-d made me.

When P2 was questioned about why the individual was cyberbullying them, they claimed:

> They saw my comment on a Facebook group page and messaged me. I found that this person had done this to multiple people. They had joined the group of LGBT persons in order to befriend us and convert us. They believed they were missionaries doing G-d's work.

Other participants also expressed their concerns about how religion often affects the LGBT community. For example, participant P8 gave the following response:

> I mean, I'm really shocked how America really is. Honestly, I feel it is not much different from the UK, but I kind of hear more and more about how churches and Christians literally calling transgender people, gay people, anyone LGBT, 'Spawns of the Devil,' and stuff like that. And they actually literally mean it. Like they don't care. And they'll twist these words from the Bible to suit their needs.

P8 also addressed how "They just pick and choose what they want to hear and believe. I think that needs to stop. I think religion and conservatism, not wanting to educate themselves, this needs to stop." P11 was another participant who experienced cyberbullying harassment with someone associated with religion. P11 disclosed how she "walked away" from religion and believes that it is toxic. P11 stated how she felt that "A lot of people out there are using religion as a means to promote hatred." P11 described an experience from when a cyberbully was stalking her. P11 shared that the bully said, "God is going to punish me by killing my entire family. That I wasn't a real girl. That was an

abomination in the eyes of everyone." P11 noted that although it's disheartening, she believes that it's the people "that don't say anything that feels these things; are the bigger problem." P11 continued to say:

> I'd rather have someone be out in the honest and say, 'Look, I hate trans people, and I hope you die.' At least I know where I stand with them, rather than someone, you know, palling around and so forth and so on, and harboring these feelings.

When questioned why the person was bullying her or what prompted them to engage in the bullying behavior, she responded by saying, "Religion definitely. He was a quote-unquote, religious zealot trying to save the world." The data from this study suggests that many of the participants received feedback from others who criticized them about how their identity is something to be ashamed of. Those who challenge expected gender roles were often made to feel as though they are sinful and immoral.

Theme 2: Adverse Reactions

The second major theme that was detected from this study was that the participants experienced various adverse reactions to cyberbullying. Although each participant had their own unique experiences with being victimized by cyberbullying, many reported having some form of negative emotional or physical response. Common codes detected included (a) anger, (b) depression, (c) anxiety, (d) physical reaction, (e) emotional, (f) isolation, (g) lack of appetite, (h) crying, and (i) loss of trust. When participants were asked how they felt when hearing or seeing the bullying behavior, many expressed feeling angry, stressed, depressed, and anxious. When describing his

experience, P1 voiced that he felt hurt and “pissed-off.” He also shared that he felt angry and “sad that people can’t just accept people.” Another participant also expressed having feelings of depression and thoughts of suicide. Participant P3 stated, “Well, on Facebook, that one was pretty bad because I knew the people, so that one put me into a really bad depression.” P3 described how he was being bullied by someone he personally knew during a vulnerable time in his life. P3 shared, “So the bullying at that time was at a vulnerable moment, and it was from people that I knew, so it was really terrible.” He continued to say, “I would never have done it because I have good people in my life, but the thought of suicide was there.” Similarly, participant P6 shared that he internalized some of the bullying behavior. In response, he stated:

> But when you react like that, you do end up harboring a lot of unpackaged trauma and a lot of repressed rage. Because you're kind of faking a smile to repress the rage, and it doesn't get out. And you don't get to feel your emotions and just represses your trauma that you later will have to dig through in therapy. I mean, I'm still digging through all the trauma therapy from bullying.

Likewise, participant P10 shared that cyberbullying “pisses you off.” She further clarified that “sometimes it'll piss you off to where you'll retaliate.” Similarly, participant P11 disclosed that she felt angry when she heard or saw the cyberbullying behavior. P11 continued to share that the bullying “affects me more when someone else is being bullied rather than myself.” When P11 was asked to describe what cyberbullying means to her and how it makes people feel, she responded by saying:

> It makes them feel horrible. It's kind of almost in a way of making you doubt yourself on levels that you're never going to be good enough. You're never going to pass enough. You're never going to be a woman. You're never going to be a man. That you invalidate yourself so much that your power is stripped away.

Participant P7 also reported feeling hurt and paranoid when confronted with cyberbullying. As he recounted his experience, P7 stated, “I got super paranoid and called one of my friends to have her purposely delete me to see how private my account was to make sure that no one could view photos or anything like that.” Further addressing his response to cyberbullying, P7 went on to say:

> Well, the night that I found out, I was super drunk already, so it just kind of led to more drinking. But a few days after, I was super anxious and depressed for a couple of days, just trying to mentally cope with what all I was told.

Likewise, participant P13 described feeling “horrible” because of the cyberbullying. P13 shared, “I know at times I thought about self-harm.” She also stated:

> What people have done to me would make people kill themselves. They begin to get people to commit suicide or cause them to lose their job. I mean, the shit that I've been through would cause you to want to take your own life.

When questioned about the impact that the cyberbullying victimization had on her, participant P14 said that overall, she felt “hurt.” P14 shared that she eventually got used to being bullied and stated, “at first, you know it's pretty hurtful, and then you tend to get more used to it.”

Physical Reaction

In addition to having emotional reactions to cyberbullying, some participants reported having physical reactions as well. When P4 was asked about how they felt while being cyberbullied, they shared that they often get an "adrenaline spike." P4 also stated, "I have an embarrassing physical response to it. I get some heart palpitations." When asked to describe how they responded to the bullying behavior and what motivated their response, P4 reported:

> At first, I had a breakdown, your initial response. And I think that's fair for anyone who's having that come at them. You're probably not going to react in your exact right state of mind. It's coming at you from every direction. And even if it's only coming at you from one direction, it's awful enough.

Similarly, participant P8 also stated that she "tends to get a sense of adrenaline and shaken up feelings because it's always that this is most likely the beginning of all the confrontation." P8 then explained that she had an "emotional breakdown" by hearing the bullying. She stated:

> I did have an emotional breakdown hearing it because there are people out there who see us as a fetish to satisfy their dirty secrets and kinks. And that is something that we, as a community and society, need to try and change.

Participant P9 also experienced a physical reaction to the bullying behavior. Interestingly, P9 claimed that she felt "really, really hungry" and lost her appetite. P9 shared, "I stopped eating for a long time, and I was just very, very upset, and I didn't really want to

talk to anyone." P9 explained that the incident of cyberbullying also caused her to become emotional and cry. P9 stated, "I was really upset by it. Like I was angry, but my anger is breaking down and crying because I'm not a violent person. I am very passive." Like participant P9, participant P2 also reported how cyberbullying affected their appetite by disclosing that the bullying had caused them to relapse on their eating disorder.

Isolation

Another significant similarity that the participants had in common was that many of them engaged in isolative behavior after being victimized by cyberbullying behavior. When asked to describe how cyberbullying affected his life, participant P1 expressed that it made him more "closed off" regarding who he allows to be a part of his transition. Participant P2 also shared that they left groups on Facebook and "avoided going places, even when Covid safe." They also expressed how they stopped talking to friends, even those who were supportive and not bullying them. P2 stated, "We are online more than ever, and it is our way to connect with people. When this method becomes unsafe, it isolates people even more, causing mental health issues." Similarly, participant P3 also felt as though the cyberbullying victimization had caused him to isolate. P3 addressed that the cyberbullying became so bad that he did not want to leave the house. P3 stated:

> I was very depressed. Going to work was very difficult. Interacting with people was difficult. All the normal things you would expect from someone who is depressed had happened to me. I just didn't want to see anyone. I didn't want to speak to anyone. I didn't want to do anything.

P3 shared that dealing with cyberbullying was “severely hindering” and that it took him over a month to “pick himself back up.” Likewise, participant P4 described how being cyberbullied has made her become “more timid.” For example, P4 stated:

> I think it made me just severely shut down and fueled a lot of my reclusive behaviors. And it also makes it difficult to advocate for myself publicly. If I get ‘ma’amed’ or called ‘misses,’ it’s really hard for me to feel validated enough to correct them, you know. Like if you get told something enough times, you internalize it to a degree. Whether you actually think it's true or not, it will affect your behavior, and that will, in turn, affect how you're treated. It made me more timid in a way that I wasn't used to and that I'm still not used to.

P4 also expressed that they left Tumblr due to cyberbullying harassment. They stated, “The reason that I did it was probably because the point of it is to make you feel just like isolated and alone. And it feels like everyone is against you.” P9 was another participant who also disclosed that cyberbullying caused her to isolate and not want to talk to anyone. P9 replied by saying, “I turned into a bit of a recluse, to be honest.” Likewise, participant P14 also revealed that coping with the cyberbullying caused her to “withdraw a little bit.” P14 responded by saying, “I didn't become quite as vocal on social media. I don't have a desire to be as vocal in spaces that are more like public, just because I don't want that exposure.” When asked to describe how the cyberbullying situation affected her life, P14 stated**:**

> It makes me not want to be as vocal on social media. I'm afraid if I put myself out there, that I'm exposing myself to nasty feedback and just nasty people in general. So, I kind of withdrew a little bit on social media.

Loss of Trust

The participants from this study expressed different ways in which they lost trust in others after being victims of cyberbullying. For example, participant P1 shared that he became "more closed off" regarding who he allowed to be a part of his transition. P1 stated, "I'm just being very careful and cautious of who can view my posts, who I have as friends, and what I post in general." Similarly, participant P3 noted that he was so upset by the cyberbullying that he created a new social media account. P3 stated:

> I reached a point where I was so upset by it that I struggled with some depression for a time, so I literally shut my account down. Didn't go to a computer, like stayed off the computer entirely for probably a couple of weeks to a month. When I decided to come back, I created a whole new account and invited only friends that I knew in real life; and locked the account down.

Participant P6 expressed how it is hard for him to trust and reach out to people on social media. P6 stated, "What if they are just a troll, and you know, what if they end up being bad people that I don't want in my life. So, I don't follow a lot of people on social media." Similarly, participant P7 shared that he doesn't engage on social media as much due to cyberbullying. When asked how the cyberbullying situation affected his life, participant P7 reported, "I don't post hardly anything now. I don't upload pictures

anymore. I don't upload videos." Likewise, participant P9 disclosed that cyberbullying made her feel upset to where she didn't want to talk to anyone. P9 explained, "I started to lose trust in people that I thought that I was close to and meant something to me." Similarly, participant P13 shared that she learned "to not trust people" due to her experiences with being cyberbullied. Participant P14 also expressed concern about how cyberbullying made her withdraw on social media and not be as vocal. P14 stated, "I don't have a desire to be as vocal in spaces that are more like public, just because I don't want that exposure." These incidents caused many individuals to experience various stressors associated with cyberbullying behavior. Overall, findings in this study revealed that the cyberbullying incidents caused many of the participants to experience adverse reactions, whether it be emotional or physical responses.

Theme 3: Coping with Humor

As the participants described their lived experiences with cyberbullying victimization, many reported using humor to respond or cope with the bullying. Some common codes detected included (a) joking, (b) funny, (c) comedy, (d) comedian, (e) laughing, (f) playing around, and (g) sense of humor. For example, participant P3 shared how he was "shocked" by the number of death threats he was getting on TikTok and stated, "Like I kind of laughed it off because at this point, I'm four years in, I'm post-op, and am very confident in myself and who I am." P3 also disclosed that although he has been cyberbullied, he has fun "making fun" of the bullies. P3 stated:

> I've got a tough skin at this point. I'm kind of used to this shit, so I actually have a little bit of fun making fun of some of the trolls. But I would not recommend it for anyone who's like first coming out, or might be a little more sensitive, or definitely not for young kids who are trans because I know they can really fall prey to things like that.

Participant P4 was another individual who reported that they make jokes and use humor in response to cyberbullying. When asked what type of strategies they use to cope, Participant P4 stated, “humor, and using the audience of the Internet against them, because that's exactly what they're doing.” Similarly, participant P6 shared that he responded to the cyberbullying with a smile and commented back, saying, “Oh, thanks for mentioning me. Thanks for, you know, talking about me and bringing my name up.” P6 also noted that when people bully him on TikTok, he’ll usually respond with a smiley face emoji. P6 stated:

> And then with trolls online, you know, when people troll me on a TikTok comment, I usually just respond with like the smiley face with all the hearts on it and say, ‘Oh, thank you so much for commenting.’ Because it throws them off. They don't know how to continue with that kind of behavior.

Participant P8 was another participant who expressed how she learned to turn the cyberbullying hate comments into content and joke around about it. P8 stated:

> Some of it, I can turn into a positive, like hate comments and stuff. I can turn that into content and make smart remarks back and stuff like that. And joke around, or

> even just play with these ideas. Even if I'm writing a script, they give me a script idea, like some dialogue.

Likewise, participant P10 disclosed that she too uses humor to cope and that she "goes back and forth and laughs about the jokes" with her partner. When asked what type of strategies she developed to try and cope with cyberbullying, P10 responded by saying, "Humor works. You know if it's going to be shitty, there's nothing you can do about it." P10 continued to say, "The people that are arguing against me being able to use the women's bathroom are the ones hitting me up and sending me dick pictures and asking me stuff." P10 responded with, "We'll just laugh and show it to each other. And then eventually send that picture to their wife or something." Likewise, participant P11 disclosed that when she had someone persistently harass her online, she responded by sending the individual a humorous picture. Participant P11 stated, "It was just like the most disgusting picture I saw, and I sent it to him. He stopped sending me pictures after that." When participant P12 was asked how she responds to the bullying behavior, P12 replied by saying, "If it was something that I hadn't heard about, I would congratulate them on their originality."

Theme 4: Anonymity

The next theme that frequently emerged from the narratives was that most participants felt that people often cyberbully due to anonymity. Some common codes that were identified included (a) hidden, (b) concealment, (d) secrecy, (e) unknown, (f) private, (g) invisible, and (h) no accountability. Participant P4 validates the concept of

anonymity by saying, “They do it because of anonymity and an audience.” When P4 was asked what cyberbullying means to them and how it makes people feel, they responded with:

> Like, it just feels like a means to silence, and it means to make you feel ostracized and belittled. Like a court jester, because again, it's that whole like audience and anonymity. That's why they take to cyberbullying. A comedian isn't funny unless someone's laughing, so that's what they want.

Similarly, participant P6 shared how he was cyberbullied on Myspace when the platform had an anonymous feature. P6 stated, “I remember there was an anonymous feature, and that was like, people would slug your inbox.” P6 also noted how he believes the bullies are “cowards,” stating, “These people that are cyberbullying you are cowards because they're hiding behind their computer screen and saying these things to you. They don't have the balls to say it to your face.” Likewise, participant P8 also expressed how she felt that bullies are “stronger” when they are not in person. P8 stated, “I mean people are a lot more stronger and tougher behind the keyboard.” She continued to say, “I think that people are starting to get way too comfortable behind the keyboard.” Similarly, when participant P10 was asked to describe what cyberbullying means to her and how it makes people feel, she stated, “It’s people getting their own insecurities out on other people that they don't know because they feel more safe that they're protected behind a keyboard and stuff like that.” Correspondingly, participant P11 also felt that when people are anonymous, they feel entitled to say, “horrible things.” P11 stated, “Even aside from

being trans, it seems like people when they're anonymous, they feel they have the right to say violent, horrible things. And I don't know if there is anything you can do about that." P14 was another participant who also expressed concern about how bullying is "easier" when done online. When describing her experience, P14 stated, "People are usually more vocal about cyberbullying because it's always easier to be mean when you're not face to face with a person."

Theme 5: Lack of Protection Online

When it comes to safety and security procedures on social media, this study's participants indicated that there is a lack of safety and preventative measures for cyberbullying. Some of the frequent codes that emerged from this theme included (a) safety concern, (b) protection, (c) security, (d) safeguard, (e) unsafe, and (f) dangerous. Participants noted that there should be stricter policies and procedures to help prevent cyberbullying from occurring. Participant P1 shared how he has reported cyberbullying through Facebook but does not believe there was any outcome. P1 commented that social media platforms should have stricter or more accessible ways of reporting and getting responses back. Although participant P2 was "impressed" with Facebook's anti-cyberbullying policies, they felt that it would be helpful for others to know what that policy is and how to report and block people. P2 explained, "that way, it's not up to contractors stumbling onto the conversation or a bot finding keywords that can be misspelled to prevent the bot from finding them." P2 continued to express concern about how social media platforms have become unsafe over time. P2 stated:

> Growing up, we used social media and blogs to escape from bullying in person and to have a safe haven, and now it's just another place to have to watch out for jerks who want to get their mean fix without the consequences of others knowing.

Participant P3 conveyed that he will often report and delete any hateful comments when he gets cyberbullied. P3 claimed that Facebook has "worked pretty well" for him since he only invites friends that he knows in real life. However, P3 believes that social media platforms need to take cyberbullying more seriously and stated, "I've started seeing a shift in that a little bit on some platforms, but places like TikTok and things like that, they're clearly not taking it as an actual threat." The same participant also stated, "The people who threaten to kill people should literally just be banned forever, and I don't understand why the platforms aren't doing that." Similarly, participant P4 also had an experience when they attempted to report the cyberbullying to the police, but no outcome was achieved. P4 stated:

> I was getting rape threats from a guy in Canada, and I found his IP and his Internet provider because I was desperate. Like I did not release this information, I was desperate. And I contacted them and was just saying, 'Can you do something please?' And they were like, 'We can't do anything about this.'

P4 suggested that social media platforms should involve more human oversight and less AI when it comes to detecting cyberbullying. They shared, "The AI in these places just are running rampant, and we need more people. You got to look for context." P4 also noted how they unfriended and blocked individuals because they felt unsafe. P4 stated:

> I eventually unfriended and blocked every single person I knew from there, even if I thought maybe they were my friend. And I feel like maybe that was an overreaction, but I had no other way to know that I was safe.

When discussing what recommendations would help strengthen anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures, participant P5 mentioned having different non-discrimination or anti-harassment policies. P5 shared that the policies "should make sure to explicitly call out cyberbullying as an issue and as something that's not going to be tolerated there." P5 expressed concern about how a lot of the policies are "pretty generic" and that "we should just get more specific and make sure it's very clearly outlined." Likewise, participant P6 also voiced concern about the need for platforms to "tighten up on community guidelines." P6 stated:

> Because, you know, we're seeing on TikTok and stuff, that a lot of cyberbullies still get around the system, and then normal people get blocked for no reason. And so, we need to tighten up our community guidelines. And our automatizing of reporting content.

P7 expressed similar thoughts regarding security issues on social media platforms. P7 stated, "I feel like Facebook and just other security for their platforms, they need to be more real realistic about what's being posted, especially toward the LGBT community." Participant P8 also voiced about the issue of social media platforms and the accuracy of protection. P8 reported:

> There are algorithms and bots in place to try and detect language that is intended to hurt and harass people. But even then, that's not really good. Because some genuinely nice comments they might be talking about, say, harassing and bullying and stuff like that, could also be removed because the trigger words are there.

P8 continued to share concerns about how difficult it is for social media platforms to tackle the issues of cyberbullying. She stated, “So if we strike down anything, like people can't say anything bad or anything like that, then you also take away people's freedom of speech. It's really a difficult problem to tackle.” Participant P9 also expressed her opinion regarding anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures. P9 reported, “I think these policies, and any policies to do with any individual group of minorities that get chastised for their characteristics, they should be involved in the creation of these policies directly and not just dictated.” To prevent cyberbullying, she also added that it would be helpful to “challenge people when they hold racist or discriminatory ideas or idealistic.” P10 was another participant who also voiced frustration about how there is “no point” in reporting people who cyberbully because “nothing ever gets done.” When asked what recommendations they think would benefit and help strengthen anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures, participant P11 shared how she believes that “there isn't a control over that, other than stay away from open groups.” P11 proceeded to say:

> Unfortunately, on a lot of online platforms, even Facebook, you can make an account and still be anonymous. You can just lie. You can kick someone out of a

> group. You can kick them off social media, but they can always come back in as someone else.

When participant P12 was asked if she reported the cyberbullying and if anything was done to try and stop it, she voiced frustration by stating, “No, nothing's ever come about from my reports of online harassment and bullying.” Similarly, participant P13 described how she felt that people do not adhere to or follow community standards and guidelines. P13 stated, “So it doesn't matter what I say or what I recommend to change the system to, because it's not going to help anything.” Like other participants, P14 also expressed concern regarding the lack of protection against cyberbullying. Although P14 reported an incident for hate speech, she claimed that there was no outcome, stating, “I reported one or two people for hate speech. But every time, it kind of comes back as, ‘Oh, they didn't break any of our guidelines.’ Because it gets put off as an opinion or whatever.” P14 also noted how she feels that there should be “stricter guidelines” on social media platforms as well.

Theme 6: Educating the Public

As participants described their experiences with being victimized by cyberbullying, many voiced concerns regarding a need or desire to educate the public. Some common codes included (a) educate, (b) school, (c) providing resources, (d) teaching, (e) inform, (f) awareness, and (g) learning. Many shared how they felt it would be imperative to inform others about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying and the issues that transgender individuals often encounter online. For example, participant P1

felt that it would be important to educate people about safety and security measures on social media. When asked what recommendations would be beneficial to help strengthen anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures, P1 stated:

> I think just having a stricter…either an easier way of being able to stop it as far as reporting it and actually getting responses back. And I guess more educating people on being able to set their securities properly when it comes to social media platforms.

Similarly, participant P2 suggested that:

> It would help others to know what that policy is and how to report and block people so that it's not up to contractors stumbling onto the conversation. Or a bot finding keywords that can be misspelled to prevent the bot from finding them.

When it comes to informing others, participant P5 reported that he would support the person being bullied by listening to what they want to share with him. He expressed how he would also provide resources to them as well. P5 indicated that he would possibly share his personal experiences with the individual, stating, "and then also I think you know, I would be comfortable sharing my own experiences if they wanted to hear about that. Just so that they also know that it's not just something that's happening to them." P5 mentioned the importance of exploring different sections of identities and how different things contribute to someone's experiences or challenges that they might be going through. P5 felt that it would be essential to "normalize talking about things like this." P5

described the importance of educating others on the impact that cyberbullying has on people. P5 validated this statement by staying:

> I would tell them that it has more of an impact than I think people sometimes think. And that it's something that we all should really take seriously. And especially when it comes to like…when I think of it happening to youth, for example. I think it's really important to think about and make sure that they know that that's not an OK thing to deal with or do to somebody else. So just making sure that it's clear and providing support, and just really talking about it more. I think we need to, you know, really do a better job at sharing these experiences so that people know that they happen and why they shouldn't be happening.

When asked if there was anything that he felt was important to say about dealing with or preventing cyberbullying from happening to someone, participant P6 mentioned the importance of reporting the bullying so that platforms can be aware of who is doing what. P6 stated:

> Reporting it. Victims being empowered to report. I would like to tell anybody who might be cyberbullied to report it. So that way, the platform can learn who's doing what. But it is hard to trust the system that has failed a lot of the time. So, it's a double-edged sword there.

Likewise, participant P7 also felt that there should be more education when it comes to cyberbullying. P7 stated, "I feel like it all starts with education. I feel like there needs to be more education within the schools regarding cyberbullying." He also mentioned the

need for Facebook and other social media platforms to “be more realistic” about what is posted, especially toward the LGBT community. He stated, “I feel like they need to be a little bit more educated themselves on what’s harassment and what’s education before our stuff gets taken down.” P7 further described how he would try to inform others about his experience with cyberbullying and what it has caused. P7 shared:

> If it was an adult, I would definitely be way firmer with them than I would be with a high schooler. And tell him about my experiences and what it's caused because I feel that if you do make it more personal toward another person, that they'll have a better understanding.

Like the other participants, P8 conveyed a desire to educate others about cyberbullying and those who are transgender. When questioned about how she responded to the cyberbullying and what motivated her response, P8 stated, “But my reasoning is generally to work out why people are like this. And try to kind of inform and educate people in some way of why we transition.” Further addressing the need to educate others, P8 went on to say, “It’s down to just better information and education. And encouraging people to better understand.” P8 continued to state:

> We're all nurtured in some way to react to certain things, and I think to a degree, people can be re-nurtured if you push the right buttons. But I don't know what I would say to a cyberbully in general because I think it's really dependent on what that person is like. I would say that they should at least take a little bit of time to get a better understanding of why we are who we are, why we make this choice to

> transition. To accept ourselves. We don't do it for the fun of it, and we get this harassment and bullying from other people.

P8 also described how she felt that communicating can be helpful when attempting to resonate with the individual. P8 reported, “And if I can at least communicate something that might resonate with them, like depression or anxiety or suicide, then they might have some sort of relation to these feelings.” Participant P9 voiced frustration when asked what she would say to someone who is a cyberbully. P9 shared how she believes that they should educate themselves by stating:

> Stop being so vacuous. Educate yourself and basically start to be more confident within yourself, and then you won't feel the need to bring others down, to make you feel better when it just displays to everybody else that you're weak.

Likewise, participant P11 also reported the need to educate others. When P11 was asked about the type of strategies she uses to cope with cyberbullying, she stated, “I attacked them with kindness and information that they might not know. You know, it's because if you start getting into the name-calling and all that crap or whatever, then you're stooping to their level.” P14 was another participant who suggested the importance of educating and informing others. When questioned about recommendations to help strengthen anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures, P14 stated:

> You know, I don't really know, aside from maybe educating people more, which is easier said than done. But just making people more aware that, you know, you can hurt people's feelings on the internet. I guess just taking better initiatives to

> show that you are hurting people's feelings. And maybe just like stricter guidelines on social media platforms. But I mean, that's always hard to do.

P14 also expressed the importance of making people more aware of how harmful cyberbullying can be, especially when the bullying is not face-to-face. P14 reported:

> I don't think people always quite realize that there's a person on the other side of your screen that you are upsetting or you're offending. You're hurting their feelings. And I don't think people quite realize that. They don't always make that connection. And I think just saying that would say a lot. You know, you are hurting people by doing that. It's not some invisible Boogeyman you're talking to. You're talking to a person with feelings and emotions.

Theme 7: Empathic Concern

While listening to the different cyberbullying experiences, many participants voiced concern for others, whether for a cyberbully victim or perpetrator. Some of the common codes that were detected included (a) empathy, (b) protect, (c) defend others, (d) concerned, (e) worried, (f) compassion, and (g) understanding. Although participant P3 described being cyberbullied, he disclosed that he did not want to tell anyone for fear of worrying others. P3 stated:

> I didn't tell anybody else. I didn't want my family to worry about me, so I didn't want to bother them with it. And I didn't tell my best friend because she's going through her own stuff right now, so I don't want to add burden to her.

P3 also expressed concern for the protection of other transgender individuals. P3 shared, “My biggest concern, I think I said earlier, is not so much for myself, but for other trans people. Our suicide rate is already drastically high, especially in trans youth because they're so sensitive.” P3 described his concern for other transgender individuals who are in a more vulnerable position than him. P3 stated:

> So, my biggest concern for cyberbullying is just for other trans people who are in a more vulnerable position than I am. So, people who are just starting to transition. People who are questioning their identity. People who don't have a solid knowledge of who they are yet as a person. Those people are so vulnerable. And these bullies could mean if someone just says the wrong thing one day**,** that could be it. They could literally kill somebody.

Similarly, participant P5 shared how he would provide support for an individual who is being cyberbullied. P5 stated:

> So, for me, I would like to remember when I like to give the person support and just hear what they want to share with me. And you know, provide resources if I have any, even if they're in a bad place. You know, different like text lines, hotlines, things like that. And then also I think, you know I would be comfortable sharing my own experience if they wanted to hear about that. Just so that they also know that it's not just something that's happening to them.

Furthermore, P5 also expressed concern for individuals who are cyberbullies. P5 shared:

> There are various reasons why people do it, and so honestly, I would probably try to reason with them if possible. But also, just not engage in like an aggressive, or accusatory way or anything like that. Just kind of try as much as I can to show compassion because, I mean, I feel like you have to be struggling with something if you're doing that.

Likewise, participant P6 described how he feels that someone who cyberbullies others should reach out for support. P6 stated:

> They should probably talk to their parents about going to therapy because something's wrong there. You know, if a kid is a bully, there's something that they are not getting at home. Neurological, whatever. And they need to be seen by a professional to determine what the cause is. And there needs to be, you know, like intervention in the household. Make sure that there's no parental child abuse going on.

P7 was another participant who voiced concern regarding the mental health of someone who is a cyberbully. P7 shared:

> To me, any person who tries to bully another person, they have some other underlying issues that they have not dealt with themselves. So, depending on the person and what I know, I would probably tell them like, 'Hey, you need to go take care of yourself first because you're harassing someone else that doesn't deserve it right now.' It all stems from within them and what their issues are, and that they need to get a grip of themselves first.

Similarly, participant P8 described how she has a desire to listen and understand why individuals cyberbully others. P8 stated:

> I am not very judgmental of a person, and I wanted to get an understanding of why. Maybe it was a call for help. Maybe it's like they wanted to express how they feel. They just wanted to maybe let something out. So, I was willing to listen and understand why this person felt this way.

Participant P9 also described how she will attempt to defend a victim if she sees someone being bullied online. P9 stated:

> Say if I see other people going through situations where they are being bullied online, or people are being horrible, just for the sake of being horrible…then I'll go out of my way to defend people because I know what that's like.

Likewise, participant P10 voiced the importance of having support if someone is being cyberbullied. P10 shared:

> Always make sure you have some support that you can talk to if it happens. And so, you can at least talk to somebody about it, so you can get it off your chest. And you can at least, you know, start to understand it.

Participant P11 also expressed concern for other transgender individuals who get bullied. P11 stated:

> I sympathize with the people that really have this affect them. Where if someone calls them 'Sir,' they have a really bad day. For me, unless it's done

> deliberately…and you know, generally I'm empathic enough to know the difference…It generally doesn't bother me.

In addition to having concern for the victims, P11 expressed worry for individuals who are cyberbullies. When questioned about what she would say to someone who is a cyberbully, she responded with:

> In my opinion, and it's just an opinion of course; they're hurting. For whatever reason, if they want to lash out at a complete stranger over something, they have to be hurt. They may have bigger problems than I have. Whether they do or not, it doesn't matter. But if you can breach that, perhaps on one small level, you can make the situation better. Be the answer. Don't be the problem.

Although P11 shared how she isn't concerned about what people think of her, she worries about other transgender individuals who are in different situations. P11 clarified:

> You know, it's a way of life for me at this point. I'm not concerned with what clothes I wear when I go out. I'm not concerned with what people think, but other people might be in a different situation. And you know, it's those people that are, you know, maybe they're new coming out. Maybe they just came out. Maybe they're still unsure of things. Maybe they haven't gotten there. Maybe their flame doesn't burn as bright right now. So, it bothers me more when I see other people. And I'll say something and jump into the argument at that point.

Participant P12 was another individual who voiced how she would encourage someone who cyberbullies others to seek help for themselves. P12 reported:

> I would tell them to figure out what triggers that for them. And I know that word 'Triggered' when it comes to an online cyberbully is another excuse to just go full in to be calling us 'Snowflakes' or whatever. But they should seek help because no human being should have that immediate reaction to another human being.

P12 also spoke about understanding the reasons why individuals may bully others. She stated, "That person is clearly coming from a place of hurt. Or they're just trying to be funny with their group of friends. I don't really think that they mean what they say. They're just trying to get a reaction." Like P12, participant P13 also voiced how she felt that someone who cyberbullies should seek help. P13 stated:

> I'm not sure what I would say. But I would probably want to say something like, 'What's wrong with you? You need help. I'm not sure why you're so mad at people and why you want to terrorize and ruin my life and prevent me from having surgery when I have nothing to do with you.'

Theme 8: Resilience

Although cyberbullying is known to cause negative experiences for many victims, interestingly, several of the participants in this study discussed how it made them into stronger individuals. Some common codes that were detected included (a) strength, (b) toughness, (c) moving on, (d) humble, (e) self-defense, (f) manage, and (g) motivation. Participant P1 expressed that he learned to have "a thick skin" when dealing with cyberbullying. He validated that statement by saying, "and I know the true me, and nobody is going to change that." Participant P2 described how he can manage the

cyberbullying due to past experiences. P2 stated, “So I know how to handle it quickly, and from past experiences, you can’t have an intelligent exchange with someone who is determined to hurt you or tear you down for their own emotional gain.” Similarly, participant P3 shared that although he had to delete thousands of hurtful comments on TikTok, he still has “tough skin.” P3 supported this by stating, “and then I had to go through and delete thousands of comments because at this point, as I said, I’ve got tough skin, so it doesn’t bother me too much.” When participant P4 was asked what they would say to someone being cyberbullied, they suggested not letting someone silence you and to “say your piece.” P4 went on to clarify:

> Don’t let that fire, that rage, don’t let it go unchecked. Feel the anger for it. Feel the injustice, feel how wrong it feels and do what you feel is necessary. But maybe take a pause before you act, and then after, just block the people involved and do your best to move forward. Developing a community or putting more interest and energy into your community and your friends and sources of positive energy and things of that nature.

P5 was another participant who expressed how the cyberbullying situation taught him the importance of “taking a step back” and taking time for himself. P5 stated, “So it did have a lot of positives for just reminding me what is best to focus on." Similarly, participant P7 reported that although cyberbullying has been challenging to deal with, he shared that he learned to “try not to hold onto it” when being victimized. P7 stated:

> I definitely learned to try to not hold onto it. But it definitely still plays a factor here and there with it. Especially now that I've been starting off on my career, and so social media can play a huge part in your career if they find out something that they don't like. They don't want you to post. You could just end up being fired for it now.

Likewise, participant P8 expressed that she turned being cyberbullied into something positive for herself. P8 shared that if people try to bully her, she will "stand her ground," however, she does not delete comments unless people report them. P8 clarified, "because, by the end of the day, I think people should face their own consequences for their own actions." When asked what she learned from her experience, P8 shared that it is "making me a stronger person. My mentality is that I am more psychologically stronger, emotionally and mentally." Similarly, participant P9 also addressed her experience from being victimized by cyberbullying and described that she "learned to be a lot stronger, and a lot more humble, and a lot more patient, and to believe in myself." Likewise, participant P11 explained how she would stand up to the bully and verbally defend herself when targeted by cyberbullying. P11 stated, "Most of the time when I can defend myself verbally in such a manner that they don't want to bother me again." P11 also noted, "I feel like I have enough defenses. I'm 55. I don't care what people think of me." P11 described how the experiences had taught her "self-defense" and to be "a stronger person," stating, "no one else is going to ever defend me other than myself." She continued to say, "If I don't hold my ground all of the time, they are going to step all over me, and they're going to win." When asked to describe how cyberbullying had an effect

on her life, participant P12 stated, “It just showed me that I can deal with just about anything that people say or throw at me. And it made me realize that I am a strong-minded individual.” P12’s statements of believing that the trans community is “extremely strong” and that the cyberbullying victimization taught her to be “strong-willed” supports the notion of resilience. P12 stated:

> But we as a community are extremely strong, and we have to deal with our own psychological stuff every single day with the gender dysphoria, the genitalia dysphoria. We are a strong group of people. And if we can handle the stress of coming out and the anxieties that we face on a day to day, somebody's words shouldn't affect us as much as they do.

Like the other participants, P14 also described that she copes with cyberbullying by training herself not to let it bother her. P14 expressed that although she felt “hurt” by the cyberbullying, she eventually tends to “get more used to it.” P14 also described how she learned to live her life the way that she wants to, stating, “I've kind of learned to just live my life my way. I don't have to prove anything to anyone as far as why I live my life the way I do.”

Summary and Transition to Chapter 5

This study consisted of 14 transgender individuals. Seven were male-to-female, four were female-to-male, and three identified as nonbinary. This diverse selection of participants were all at different stages of their transition and between 25 and 55 years old. The participants shared their lived experiences of being victimized by cyberbullying

and described what that experience was like for them. Participants discussed their struggles with being transgender and identified concerns that they experienced while navigating online.

Eight central themes were detected from the data, which included (a) harassment, (b) adverse reactions, (c) coping with humor, (d) anonymity, (e) lack of protection online, (f) educating the public, (g) empathic concern, and (h) resilience. Among the identified themes from the interviews, participants underwent various forms of harassment, including online to offline harassment, doxing, and religious criticism. Participants also experienced different adverse reactions to cyberbullying, such as physical reactions, isolation, and loss of trust. Many of the individuals in this study shared how they utilize humor in response to cyberbullying. Participants mentioned how people often engage in cyberbullying due to anonymity and lack of accountability for their actions. Another central theme derived from this study was that the participants expressed frustration regarding the lack of online protection. Many reported that online security and protection have been ineffective when it comes to preventing cyberbullying. In addition to not feeling safe online, participants also expressed the importance of educating others about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying. Participants described how educating others could promote awareness regarding the impact that cyberbullying has on people, specifically transgender individuals. Showing empathic concern for others was another central theme that was detected in the data. Many of the participants expressed concern about not wanting others to experience the harmful effects caused by cyberbullying. Lastly, having or developing resilience was another central theme that many of the

participants had in common. Participants shared how having experienced online harassment has made them stronger and more resilient. Chapter 5 will conclude the study, where I interpret the findings, describe limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Introduction

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of transgender adults with cyberbullying victimization. This investigation was guided by the research question: What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults? In this concluding chapter, I described an interpretation of the findings, limitations, and issues of trustworthiness. I also described recommendations and social change implications. The crucial findings reviewed in this chapter include various descriptions of the participants' lived experiences with cyberbullying. Central themes are detailed, including harassment issues, adverse reactions to cyberbullying, and using humor in response to bullying behavior. Additional themes reviewed include a correlation of anonymity and cyberbullying, online safety concerns, empathic concern for others, and how cyberbully victims have maintained or developed resilience. I collected data from the narratives provided by the participants.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I describe the essential findings and the interpretation of the findings. I specifically chose interview questions to produce responses to the research question that guided this study. I established the results by using the participant's responses during the interviews and research from past studies. The results from my study confirmed that transgender adults are both negatively and positively impacted by cyberbullying victimization. Results indicated that although the victims experienced different adverse reactions from cyberbullying, many participants also displayed

characteristics of resilience as well. I described and interpreted the significant themes in the following section.

Theme 1: Harassment

Participants from this study shared various ways in which they experienced harassment from cyberbullying. Cross (2019) defined online harassment as abusive, unwanted, repetitive interactions that are purposefully inflicted on another individual online. The acquired results demonstrate that many participants experienced various forms of harassment, including name-calling, death threats, stalking, and homophobic and transphobic slurs. The information regarding different forms of harassment from cyberbullying is similar to the study from Fenaughty and Harré (2013), who also discovered that around a third of their participants reported at least one experience of electronic harassment across either Internet and or mobile phone modalities in the previous year. The types of harassment most prevalently detected in my study involved online to offline harassment, doxing, and religious criticism. For example, participants shared how they were often targeted due to their transgender identity and physical appearance. This notion validates the results from a nationally representative study conducted by Patchin and Hinduja (2019), who discovered that the most commonly cited types of cyberbullying experienced in the previous 30 days were mean or hurtful comments (24.9%) and rumors spread online (22.2%). Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying has the same, if not a more significant negative influence because bullies often target individuals based on characteristics that they cannot change, such as ethnicity or physical appearance (Mahbub et al., 2021).

Online to Offline Harassment

Because cyberbullying can spread to thousands of people at once, the actions can significantly impact the victims as people get the information and can potentially contribute to the cyberbullying behavior (Dooley et al., 2009). Several participants from this study revealed that although they were cyberbullied online, the bullying eventually led to off-line harassment as well. These perceptions confirm the results from Weber and Pelfrey (2014) who discovered that there is a reciprocal nature to cyberbullying due to the overlap of social media friend networks and school environments. For example, in this study, one participant revealed that the cyberbullying harassment had caused her so many issues that she eventually left her job. Similarly, another participant described how she was cyberbullied online, and the harassment continued to follow her at home. These results are consistent with previous research that has suggested individuals often feel the most significant impact from harassment that is a combination of both in-person and online (Mitchell et al., 2016). Because participants from this study all experienced various forms of harassment while being cyberbullied, results corroborate with those from Mitchell et. al. (2016) who found that of the 791 participants, 34% (240 participants) reported incidents in which they experienced harassment in either technology or in-person situations. The data obtained from this study also validates Janopaul-Naylor and Feller (2019), who claimed that online harassment is universal and has become a public health epidemic. Similarly, Bork-Hüffer et al. (2021) discovered how the relationality of bullying extends across both online and offline areas, in addition to public and private spaces. The researchers revealed that this online and offline

behavior affected their physical and psychological well-being, self-perception, self-representation, and identity formation (Bork-Hüffer et al., 2021).

Doxing

Doxing was another form of cyberbullying harassment that several of the participants experienced. According to Chen et al. (2019), doxing occurs when an individual violates privacy and releases someone else's personal information, facilitating additional harassment. Not only can this form of harassment create distress, but it also increases the risk of physical harm, especially if the victim's personal information is used to encourage others to abuse the victim (Douglas, 2016). The disclosure of personally identifiable information can be dangerous because it can enable additional cyberbullying and real-life violence against victims (Chen et al., 2019). According to Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin (2020), the harassment tactic of doxing is heightened when gender intersects with race and sexual orientation, disproportionately affecting women of color and/or LGBTQ communities. This concept was demonstrated in this study when participants detailed their encounters with having experienced doxing, which eventually transferred to off-line harassment. Participants in this study expressed feeling violated after being doxed due to having their personal information revealed. Participants also voiced concern regarding possible retaliation from the perpetrator because they had access to the victim's identifiable information. Many victims expressed having feelings of paranoia and anxiety when doxing had been inflicted upon them. These results are parallel with past studies who also discovered that cyberbullying and doxing could be the

catalyst of mental health issues, distress, and anxiety (Chen et al., 2018). As the above suggests, doxing can inflict damaging psychological effects on the victims.

Religious Criticism

Although religion and spirituality have been associated with mental and physical health, the correlation between religious faith and transgender identities is understudied (Ghazzawi et al., 2020). According to Beagan and Hattie (2015), condemnation by mainstream faith traditions has substantially harmed sexual and gender minorities. In this research, participants claimed to have been cyberbullied by someone who used religion as a weapon of harassment. Participants shared that they felt that their gender identity was invalidated by someone who was associated with religion. These findings are largely in line with previous research, in which Campbell et al. (2019) discovered consistent evidence indicating that religious identification is associated with more negative attitudes toward transgender people and higher levels of transphobia. Data from Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) validate the concept of religious harassment and LGBT individuals by discovering that identity conflict that comes from dissonance felt between religious beliefs and LGBT identity was associated with a higher risk of suicide. Participants in this study revealed how bullies often used religion to promote hatred and criticize them for how shameful their identity is. According to Kashubeck-West et al. (2017) sexual minority and transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals may discover that discrimination and harmful messages from religious organizations are so intolerable that they entirely abandon these religions. This notion confirmed the results from this study when participants indicated that they walked away from religion since they

considered it to be toxic, especially toward the LGBT community. To further address the conflicts of religion and the LGBT community, Beagan and Hattie (2015) found that faith traditions negatively affected LGBTQ people through shame, guilt, sex-negativity, disconnection from body, and severing of relationships to self and others. Several participants in my study described how religious harassment had caused harmful effects on their self-esteem due to the frequent condemnatory messages. For transgender individuals who believe religion is an essential aspect of their lives, not being accepted in a place of worship could affect their quality of life (Benson et al., 2018). The findings from this study revealed a link between religious affiliation and patterns of harassment regarding cyberbullying victimization among transgender individuals.

Theme 2: Adverse Reactions

The participants in this study experienced various adverse reactions to cyberbullying, whether it was negative emotional or physical responses. Discussions over adverse effects produced by cyberbullying were prominent among the participants. The participants mentioned having experienced various emotional stressors, including rage, depression, paranoia, loss of trust, and anxiety; suggesting the severity of the cyberbullying incident inflicted upon them. Past studies indicate that although victims of traditional bullying are more likely to feel embarrassed, victims of electronic bullying are more likely to feel anger (Asher et al., 2017). The concept of cyberbullying victims experiencing these stressors is indicated in previous studies, which found that 72.2% of victims reported high levels of anxiety, 68.1% had high levels of depression, and 75.2% showed high-stress levels (Martínez-Monteagudo et al., 2020). Some participants also

shared that they experienced anger and sadness because they felt that people were not accepting others. This notion is consistent with the findings in Zalaquett and Chatter's (2014) research, which showed that approximately 45% of their participants who experienced cyberbullying had reported feeling angry, 41% felt sad, 32% reported experiencing an increase in stress, and 9% reported experiencing a loss of productivity. Interestingly, only 6% of the participants from their study reported experiencing no effects from cyberbullying. In similar research by Mikhaylovsky et al. (2019), they found that most teenagers who were victims of cyberbullying have a high and medium level of anxiety, a decrease in activities, and a high level of frustration. The results from this research support the findings from previous studies suggesting that victims of cyberbullying often exhibit a variety of emotions and reactions. This study provides evidence regarding the adverse effects of cyberbullying on transgender adults, as shown by the participants' stressful cognitive and emotional responses.

Physical Reactions

In addition to having emotional reactions to cyberbullying, many participants indicated experiencing physical reactions, such as heart palpitations, stress, crying, alcohol consumption, isolation, and lack of appetite. Goshe (2016) supported these findings by discovering "small" yet significant effects for anxious symptomatology, self-esteem, alcohol use, and adverse physical health symptoms from cyberbullying. Previous findings from Peled (2019) supported the above by identifying correlations between cyberbullying perpetrated by all media types and substance abuse. The concept of alcohol consumption is imperative because cyberbullying may be another risk factor for

increasing the probability of substance abuse. Some participants in this study indicated how cyberbullying victimization caused them to experience appetite issues and not having a desire to eat. For example, one participant reported how the cyberbullying harassment had affected their appetite to where it had caused them to relapse on their eating disorder. In comparison to past studies on cyberbullying and food consumption, Sampasa-Kanyinga et al. (2014) discovered that breakfast skipping is associated with the experience of bullying and cyberbullying. Further addressing this concept, the findings suggest that victims of bullying may endure episodes of depression; therefore, developing a tendency to miss breakfast consumption (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al., 2014). Kopecký and Szotkowski (2017) also found that victims may develop various health issues, such as headaches, stomachaches, sleep disorders, impaired concentration, or overall reduced immunity when exposed to long-term cyberbullying attacks.

Stress

Another physical reaction that participants experienced from cyberbullying was having high adrenaline and stress. Participants described having heart palpitations and adrenaline spikes when confronted with cyberbullying behavior. Some also shared that they broke down emotionally and cried as a result. These findings corroborate previous research indicating associations between cyberbullying victimization and perceived symptoms of stress. For example, González-Cabrera et al. (2017) found that incidental cyber-victims and cyberbully-victims show the highest cortisol secretion. It was also discovered that cyber-victims and cyberbully-victims scored higher on perceived stress scales when compared to cyberbullies and cyber-bystanders (González-Cabrera, et al.,

2017). These results support and extend previous studies indicating that victims experience various physical reactions such as stress and adrenaline after being cyberbullied.

Isolation

Another significant similarity that the participants had in common was that many of them engaged in isolative behavior after being cyberbullied. Many reported that they did not want to engage with others and would exhibit reclusive behavior by avoiding public places. This concept aligns with previous research indicating that sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY) are less likely to defend themselves online, instead choosing to ignore or avoid problematic individuals or websites (Craig et al., 2020). Participants shared that they became more closed off after being victimized by cyberbullying, and some had even decided to leave social media. These results support the notion that victims of cyberbullying encounter more significant challenges with social interaction for finding help and that they socially withdraw after experiencing cyberbullying (Navarro et al., 2018). Consistent with previous studies, Asher et al. (2017) discovered that individuals endorse avoidance strategies significantly more in response to electronic bullying than traditional bullying. According to Cook (2010), victims of cyberbullying behavior are likely to show internalizing symptoms, engage in externalizing behaviors, struggle with social skills, and be rejected and isolated by peers. Similarly, Kanwal and Jami (2019) found that cyberbullying victims experience more significant depression, increased family surveillance, and social isolation. According to Van Laar et al. (2019) people of stigmatized groups may deal with identity threats by

hiding or concealing their threatened identities. This concept of disengagement can be confirmed in this study as evidenced by lower levels of engagement and reports of isolation from transgender individuals.

Loss of Trust

The participants from this study expressed different ways in which they lost trust in others after being victims of cyberbullying. Many participants felt that it was challenging to open up and disclose personal information about themselves to others. Individuals in this study reported that after having experienced cyberbullying, they are now more cautious about who they share information with and what they post online. Participants described how they do not engage on social media as much anymore due to the severity of cyberbullying. The results from this study validate those from Ronis and Slaunwhite (2019) who found that cyberbullying victimization is related to higher rates of depression, substance abuse, anxiety, insomnia, as well as feelings of anger and distrust among victims who are more likely to withdraw from school and have lower grades. Previous research from Butt et al. (2019) also discovered a significant positive correlation between cyberbullying and interpersonal trust. The findings from this study confirm the correlation between having experienced a loss of trust with others and cyberbullying victimization. A similar study exploring trust and cyberbullying among young women revealed that interpersonal trust was a continuous psychological dynamic throughout the process of cyberbullying. In a study on defense mechanisms of students experiencing cyberbullying, Masangcay (2020) supports the concept of cyberbullying victimization and mistrust by discovering that the victim's self-trust decreased, and they became more

cautious regarding discloser. Due to the lack of trust, Masangcay (2020) discovered that the victims of cyberbullying also demonstrated changes in social activities, such as not using social media again. Overall, the participants from this study were very cautious about what and with whom they disclose personal information with online. These discoveries suggest that participants manage their self-disclosures online to evade being targeted for transphobia-based cyberbullying.

Theme 3: Coping with Humor

As the participants described their lived experiences with cyberbullying victimization, many shared that they often used humor to respond or cope with the harassment. One participant would "laugh it off" when responding to cyberbullying and shared that he has fun "making fun" of the bullies. Another participant reported making jokes or responding to the cyberbully with smiley faces and heart emojis. Others shared how they would respond by sending funny pictures to the perpetrator and would joke about it with their friends. In comparison to previous studies about cyberbullying and coping, Weber and Pelfrey (2014) revealed that there could be a reciprocal nature to cyberbullying. The researchers discovered that individuals were often both perpetrators and victims because of retaliation and acts of revenge. For example, when false information was posted about a victim in this study, the victim posted something in retaliation against the cyberbully. In comparison to past research, Willard (2010) discovered that transgender individuals used humor to cope with homophobia more often than lesbian, gay, queer, or bisexual participants and that transgender female-to-male participants used humor more frequently than the female-identified participants.

Interestingly, the strategy of coping with humor has seldom been reported by participants in past cyberbullying studies. For example, Francisco et al. (2015) found that 64.2% of cyberbully victims cope by blocking contacts, 63.5% informed authorities, 59.1% asked someone who they trusted for help, and 54.6% changed their email accounts. Further addressing the concept of cyberbullying and coping, Schenk and Fremouw (2012) discovered that male and female cyberbullying victims shared four out of five of the most frequent behavioral responses to cope with their victimization. These behavioral responses included (a) telling someone, (b) avoiding friends or peers, (c) getting revenge, and (d) stopped going to events. Other conflicting results regarding coping and cyberbullying indicate that victims often cope by using a combination of online and offline strategies. For example, Orel et al. (2017) discovered that blocking, staying away from where the cyberbullying took place, and seeking help from a friend were the three most popular coping strategies detected in their study. The findings from this study are inconsistent with past research since previous findings have indicated that victims may attempt to cope or respond to cyberbullying in different ways.

Theme 4: Anonymity

Another central theme discovered in this study was anonymity. The participants from this study expressed different ways in which they felt that people frequently cyberbully due to anonymity and lack of accountability. According to Bandura (2002) when suffering is not visible and harmful actions are physically and temporally removed from their damaging effects, it is easier to harm others. Many participants shared how they believe that people who cyberbully are “cowards” since they don’t have the courage

to confront their victims in person. Participants expressed that they felt that people are a lot “tougher” when hidden behind the computer screen. Participants reported how they felt that people bully online because they feel safer and are more protected behind a keyboard. These results are consistent with Hoff and Mitchell’s (2009) study, which found that out of 325 students, 52 percent reported that the anonymity of cyberbullying contributes to the phenomenon due to the power it gives bullies, encouraging them beyond what they might do in person. The evidence produced by this study of cyberbullying supports Notar et al. (2013) who reported that bullying has spread to the computer because it provides a greater advantage for the bully. Correspondingly, participants in this study also felt that when people are anonymous, they feel entitled to say horrible things, especially when hiding behind a computer screen. This concept validates Notar et al. (2013) who reported that online anonymity and having the security of being behind a computer help free individuals from traditionally constraining pressures of society, conscience, morality, and ethics to act in a normative manner. Further addressing the notion of cyberbullying and anonymity, Barlett et al. (2016) discovered that aggressor-perceived anonymity was related to cyberbullying behavior, in a way that the more that people feel they are anonymous online, they are more likely to cyberbully others. The role of anonymity as a contributing factor of cyberbullying is also supported by results from Barlett (2015) who found that positive attitudes toward cyberbullying, cyberbullying reinforcement, and anonymity, strongly predicted cyberbullying frequency. Moderation tests also confirmed that cyberbullying was the highest when positive attitudes and anonymity were both high as well (Barlett, 2015). Since online social

networking sites are easily accessible by simply using false names and email addresses, anyone can cyberbully a victim while remaining anonymous. This anonymity allows for significant conflict to occur, all while the perpetrator remains hidden. Researchers Wang and Ngai (2020) also corroborate these findings by demonstrating that a higher level of anonymity is positively associated with moral disengagement, which correlates with a higher possibility of cyberbullying. The concept of anonymity is prevalent among those who cyberbully since the perpetrator can easily conceal their identity, thus not taking accountability for their actions. Overall, results from this study demonstrated that anonymity is a prevalent risk factor for predictive cyberbullying behavior.

Theme 5: Lack of Protection Online

The participants in this study all reported that they felt there is a lack of safety and preventative measures for cyberbullying. Participants described how there should be stricter policies and procedures to help prevent cyberbullying from taking place. Not only did participants from this study express concern about how navigating online has become unsafe over time, but they also shared how social media platforms should take cyberbullying more seriously. In reference to the literature review, Lucassen et al. (2018) corroborate these findings by discovering that Internet use can be problematic due to specific safety and personal security concerns for gender minority individuals.

Participants in this study also detailed routines that they developed to increase cyberbullying safety, including blocking people, avoiding social media, and reporting harassment to the police. Other participants noted that they would request support from a friend or family member. Participants voiced concern regarding how they felt their safety

was at risk, which placed the individuals in danger of not receiving appropriate support. The concept of there being a lack of protection against cyberbullying is endorsed by Paat and Markham (2021) who reported that more proactive efforts from social work practitioners and stakeholders are essential to creating preventative and intervention efforts for addressing these safety concerns. Further addressing the notion of online safety, Paat and Markham (2021) voiced the importance of schools creating a consistent goal and policy to prevent different cyber risks that adolescents and emerging adults frequently face. The researchers mention the significance of educating school social workers about the widespread impacts and risks of cyberbullying (Paat & Markham, 2021). Espelage and Hong (2017) validate this concept by determining that schools need to be supported to implement anti-bullying programs, including lessons on cyber-safety and cyberbullying. The researchers clarify the importance of schools being supported through stronger legislation that addresses cyberbullying, and that health care providers should be educated on the associated negative consequences (Espelage & Hong, 2017). Although social networking sites have attempted to provide a safe online environment, little is known regarding the legal ways which could be used to prevent or detour cyberbullying from occurring (El Asam & Samara, 2016). More research should be conducted regarding the different ways that schools, communities, and health care providers are addressing cyberbullying and to determine the best way to intervene (Espelage & Hong, 2017). The evidence produced by this study supports the concept of there being a lack of protection and security against cyberbullying. After identifying the negative correlations between the participant's exposure to cyberbullying and their sense

of emotional security, it is apparent that there should be more effective strategies and procedures to combat this dangerous phenomenon. This notion suggests the importance of developing anti-cyberbullying policies and procedures so that transgender individuals are better protected in an online environment.

Theme 6: Educating the Public

Another theme that developed among the participants was that they expressed a desire to educate the public. Many described how they felt it would be essential to inform others about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying and issues that transgender individuals often encounter online. Participants reported that they would attempt to support the bullied person by sharing their personal experiences and providing resources. Compared to past studies on cyberbullying, Zalaquett and Chatters (2014) discovered that approximately 77% of their sample favored education on cyberbullying, which indicates a desire for more teachings on this type of bullying. Participants in this study also expressed how communicating and informing others can be helpful when attempting to resonate with someone who bullies others. These findings validate those from Craig et al. (2020) who found that sexual and gender minority youth were much more likely to defend others against online discrimination, often by sharing knowledge. Researchers Wachs et al. (2019) also reported how prevention and intervention programs that target online hate should consider educating young people in problem-focused coping strategies. The evidence produced from this study of cyberbullying supports the findings from Paullet and Pinchot (2014) who discovered that participants conveyed a need for more training and public awareness on the effects of cyberbullying and that kids must be

taught about it early on. Researchers Eweida et al. (2021) identify the importance of psycho-educational programs to be designated for cyber-victims' rehabilitation to cope with such harmful experiences. Overall, the need to educate and inform others on the ramifications of cyberbullying was prevalently detected among transgender participants from this study. These findings are reinforced by existing research, suggesting that online platforms should be more active in promoting tolerance and inclusion regarding the increasing incidence of transphobic cyberbullying.

Theme 7: Empathic Concern

While listening to the different experiences of cyberbullying, many reported having concern or worry for others. Participants expressed concern for the protection of other transgender individuals who are exposed to cyberbullying, especially toward those in a more vulnerable state of mind. Some individuals reported that they would attempt to defend a victim if they see someone else being bullied online. Interestingly, participants also shared concerns about the people who are cyberbullies and how they should reach out for support to receive help. Many participants reported that they sympathize with victims who are greatly affected by cyberbullying because they know what that experience feels like. This study highlights the significance of cyberbully victims having high defending self-efficacy to ensure that they intervene and protect others online. This notion is consistent with previous research, in which Clark and Bussey (2020) found that empathic self-efficacy was associated with increased defending during cyberbullying episodes. More broadly, results from this study are aligned with previous work from Chen et al. (2020) suggesting that trait gratitude–cognitive empathy play an important

mediating role between emotional warmth and college students' cyberbullying perpetration attitudes. The researchers also found that trait gratitude can inhibit cyberbullying perpetration attitudes of college students through cognitive empathy. Surprisingly, Balakrishnan and Fernandez (2018) found conflicting results where no significant relationships were found between self-esteem and empathy for cyberbullying, victimization, and bystander behavior. This concept, therefore, implies that psychological features do not predict such incidents among individuals with high scores of self-esteem and empathy (Balakrishnan & Fernandez, 2018). However, Balakrishnan and Fernandez (2018) also noted that individuals with higher self-esteem are likely to report victimization more and tend to defend the victims as well. This concept validates the notion of empathic concern as evidence by the participants demonstrating a strong desire to reduce the suffering or protect the safety of others online. The results from this study indicate that although participants expressed concern regarding the safety of victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying, they conflict with previous research pertaining to emphatic concern and cyberbullying.

Theme 8: Resilience

Although participants from this study described challenges associated with cyberbullying, they also demonstrated notable resilience. Findings from this research suggest that transgender individuals who are cyberbullied often obtain or develop resilience when being victimized. For example, participants shared how they turned from being cyberbullied into something positive for themselves, such as learning to be a lot stronger, humble, and more patient. This notion of resilience indicates that participants

are self-reflective, assessing their ability to deal with possible conflict and making clear decisions about how they would respond (Craig et al., 2020). Individuals in this study also reported that after being harassed online, it had made them mentally and emotionally stronger. Some participants indicated that they were not significantly affected by negative online harassment and could control their emotional responses. For example, one participant explained how she would stand up to the bullies and verbally defend herself when being victimized and harassed. This notion of resilience would be related to the individual's attempt to adapt constructively to these harmful events to diminish their psychological discomfort (Eweida et al., 2021). The findings from this study are congruent with past research from Craig et al. (2020) who discovered that sexual and gender minority youth reduce the impact of exposure to negativity by actively managing their online lives. Likewise, the results from Collen and Onan (2021) suggest that university students who are exposed to cyberbullying exhibit higher levels of psychological well-being when their psychological resilience is higher. Interestingly, researchers Brighi et al. (2019) discovered conflicting results demonstrating that victims of traditional cyberattacks suffered directly from emotional symptoms and indirectly regarding a reduction in their resilience. Similarly, Kabadayi and Sari (2018) also found a negative correlation between resilience and cyberbullying perpetrators and cyber-victims. The researchers indicated that victims of cyberbullying have low resilience because their reactions and psychological symptoms of cyberbullying indicate that they cannot emancipate themselves from their problems in a healthy manner (Kabadayi & Sari, 2018). Conflicting results were also discovered from Zhang et al. (2021) who found that

transgender participants who reported gender-related victimization experiences had demonstrated a significantly lower level of resilience compared to those who never encountered such experiences. According to Worsley et al. (2019) having the ability to reappraise or refocus thoughts cognitively may enable someone to restore some emotional control by reframing the meaning of their cyberbullying experiences internally; thus, leading to greater resilience. When compared to previous research on cyberbullying, findings on the effects of cyberbullying and resilience are inconsistent.

Interpretation of the Results in the Context of Theory

The theoretical framework used for this study is the MST. According to Tan et al. (2020) the high occurrence of mental health problems among transgender and gender diverse people has correlated with the impact of minority stress. Moreover, minority stressors embedded in the context of anti-trans prejudice are conceptualized as risk factors for mental health concerns (Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). The MST proposes that stigmatized individuals experience chronic stress through prejudice and discrimination, which leads to more significant risks for poor mental and physical health outcomes (Binion & Gray, 2020). Although the minority stress model was originally conceptualized for sexual minorities, it can also be similarly applied to gender-variant individuals (Poteat et al., 2014).

The first underlying assumption of the MST is that minority stress is combined with general stressors that are affected by most people; therefore, prompting stigmatized individuals to engage in greater efforts to adjust to these additional stressors (Binion & Gray, 2020). For example, since prejudice and discrimination can unexpectedly happen,

the tireless efforts from LGB individuals must continuously readjust to living in a homophobic social environment (Alessi, 2014). This concept can be detrimental to one's health because when adaptation fails, a pathological stress response such as depression or anxiety may occur (Alessi, 2014). The second assumption of the MST is that minority stress is persistent since prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes and behaviors are prominent in social and cultural structures (Binion & Gray, 2020). Participants demonstrated persistent minority stress as evidence by the various cyberbullying attacks of relentless harassment that had occurred. The last assumption is that minority stress is socially constructed, and attitudes regarding stigmatized individuals develop from social processes, institutions, and structures instead of the individual events that include more normative stressors experienced by most people (Binion & Gray, 2020).

According to Davies and Kessel (2017) the Gender Minority Stress model suggests that transgender individuals experience four distinct external stress types, including (1) victimization, (2) rejection, (3) discrimination, and (4) identity nonaffirmation. Regarding the participants in this study, their experiences of cyberbullying victimization, rejection, discrimination, and identity nonaffirmation likely impacted the development of emotional and physical adverse reactions (i.e., rage, depression, anxiety, isolation, loss of trust). Participants also expressed concern regarding the lack of protection against cyberbullying harassment, thus prompting them to experience many of the adverse reactions presented.

According to Anderson (2019) gender minority stress theorists integrate the correlation between stigma, stress, and protective factors. This concept applied to the

transgender participants in this study and their experiences with being victimized by cyberbullying. For example, participants reported feeling unsafe online, therefore triggering security concerns and protective factors. Contributing to resilience are protective factors that can buffer against bullying and the adverse psychological effects associated with it (Moran et al., 2018). Protective factors were prevalently detected among the participants, as evidenced by the themes of isolation, coping with humor, empathic concern, and resilience. Since many of the participants did not always feel safe online, they utilized the concept of isolating and avoiding confrontation as a protective factor against cyberbullying. The minority stress model also discusses coping and social support. According to Alessi (2014) minority group individuals often cope with minority stress by maintaining strong relationships with their community. Participants in this study exhibited strong relationships with their communities, as demonstrated by their resilience and empathic concern for others. For example, participants expressed concern for protecting other transgender individuals exposed to cyberbullying behavior, especially those who are vulnerable. It was also discovered that participants would support another victim being bullied by providing resources and sharing their personal experiences with them. Maintaining strong ties to their communities allows the minority group members to evaluate themselves based on others who are similar instead of different (Alessi, 2014).

Another way that the participants demonstrated strength with their communities was through resilience. Respondents engaged in various resiliency processes such as actively and directly confronting the perpetrator, expressing a desire to educate the public, and coping or responding with humor. Meyer (2015) defines resilience as an

essential aspect of minority stress and can be described as the quality of being able to survive and prosper when encountering adversity. Resilience involves anything that can lead to more positive adaptations to minority stress; therefore, reducing the negative effect of stress on a person's health (Meyer, 2015). In the context of minority stress, minority coping and community resilience refer to norms and values, role models, and options for social support (Meyer, 2015). Community-level resilience consists of tangible resources, such as access to LGBT support groups, hotlines, information (knowledge), and policies pertaining to advocacy (Meyer, 2015). By offering to provide others with resources, support, and information, participants demonstrated community-level resilience. For example, participants expressed a desire to educate and inform the public about how dangerous cyberbullying can be. Many detailed how they felt it would be imperative to advise others about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying and issues that transgender individuals often encounter online. Other participants demonstrated resilience by describing how they learned to be stronger, more humble, and patient after being victimized by cyberbullying. Some participants described how it made them mentally and emotionally stronger, thus enabling them to regulate their emotional responses. Centered on the MST, this study found that minority stressors of gender-related discrimination, rejection, and victimization were associated with the cyberbullying of transgender individuals.

According to Julien-Chinn and Piel (2019) for many people, humor operates as a protective factor in the resiliency process by decreasing stress and helping individuals cope with difficult situations. Regarding participants in this study, coping or responding

with humor served as a protective factor that many found helpful when faced with cyberbullying. For example, when participants encountered online harassment, some individuals would respond by making jokes or sending funny photos to the perpetrator. Others shared how they would respond by sending humorous photos to them and would laugh about it with their friends. According to Meyer (2000) relief humor is frequently observed in the form of joking to calm tense situations or uncomfortable laughter. Participants demonstrated this notion of humor to alleviate the various stressors linked with cyberbullying, including distal and proximal stressors associated with their minority status.

Meyer (2003) distinguished distal sources of stress and proximal appraisals of stress to classify the minority stressors that transgender individuals encounter and emphasize a strong relationship between these types of processes. The high prevalence of mental health issues among transgender and gender diverse individuals has also been found to associate with the impact of minority stress (Tan et al., 2020). According to Goldberg et al. (2019) transgender individuals are directly affected by distal experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and prejudice by creating stress. Distal factors can be defined as gender-related discrimination, gender-related rejection, gender-related victimization, and nonaffirmation of gender identity (Testa et al., 2015). Distal experiences also indirectly affect their impact on proximal stressors, such as concealment of one's gender identity, anxiety about the likelihood of stigma, and internalized transphobia (Goldberg et al., 2019). Participants in this study shared experiences of distal stressors, including rejection from peers, religious criticism, and discriminatory acts, due

to their transgender status. Relevant distal stressors also include experiences of discrimination and violence, such as harassment and doxing. In this study, participants claimed to have been cyberbullied by someone who used religion as a form of harassment. Participants shared that they felt that their gender identity was invalidated by someone associated with religion. Participants claimed that people often used religion to promote hatred and criticism about how shameful their gender identity is. Several participants described how religious harassment had caused detrimental effects on their self-esteem due to the frequent condemnatory messages. According to Gibbs and Goldbach (2015) when individuals experience conflict with an accepted belief structure, this can cause a significant amount of distress, leading to a desire for escape. Not being accepted in a place of worship can affect a person's quality of life, especially for transgender individuals who feel that religion is an important aspect of their lives (Benson et al., 2018). This study revealed a correlation between religious affiliation and patterns of harassment regarding cyberbullying victimization for transgender individuals. These findings suggest that religious victimization and cyberbullying toward the transgender community can be psychologically damaging to the extent that it triggers negative adverse reactions.

In contrast, proximal factors consist of internalized transphobia, negative expectations, and concealment (Testa et al., 2015). According to Pitoňák (2017) proximal stressors are internal processes that are presumed to occur after exposure to distal stressors. Transgender participants displayed proximal factors such as concealing their social media accounts by making them private and blocking potential cyberbullies.

Despite this notion of concealment providing the victims with some relief from cyberbullying, they also shared feelings of isolation and mistrust when interacting with others online. For example, several reported that they did not want to engage with others and would exhibit reclusive behavior by avoiding public places. Participants described how they became more "closed off" after being victimized by cyberbullying, and some had even decided to abandon social media because of it. One way that participants in this study demonstrated proximal stressors was from negative expectations, such as anonymity. For example, many participants indicated that people cyberbully because they feel safer and more protected behind a keyboard. Perhaps these negative expectations of anonymity prompted the cyberbully victims to become more cautious about who they share information with and what they post online. Many individuals described how it was challenging to open-up and reveal personal information about themselves to others. Participants in this study also shared that after having experienced cyberbullying, they are now more mindful about who they disclose their transgender status with and what they share with others.

The MST suggests that sexual minority groups experience increased levels of stigma-related stress correlated with their minority status, leading to higher rates of psychopathology, including disordered eating (Convertino et al., 2021). This concept was detected among participants in this study, as evidence by reports of appetite suppression. For example, some participants reported that the cyberbullying harassment was so awful that it had affected their appetite, causing them not to want to eat. Another participant claimed that they were so upset that they stopped consuming food, thus causing them to

relapse on their eating disorder. Overall, with the combination of distal and proximal stressors, chronically high-stress levels are produced, contributing to poor health outcomes (Marsack, 2018).

Limitations of the Study

To ensure that this study achieved a high scientific impact factor, it is pertinent that the quality of research is valid and reliable. Many of the anticipated limitations from the study presented in Chapter 1 did not occur. Researcher bias was a potential limitation that was mentioned. Although I believe in anti-bullying, especially toward minority individuals, I remained mindful of any preconceived notions and did not allow them to influence the results. Nevertheless, I managed to preserve an open mind during the interview process and allowed the participants to freely express their lived experiences regarding the research phenomenon. To overcome any issues of researcher bias, I utilized bracketing. Bracketing can be defined as a method used in qualitative research to lessen the potentially damaging effects of biases that may hinder the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012). I utilized the strategy of bracketing throughout the research procedures by taking notes of any preconceived notions, writing them down, and reflecting.

Although this study demonstrated validity, one limitation identified would be having difficulty recruiting participants for interviews. For example, even though I had participants express interest in my study, many failed to follow up with the interview; thus, requiring me to start another sampling procedure. To reach the sampling goal of 12-15 participants, I decided to expand my social media platform and post the recruitment

flyer in social media groups associated with the transgender community. Due to the many advantages over traditional recruitment methods, Lee et al. (2020) reported that researchers are increasingly using social media advertisements to obtain participants. In addition to recruitment issues, being a novice researcher would be another limitation of this study. For example, I had to examine the various techniques for conducting the interviews appropriately, collecting, coding, and interpreting the data. Although the research procedure was challenging, I successfully conducted and completed the study by adhering to the research guidelines and feedback from my chair and committee members. Lastly, since one of the participants was deaf, they answered the interview questions by typing out their responses. Since I did not directly ask this participant the questions during the interview, it hindered the ability to probe for additional details. Despite limitations that can occur within a study, it is essential for researchers to identify and acknowledge them. According to Clark and Mulligan (2011) scientists have an obligation to understand research methods, perform the best research they can, and publish their results honestly and unbiasedly. Based on the information provided from this research, limitations and issues of trustworthiness did not appear to have skewed the results or outcomes.

Recommendations

The focus of this study is about the experiences of cyberbullying victimization on transgender adults. The results determined that transgender adults are both negatively and positively impacted by cyberbullying victimization. This study indicates that transgender individuals are often targeted based on their gender identity and often experience various

forms of harassment, including online to offline harassment, doxing, and religious criticism. As a result, participants experienced physical and emotional adverse reactions, including isolation and loss of trust. Individuals from this study expressed different ways in which they felt that people frequently cyberbully due to anonymity and lack of accountability. The participants in this study all reported that they felt there is not enough security and preventative measures for cyberbullying, implying that they feel unsafe online. Participants suggested the importance of educating and informing others about the detrimental effects of cyberbullying and problems that transgender individuals often encounter online. Although the victims experienced negative aspects from cyberbullying, many participants also demonstrated significant resilience as a result.

Given that the results from this study affirm the complex nature of cyberbullying victimization, it is proposed that future research conduct a study that explores transgender experiences with cyberbullying support programs. The study could focus on programs for participants that concentrate on cyberbullying prevention and intervention efforts. As previously mentioned, a need for competence in cyberbullying intervention and prevention methods should be considered (Heller, 2015). Likewise, counselors and victim support advocates should be educated and informed about the nature and scope of digital abuse and harassment against sexuality and gender-diverse individuals (Powell et al., 2020). The findings from Veale et al. (2017) also suggest that prevention strategies should implement programs or policies that improve social support and prevent isolation of transgender youth, such as specific gender identity anti-bullying strategies in schools and work.

Another recommendation would be for future studies to address what specific coping skills are most often utilized by transgender individuals when confronted with cyberbullying behavior. The research study could explore what coping strategies are perceived to be successful from various perspectives. Furthermore, this study could also compare cyberbullying coping strategies between transgender individuals and cisgender individuals. A component of this study could examine whether there is a difference among cyberbullying coping strategies that transgender individuals use to sustain resilience versus coping strategies that cisgender individuals use when being victimized. Developing a greater understanding of the different experiences of coping can promote awareness about cyberbullying and the crimes associated with it.

Implications

Positive Social Change

As discussed in the literature review, cyberbullying can lead to adverse behavioral and health-related outcomes, harming a person's psychological well-being (Kowalski et al., 2018). This study aimed to explore and raise awareness and understanding about cyberbullying victimization experiences on transgender individuals. Many individuals indicated that they do not feel safe online, especially since cyberbully perpetrators can remain anonymous. The participants in this study have suggested that it would be beneficial to have stricter policies and procedures to help prevent cyberbullying from occurring. Implementing anti-cyberbullying programs, including lessons on safety and cyberbullying, can provide the public with further education regarding this detrimental phenomenon. By understanding how transgender adults are treated and the issues they

encounter from cyberbullying, organizations could develop programs that address these minority individuals' concerns. The detailed information obtained from this research study can possibly help improve cyberbullying intervention efforts and bring about positive social change.

Results from this study can improve programs by helping educate the public and reduce future harm caused by cyberbullying behavior. The participant's narratives offered unique insights into the nature of stigma and self-awareness. These insights can help reduce stigma in society by educating the public about the detrimental harm of online harassment and the struggles that transgender victims encounter. Since this study focused on the transgender population, it allows the reader to better understand the participant's lived experiences as a minority population. Being informed about the participant's experiences can promote awareness about cyberbullying and its associated crimes, thus contributing to positive social change.

Summary and Conclusion

Navigating online can be an exciting and convenient way to interact with others; however, it can also be considered a toxic environment, especially for transgender individuals. The lived experiences described by the participants answer the qualitative research question "What psychological experience does cyberbullying have on transgender adults?" Various forms of harassment can take place online, and transgender individuals are often victims of that behavior. The participants from this study described how they experienced different forms of harassment, such as online to offline harassment, doxing, and religious criticism. Several participants from this study revealed that

although they were cyberbullied online, the bullying continued offline as well. These results were consistent with previous research that has suggested individuals often feel the most significant impact from harassment that is a combination of both in-person and online (Mitchell et al., 2016). Participants expressed feeling violated and anxious after being doxed, due to having their personal information revealed publicly. This concept poses a dangerous threat since disclosing identifiable personal information can enable additional cyberbullying and real-life violence against victims (Chen et al., 2019).

Participants also detailed how they were frequently targeted due to their transgender identity and physical appearance. Individuals from this study described how they felt that their gender identity was invalidated by someone associated with religion, thus inflicting detrimental effects on their self-esteem. These results validate past research, indicating that religious identification can be associated with more negative attitudes toward transgender people and higher levels of transphobia (Campbell et al., 2019). Since the participants were subjected to these different types of harassment, it caused them to experience various adverse reactions, whether it be negative emotional or physical responses. The cyberbully victims mentioned having experienced different emotional stressors, including rage, depression, paranoia, anxiety, and loss of trust. This concept of not trusting others may indicate that participants feel unsafe online and are more inclined to conceal their identities. Physical reactions to the cyberbullying harassment involved participants having heart palpitations, stress, crying, alcohol consumption, isolation, and lack of appetite. In addition to the general stressors affected by most people, minority stress is combined, thus pressuring individuals to engage in

more significant efforts to adjust to these additional stressors (Binion & Gray, 2020). This concept can be harmful to a person's health because when adaptation fails, a pathological stress response such as depression or anxiety may occur (Alessi, 2014).

Based on the data collected from this study, it is apparent that transgender adults encounter significant adverse physical and emotional reactions due to cyberbullying victimization. Participants also expressed how they felt that people who cyberbully are a lot "tougher" when hidden behind the computer screen, thus supporting the theme of anonymity. The concept of anonymity and cyberbullying can be harmful because when distress is not seen and damaging actions are physically and temporarily removed from their harmful effects, it is easier to hurt others (Bandura, 2002). This study provides data regarding the adverse effects of cyberbullying on transgender adults, as evidence by the participants' stressful cognitive and emotional responses.

Issues identified in this study, such as feeling unsafe, encourage more effective safety and preventative measures to combat cyberbullying. Recommendations such as interventions and age-appropriate resources would be imperative to promote and empower the safety of this minority population. Schools and online platforms should promote and implement anti-cyberbullying programs, including lessons on cyberbullying and online safety. Based on the MST, this study discovered that minority stressors were associated with the cyberbullying of transgender individuals. Although participants in this study encountered challenging situations, they also coped with humor, displayed empathic concern, and resilience. Resilience is an essential aspect of minority stress and is described as the quality of being able to survive and prosper when encountering

adversity (Meyer, 2015). Many participants in this study discovered humor as an effective way to cope with cyberbullying, so they used it as a protective factor in the resiliency process. Despite the adverse effects caused by cyberbullying, some participants demonstrated extraordinary resilience; thus, enabling them to regulate their emotional responses. Overall, the findings from this study both support and challenge current literature. From this research, it is apparent that the issues of cyberbullying are very complex and that transgender victims encounter different forms of harassment. Although people should have the freedom to browse the Internet and feel safe doing so, it is evident that the phenomenon of cyberbullying should be taken more seriously.

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