The presentation of self in the digital age:
Experiences of cyberbullying victims and perpetrators

By

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ABSTRACT

Virtual communication has become instrumental in the digital age and it presents advantages and risks, including cyberbullying, in the lives of young people. Drawing on Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self – the study of how the self assumes different roles and behaviours depending on social circumstances – I explore how young people with the lived experiences of cyberbullying engage in the presentation of their virtual and non-virtual selves and how they cope with the consequences of cyberbullying. Using a phenomenological framework for inquiry, the results of this study derive from qualitative interviews and participant-generated visual data. The results of this study suggest that there is no binary identity of a cyber-victim or cyber-perpetrator, and participants' chosen identity shapes their presentation of self both in virtual and non-virtual settings as a way of coping and/or maintaining their status and appearance. Cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization, whereby the former form of victimization can produce digital harm and social inequalities due to the lack of emotional, affective, and mental health support offered to the victims of online bullying. With the recommendations for future research, this study advocates for creating spaces to offer mental health support to young people who experience cyberbullying victimization. Contributing to the growing field of digital criminology, the results of this thesis also suggest that the experience of cyberbullying normalizes the practice of online bullying among young people and shapes their understanding of online communication, victimization, and transgression in the digital age.

Keywords: cyberbullying; online victimization; the presentation of self; coping; lived experience; digital criminology; qualitative visual data

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction

We live in the digital age where virtual communication has become instrumental in our everyday life. While virtual communication has brought many advantages, such as enabling faster communication methods and networking, it also poses risks, such as cyberbullying and victimization, especially to young adults given their extensive use of virtual communication. Statistics Canada (2023) reported that in 2019, one in four youths (25%) aged 12-17 experienced cyberbullying in the previous year. This included threatening messages, exclusion from an online community, and spreading hurtful information about the victim on the Internet. The extensive use of virtual interaction since the COVID-19 pandemic has increased levels of online criminal activities. For example, Malone (2022) reported that in 2021, the number of online harassment and threats involving social media and other electronic platforms in Canada increased by up to 21% from 2019.

With the increased number of cybercrimes, children, youth, and adults have become vulnerable to exposure to a wide range of online crimes, from online grooming and unwanted sexual attention to fraud attacks, sexual solicitation, and exploitation. These examples present serious challenges and encourage scholars from different fields, including technology, communication, criminology, psychology, and sociology to explore how the Internet enables offending and victimization. Equally concerning is the fact that young people also expose deviant behaviours and offending in an online environment (i.e. cyber-perpetrators). The younger generation is inclined to becoming a victim as a result of participating in different activities online (i.e. cyber-victims). One example that relates to youths' online misbehaviour and victimization is cyberbullying. The use of different social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, etc., can expose children and adolescents to situations of being a victim, or becoming a perpetrator or victimizer, or both the victim and the perpetrator/victimizer of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010; Newall, 2018, Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Çimke & Cerit, 2021, Borraccino et al., 2022; Rollins, 2015; Johanis et al. 2020; Carter, 2013). Cyberbullying offending can also include features of hatred and harassment (Abarna et al., 2022; Kilvington, 2021; Wachs et al., 2019; Henry, 2013).

Peter and Petermann (2018) define cyberbullying as "using information and communication technologies (ICT) to repeatedly and intentionally harm, harass, hurt and/or embarrass a target" (p. 359). Scholars have challenged this definition on the basis that it fails to account for socio-cultural differences (see e.g., Carlson & Frazer, 2021). They critique the normative theoretical framework for not accounting for socio-cultural complexity, diversity, and differences (for example, the experience of systemic racism or collectivistic culture) from the mainstream populations. These authors call for "deconstruct[ing] and destabiliz[ing] the standard academic discourse of cyberbullying" (p. 160) and encourage researchers to consider the social and political complexity of cyberbullying via contextualized analyses of the lived experiences. Noting the importance of Carlson and Fraser's (2021) argument to move beyond the individualistic lens of the current cyberbullying scholarship, I examine the social issue of online bullying by accounting for the lived experiences, backgrounds, and cultural differences of those who are engaged in cyberbullying, cyberbullying victimization, and online victimization. With the use of a qualitative approach, I analyze how the lived experience of cyberbullying, as well as the socio-cultural contexts embedded in individual differences, shape young people's

understanding of cyberbullying and their behaviour online. My analysis sheds light on the needs of young people who frequently engage in cyberbullying transgression and offers different ways of responding to and coping with cyberbullying victimization.

Online bullying can be categorized as a type of e-crime that "haunt … victims over a very long time" (Prins, 2011, p. 218). Megele and Longfield (2022) contend that the risks associated with social media use have become normalized and have created a 'collective unconsciousness' – the process associated with considering cyberbullying transgression and victimization as normal sets of experiences among young people. The collective unconsciousness further complicates safeguarding online activities that youth and children are engaged in outside of parental monitoring. Likewise, other forms of communication, such as trolling, have become normalized, despite they carry offensive, politicized, and vulgar meanings that shape how our society perceives truth and reality (Hannan, 2018). Because online transgressions, such as cyberbullying have been normalized and young people are desensitized by this phenomenon, more research is needed to explore the nature and consequences, as well as current responses to cyberbullying, especially as it affects young adults and adolescents. Given that children and young adults can engage in cyberbullying, harassment, and hatred easily, the issue of cyberbullying has undoubtedly become a priority for parents, teachers, policymakers, and researchers in efforts to assist with digital literacy and provide protection and needed support for the younger generation.

Cyberbullying or online bullying is a form of online transgression that deserves more attention. Scholarship on digital criminology looks into social issues, such as cyberbullying and other forms of online transgression, victimization, and justice (Stratton et al., 2017; Brady, 2008; Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Rivituso, 2014; Jaishankar, 2010). Consisting of multi- and inter-disciplinary research, this body of literature examines how online transgression has become an inseparable part of our everyday life. According to Jaishankar (2010), with the rise in technological advancement, digital crime has risen causing financial, social, and psychological harms. Since technology and online communication can facilitate online transgression, digital criminology and cyber-criminology should further examine online transgression, its origins, causes, and effects of it on human life, as well as its socio-cultural contexts from a social sciences perspective (Jaishankar, 2010; Stratton et al., 2017; Powell et al., 2018). Moreover, Powell and colleagues (2018) argue that technology facilitates the operation of power, violence, and inequalities. The vast technological advancement can shape how society responds to criminality, victimization, and (in)justice (Powell et al., 2018). The authors use the framework of 'digital society' that advances digital criminology beyond the traditional and binary offline/online cyber-criminology and reconceptualizes "the broad implications of digital technologies embedded in emerging technosocial practices that are shaping crime, deviance, criminalisation…" (Powell et al., p. 190). Within the framework of digital society, my thesis explores the lived experience of young people's engagement in online transgression and victimization in the context of cyberbullying.

The prefix "cyber" is used interchangeably with other words, such as online, virtual, or digital. However, Stratton and colleagues (2017) contend that the use of the prefix "cyber" in front of the social issue under discussion might be inaccurate (for example, bullying becoming "cyber"-bullying) for making readers perceive it as separate from its physical, terrestrial, or non-

virtual counterpart. When we use the prefix "cyber", we do not mean that the phenomenon under consideration only belongs to one particular field, such as Information Technology; rather, when we use the prefix "cyber", we unpack the phenomenon from a social sciences perspective by situating its impact on human lives. This is the way I see the use of "cyber" and "online" fitting the general scope of my thesis as I take a social science, and specifically digital criminology, approach to explaining what cyberbullying is and what role it plays in the digital age. Likewise, Carlson and Frazer (2021) deem that cyberbullying is a *social* practice where situational context plays a key role in describing and characterizing what the phenomenon denotes. Situating the experience of cyberbullying in the framework of digital society, I use "online", "cyber-", and "virtual" interchangeably. Cyberbullying, its effects, its causes, and its forms from a non-standardized or non-normative perspective will help refine social sciences studies, particularly, the emerging field of digital criminology by situating participants' lived experiences central. In this sense, my thesis contributes to the growing field of digital criminology.

Numerous researchers have already explored the impacts of cyberbullying and its elements (Tokunaga, 2010, Peter & Petermann, 2018; Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2021). Others have also explored ways of implementing anti-cyberbullying programs (Broll & Howells, 2021; Broll & Huey, 2015; Pennell et al., 2021). These studies mainly consist of surveys and different forms of analyzing quantitative data, but recently, a few researchers have called for more qualitative research to further explore cyberbullying (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Abela & Donlevy, 2020; Hayward, 2012; Smith, 2019). While fighting against online perpetration is crucial, the understanding of human behaviour and the root causes of online perpetration (i.e. cyberbullying, cyber-threat and harassment) is equally important to refine existing policies. The root causes may relate to social, cultural, and political contexts and the backgrounds of those who frequently engage in cyberbullying. Accounting for these pre-existing conditions, understanding how people navigate and conduct their virtual selves becomes important to explore in the context of online communications studies. In fact, Hayward (2012) encourages researchers to delve into the ways people "make sense of cyberspace and how human beings use and abuse it" (p. 455). Given that the effects of cyberbullying are disturbing and call for serious attention, especially in cases involving self-harm or internalized deviance (i.e. self-victimization), I aim to understand how victims of cyberbullying and hatred cope with the negative consequences of cyberbullying. I also aim to investigate how cyberbullying victims and perpetrators / victimizers present their selves in online and physical spaces and how their self-presentation changes over time.

To reach this objective, I use Erving Goffman's (1959) influential concept of the representation of self – the study of how the self assumes different roles and behaviours depending on social circumstances. Applying this concept to communication in virtual reality, I explore how victims and victimizers of online interaction define, construct, and re-construct themselves in the virtual environment and their physical world. The use of this conceptual framework advances the current literature, as Goffman's theory on the presentation of self has not been thoroughly analyzed in the context of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration (see Kilvington, 2021 for the conceptualization of staging virtual selves in the context of online hate). While the literature on Goffman's model of self-presentation and impression management offers some explanation of online behaviour in various contexts (Aspling, 2011; Kilvington, 2021; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018), the current literature does not consider

how and why this concept applies to cyber-bullies. Put otherwise, not much is known about how young people who are engaged in cyberbullying aggression and victimization present their virtual selves. I respond to this gap via a phenomenological framework for inquiry. The central questions I investigate in this thesis are "How do young adults present their virtual and non-virtual selves in the context of cyberbullying?" and "How do they cope with the consequences of cyber-interaction in the digital age?"

This study is one of few studies that explore the virtual presentation of self in the context of cyberbullying using a phenomenological framework for inquiry. Through this qualitative inquiry, I contribute to existing scholarship on cyberbullying by accounting for socio-cultural backgrounds and lived experiences of minority communities to explore the social consequences of digital technologies. The use of a phenomenological framework for inquiry and interpretative phenomenological analysis enables me reach my objectives. The results of the study add to the growing scholarship on digital criminology and justice. The results of the study expand and refine the literature on Goffman's concept of the virtual presentation of self, adding victims' and perpetrators' perspectives (and lived experiences) while making methodological and policy-related contributions, such as an integration of creative visual methods, effective strategies of coping with cyber-offending and online victimization, the need for digital literacy, awareness surrounding cyber-victimization, and addressing needs of cyber-victims.

This qualitative inquiry derives verbal and visual data from interviewees' previous online interactions to generate the process of their meaning-making and how these meaning-making processes help them to develop and negotiate their virtual presentation of self. Online communication shapes cyber-bullies' and cyber-victims' online behaviours that have real consequences in their non-virtual or physical world. Therefore, in this thesis, I explore how cyber-bullies and cyber-victims formulate virtual expressions and present themselves online. Another aspect I explore in detail relates to how victims cope with cyber victimization, as the current literature is limited in the area of cyber-victim support and practices related to this type of victimization.

My thesis is structured into several parts to seek answers to my inquiry and guide readers throughout. First of all, I provide a literature review of previous research and identify gaps and limits. I focus on the definition of online bullying and hate, its consequences, motivations, online victimization, and common responses to cyberbullying. After identifying gaps and limits, I discuss the conceptual framework – the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). Then I offer a summary of previous literature that applies this concept to virtual communication. Goffman's (1959) conceptual framework posits that people enact a self-image depending on the given social situation. Based on this conceptualization of interpersonal interaction, I explore how young people enact their self-image and make sense of virtual interactions. The use of the dramaturgical model in the context of cyberbullying unveils covert and overt aspects of online bullying and enables me to develop my argument that there is no binary victim-perpetrator identity or the presentation of a sole identity of a victim or victimizer in the context of cyberbullying. The use of the presentation of self in the context of virtual communication and cyberbullying reveals that participants choose to identify themselves as a bully or bullied and their presentation of self is dependent on their subjective identification of the self.

Before discussing findings using the model of virtual dramaturgy, secondly, I offer a detailed summary of the phenomenological framework of inquiry that delves into phenomenology as a philosophical thinking and methodology for understanding subjective experiences of virtual existence, virtual communication, and online bullying. I bring together the conceptual framework (on the presentation of self) and the phenomenological framework for inquiry to address my research questions by conducting social analysis of participants' lived experiences of cyberbullying. In this section, I describe how this project was carried out, with specific emphasis on verbal and visual data collection techniques, analysis of the collected data, and the importance of practicing relational ethics. This thesis uses a visual technique as a way of collecting data that triangulates and strengthens the verbal interview data.

Thirdly, I will share my results and demonstrate how the use of the conceptual framework and the framework for inquiry facilitate the discussion on self-presentation and coping mechanisms. I will present findings on how young people engage in impression management and presentation of their virtual self using verbal and visual data. Visual data presents the experience of identifying a victim and victimizer in the context of cyberbullying and how this identity navigates virtual and non-virtual presentation of the self (Goffman, 1959). This discussion on the presentation of the self leads to my argument on the normalization of cyberbullying in the digital age as a result of digital communication technology gradually becoming an inseparable part of our lives enabling social harm (Stratton et al., 2017). I also argue that while both the aggressors and victims of cyberbullying predominantly stage their performance, their motivations for enacting and performing a self-image differ. While cyber-bullies stress the importance of their appearance and manner (discussed in detail in Chapters 2, 7 & 8), the victims of cyberbullying enact self-images related to coping with their online victimization. Moreover, it is central to this thesis that while some participants experience cyberbullying victimization more often than others, they do not have access to the needed support services. With these findings and arguments, I then offer a discussion of my findings and what these findings mean for scholarship and advocacy work on digital media and criminology studies in the digital age. I conclude my thesis with a note on limitations and recommendations, as well as contributions I make through this thesis work.

2. Literature review and conceptual framework

2.1. Introduction

This chapter offers a review of the existing literature on cyberbullying transgression. Throughout this chapter, I focus on defining and describing cyberbullying and its consequences. With the aim of studying the phenomenon from a *social* perspective in the context of digital communication and digital criminology (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Hayward, 2012; Smith, 2019; Stratton et al., 2017), I offer a summary of the existing literature on online victimization and digital violence, responses to cyberbullying, and some challenges related to the responses to cyberbullying. The integration of a wide range of literature relating to online victimization and cyberbullying victimization helps me identify gaps and limits of previous research while alluding towards the exploration of the phenomenon from a dramaturgical perspective (Goffman, 1959). The use of Goffman's concept informs the overall conceptual framework for my thesis to study how social interactions shape human experiences in the context of cyberbullying.

2.2. Literature review

2.2.1. *Defining cyberbullying and identifying consequences of cyberbullying*

Peter and Petermann (2018) define cyberbullying as "using information and communication technologies (ICT) to repeatedly and intentionally harm, harass, hurt and/or embarrass a target" (p. 359). The use of different social media platforms can facilitate cyberbullying and the spread of disinformation (Maftei et al., 2022; Rezayi, 2018). According to Alam (2021), disinformation is "fabricated or deliberately manipulated text/speech/visual context and intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumors" (p. 1). Cyberbullying is a form of disinformation intended to manipulate and harm others (Rezayi et al., 2018). Examples of cyberbullying include misuse of private and personal information, impersonation, sharing abusive and threatening comments, or distribution of non-consensual images and information. Although cyberbullying encompasses a wide range of forms of online deviance, such as online hate and hate speech, few studies have focused on the direct perspectives of those directly engaged in cyberbullying misbehaviour.

Cyberbullying transgression can include features of hatred and harassment (Abarna et al., 2022; Kilvington, 2021; Wachs et al., 2019; Henry, 2013). Cyberbullying can pertain to elements of hatred, hate speech, and can lead to physical hate crimes. As Cohen-Almagor (2022) defines it, "[h]ate speech is intended to injure, dehumanize, harass, debase, degrade, and/or victimize the targeted groups, and to foment insensitivity and brutality towards them" (p. 10). Cohen-Almagor (2018) argues that there is a connection between online hate speech and the prevalence of hate crime occurring in our physical reality. Hate speech can assume the form of online bullying by becoming an element of cyberbullying aggression, which is recognized as "cyber hate" (Perry & Olsson, 2009).

There are also important connections between cyber hate and cyberbullying. Both cyber hate and cyberbullying share conceptual and definitional similarities but differ in regards to the population/victim targeted. Whereas cyberbullying aggression is an online attack towards an individual, cyber hate aggression targets a collective (community or groups) that is meant to devalue others based on "their religion, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, or some other characteristic that defines a group" (Hawdon et al., 2017, p. 254). Overall, online hate and online bullying share similar characteristics and the consequences of these online transgressions are harmful.

2.2.2. *Consequences of cyberbullying*

Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying can have detrimental effects on adolescents. Regardless of the causes of cyberbullying, online victimization has been shown to produce a wide range of harms and consequences, including physical, financial, emotional, psychological and mental health (Broll et al., 2018; Peter & Petermann, 2018; Tokunaga, 2010), social (Dignan, 2005), externalizing aggressive behaviour (Tsitsika et al., 2015), internalizing problems causing stress and anxiety (Hay et al. 2010), and even attempted suicide (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Cyberbullying victimization exposes the target to detrimental consequences, such as physical and mental harms (Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020), internalization effects (Broll et al., 2018) and/or self-inflicted death and suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In fact, Hinduja and Patchin's (2010) survey results indicate that cyberbullying victims were twice as likely to have attempted suicide than those who were not engaged in cyberbullying behaviours.

Landoll and colleagues (2015) concluded that cyber victimization was associated with increased levels of depressive symptoms for adolescents. Holfeld and Mishna (2019) found that both internalizing symptoms (such as anxiety, depression, and feelings of withdrawal) and externalizing problems (aggression and delinquent behaviour) were associated with increased experiences of cyber victimization among adolescent boys and girls. Likewise, Kowalski and colleagues (2014) indicate that the association between cyber victimization and depression is stronger for girls than for boys.

These effects of cyberbullying are also manifold for ethnic minorities and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) pupils – particularly vulnerable to the effects of cyberbullying due to their socio-economic and cultural differences from the mainstream populations (Carlson and Frazer, 2021). Garaigordobil and Larrain's (2020) cross-sectional analysis of 1,748 adolescents (ages 13-17) in Spain indicated that non-heterosexual cyberbullying victims were exposed to cyberbullying more often when compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Both aggressors and victims of cyberbullying who identified as non-heterosexual reported depression, anxiety, hostility, and psychoticism. In Eastern Canada, Broll and colleagues (2018) found that Indigenous youth who were cyberbullied reported experiencing anxiety and stress as a form of internalized behaviour. Faucher and colleagues (2014) from Western Canada in the context of post-secondary education concluded that while one in five over 1800 students were cyberbullied, the issue of underreporting prevailed due to anonymity, lack of awareness surrounding cyberbullying, lack of knowledge of reporting to authority, and shame and fear of consequences of reporting. In addition to the empirical studies, The Canadian Press (2013) reports distressing cases of cyberbullying victimization related to suicides of Canadian teens in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan. Pierson (2022) reports self-inflicted death among teenagers who use a popular social media platform in the US. These findings related to suicidal ideation are undoubtedly disturbing. My research adds to this vast literature of cyberbullying by examining the phenomenon from the self-presentation lens using Goffman's conceptual framework on the dramaturgical model of everyday life where participants' lived experiences shape one's behaviour in virtual reality as a response to social harms caused by cyberbullying. The dramaturgical model demonstrates how one's self assumes different roles and self images depending on social circumstances (Goffman, 1959).

Regarding the effects of online bullying in the local context, recent data driven from the Manitoba Youth Health survey supported the initiative of early school intervention to prevent cyberbullying. The Manitoba Youth Health survey reported that traditional and online bullying behaviours increase between Grades 7 and 12 in Manitoba (Salmon et al., 2018). The survey results indicated that in addition to being ridiculed online, girls are criticized for body size, shape, and appearance. Based on these criticisms, girls were more than twice as likely (on average) as boys to become victims of three common types of cyberbullying: being teased and bullied in an online environment, being asked for personal information over the internet, and feeling unsafe when in contact with someone online. These results were still significant after adjusting for school grade and location of their community (urban vs. rural) (Salmon et al., 2018, p. 34). According to the researchers, early intervention strategies starting as early as Grade 7 or prior to Grade 7 can be helpful for avoiding cyberbullying and cyber victimization, given that girls in middle and high schools are more susceptible to being a victim of online communication. In the Western Canadian context, the objective of this thesis is to understand how young adults

with previous experiences of online bullying cope with the negative effects of this phenomenon summarized above.

With the rise of different forms of online transgression, the literature on cyber-victimization extends to exploring the indirect effects of online instances. The effects of victimization (regardless of the online or offline forms) are extended to the victim's family, friends, and colleagues of the immediate victim, what Shapland and Hall (2007) have termed as "indirect victimization" (p. 179). Family members experiencing this type of victimization become vulnerable, stressed, and worrying about the victim's safety. Relating to safety and coping, Dignan (2005) argues that victims' reactions to the offense and interactions with others as a consequence of being a victim change victims' self-perception, behaviour, and their relationship with the offender, as well as their perception about criminal justice agencies.

These studies provide clear evidence of how rapid developments in technology that mediate and facilitate human communication can have negative impacts on our lives (including direct and indirect forms of harm), despite also offering numerous benefits. These findings call for investigating the problem of cyberbullying and the consequences of online victimization in the offline world. To understand what challenges cyberbullying victimization present in the offline (or physical) world, I explore how victims of cyberbullying cope with their negative emotions, including their support system, and the involvement of justice agencies, such as police, and other community organizations. An effective prevention strategy or a strategy to support victims of online bullying would benefit the younger generation, given their experience of online victimization and digital violence.

2.2.3. *Online victimization and digital violence*
The literature on online hatred and cyberbullying sheds light on the growing issues of digital violence and online victimization (Abdulai et al., 2023; Ballard & Welch, 2015; Bjelajac & Filipović, 2021; Chang et al., 2021; Hamby et al., 2018; Henry, 2013; Ranney et al., 2019; Lumsden, 2019). I focus on the conceptualization of online victimization in this thesis as it helps to situate the participants' experiences either from the victim's or bully's perspectives. Looking at some gaps in legal definitions of online victimization, Bjelajac and Filipović (2021) contend digital violence deriving from digital crimes have become a contemporary problem needing law and policy-makers' attention for legal regulations since the border between the digital and the physical has become invisible. Regardless of where the border between virtual/digital and physical worlds exists, the author notes that victims of digital violence, including cyberbullying, experience consequences of digital crimes in their real physical world. This can present legal challenges of establishing harms caused by virtual reality (Bjelajac & Filipović, 2021; Henry, 2013) that masks the consequences / effects of online victimization discussed above.

In addition to the legal definition of establishing online victimization, researchers across different fields also explore what online victimization is cross-culturally (Kokkinos & Antoniadou, 2019; Çimke et al., 2021; Ngo et al., 2020; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Ranney et al., 2019). A recent study by Çimke and colleagues (2021) associated the risks of cyberbullying and cyber-victimization with upbringing, problematic internet use, and aggressive traits of post-secondary students in Turkey, whereas a similar study conducted by Kokkinos and Antoniadou (2019) with Greek undergraduate students predicted that the personality trait of

agreeableness, weekly Internet use, and negative Internet outcomes increased cyberbullying victimization.

Vulnerability to online victimization is shaped by specific activities people are engaged in (Ngo et al., 2020). Compared to those who use social networking sites for communication, those who shop online or read newspapers online are at risk of falling victim to phishing. Receiving unwanted pictures and being harassed by non-strangers are associated with the activities of communicating with strangers online. While research on the correlates between online activities and victimization is important, it is critical we illuminate the perspectives cyber victims in order to learn what constitutes online victimization. Burgess-Proctor and colleagues (2009) research provides important insights here, they conducted a mixed-methods study with 3,000 adolescent girls in the US. Based on the results of this study, behaviours, such as name calling, gossiping about the victim, being disrespected by others, concealment of identity, and spreading sensitive personal information, and receiving unwanted sexual attention online were counted towards online victimization by adolescent girls. Consequently, these characteristics of online victimization are direct results of online harassment and bullying (Peter & Petermann, 2018). Even though the participants in this study identified the common characteristics of online victimization, they also specified the difference between cyberbullying and online harassment. The difference between these two phenomena is based upon the frequency of online transgressions. Specifically, one-time occurrence of online victimization behaviour counted "online harassment" (pp. 168-169) whereas multiple repeating patterns of online victimization were deemed "cyberbullying" (p. 173) according to adolescent girls. Furthermore, this study notes some of the common responses for cyberbullying: cyberbullying back or retaliation (27.6% of 3,000 participants), sharing their experiences with their "online buddy" (46,5% of 3,000 participants), reporting to parents (13.4%) or adults (7.2%). Some girls decided not to share their online experiences with anyone else (35.5%) (Table 10.4, p. 170). Based on these responses, the authors question what online safety means for girls in the technologically-advanced world and how they carry on with long-lasting emotional experiences associated with online bullying, suggesting future research to expand the concept on online victimization and the ways victims cope with the long-lasting emotional consequences of online victimization.

Ranney and colleagues' (2019) qualitative study on the lived experiences of cyberbullying of minority, low-income youth in England provides further insight into the distinction between different forms of cyberbullying. Youth (aged 13-17) in their study made a clear distinction between cyberbullying and conflicts / arguments taking place online. Whereas encounters producing serious consequences, such as suicidal ideation and severe depression, were counted as cyberbullying, events associated with online harassment were counted as "online conflict" or "online drama" (p. 490). At the same time, youths involved in "online conflict" reported of having to experience lingering emotional consequences. Analysis of interview data also revealed that boundaries between what is acceptable and what is hurtful were difficult to differentiate leading to online victimization. This resulted in a small number of participants identifying pure victims of cyberbullying because most victims would retaliate in the form of cyberbullying in order to defend themselves or their friends (also see Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009).

In addition to cyberbullying, 'self-cyberbullying' is a new phenomenon calling for scholarly attention (Englander, 2012; Erreygers et al., 2022; Boyd, 2010; Pacheco et al., 2019). For instance, Erreygers and colleagues' (2022) work on cyber victimization looks into the so-called 'fictitious online victimization' (FOV) or 'self-cyberbullying' or digital self-harm phenomenon. Engaging in the FOV, adolescent victims of cyberbullying would create cyberbullying attacks against themselves (i.e. self-victimization online). Constructing a measurement instrument for cyberbullying attacks targeted against oneself, self-victimizing behaviours consist of pretending to be laughed at, hurt, threatened, and offended online. The authors contend these types of online behaviour stems from motivations to "be fun," to "see how others would react," and to "feel powerful" (p. 172). The authors recommend future research to look at ways that the recent and unknown phenomena FOV could be associated with risk factors, such as personality disorders and depression, and ways for offering appropriate help for digital self-harming adolescences.

These studies show that online bullying, hatred, and harassment can represent power imbalance between its target(s) and the perpetrator through an engagement in cyber aggression (Tokunaga, 2010; Víllora et al., 2021). Power imbalance manifests cyber aggression leading to digital violence, which exacerbates experiences of online victimization. Rafferty and Vander Ven (2014) explore about motivations of online bullying among young adults. They conducted a qualitative study using open-ended questions with 221 college students in the US. Responses from this study were coded into three themes. The results of the study identified three motivations for cyberbullying perpetration: cyber sanctioning, power struggles, and entertainment. The first theme, cyber sanctioning, was defined as pressure from one's peers to modify one's behaviour (p. 368). Social networking sites, such as posting on the victim's Facebook wall, were used as a platform to regularly sanction behaviours that broke socializing norms with the intent of shame and guilt. The second motivation and consequence relate to "power struggles that are defined as the attempt to hurt, humiliate, or influence the behaviour of another individual to gain access to some valued source" (pp. 370-371). For example, cyberbullying aggressors (regardless of sex and gender identity) targeted their ex-partners; and racial slurs were used as a method to overpower and target people from different races. The third motivation was directed towards annoying or provoking victims to elicit negative responses from the target. So-called trolling instances were performed with the purpose of entertaining the perpetrator, with trolling efforts increasing after the victim has made an attempt to stop the situation (p. 373).

The literature on digital violence and online victimization focus specifically on 'other'-ing minority groups, including women, gender-fluid persons, and racial minorities. The studies discussed below show how women and racial minorities have been targeted as victims of digital violence in the context of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) (Ballard & Welch, 2015). Gaming communities can facilitate a misogynistic culture where women and LGBTQ players experience online sexual harassment from opponent players, compared to men and heterosexual players, according to Ballard and Welch, 2015. The authors found that the players' rank in the MMOG – or power and dominance – was the leading factor that correlated with perpetration of cyberbullying and cyber-victimization. Sundén and Paasonen (2018) suggest that online shaming, misogyny, and hatred towards women can change the way women act, behave, and challenge hatred against them in online communities in Finland. Consistent with the

literature on cyberbullying power imbalance, power assumed through virtual hate can manipulate and target women resulting in shame, guilt, and feelings of fear. These feelings of victimization can trigger a counter-tactic of resistance in online spaces to overcome shame that has been experienced by the targets of online hate. In this way, online victimization and digital violence can overturn power into the action of resistance and empowerment (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018).

Another example of online hate against women relates to trolling and shaming practices that are publicly shred for entertainment purposes. Online trolling has taken a shape of digital violence. Using discourse analysis to examine misogyny and violence on a popular website Reddit, Lumsden (2019) looks at how Men's Rights Activists (MRA) construct digital violence through trolling and "othering" women and feminist movements to justify their deviant behaviour online. Negating possible consequences of digital violence, MRA believed online violence would be different than physical violence experienced in reality. This article shows how online construction of othering creates harmful digital gendered violence and hate against women. Lumsden's work also stresses the importance on the fact that popular user-led platform like Reddit is used to normalize and desensitize hatred against women. Similarly, analyzing comments, conversations, and images posted on Reddit, Topinka (2018) looks into how racism and nationalism are constructed online in the form of jokes or humorous contents. The *ImGoingToHellForThis* is a Reddit community created after the news release of the death of a Syrian immigrant child found dead on a beach in Turkey. The author argues that under the guise of freedom of speech, the culture of memes in the digital age manifests in a form of visually and textually humorous contents, which are excused as jokes.

Relating to the culture of meme, online trolling and the prevalence of online trolling shaping public views have become central in the study of digital communication (Hannan, 2018). This type of participatory media communication further normalizes violence online without acknowledging what is constituted as humorous on social media is racist and nationalist in reality. Similarly, Yar (2012) examines the direct effect of ICT in the context of 'happy slapping' and concludes self-organized and self-produced deviance leads to increased numbers of online misbehaviour and deviance among young people. Cohen-Almagor (2018) also argues that hate speech instigated online has the consequence of promoting hate and violence in our real life outside of virtual reality. The scholarly work on digital criminology needs to explore online victimization and digital violence as online communication and online culture are powerful in constructing everyday reality, especially when it involves online transgression among young adults (Yar, 2012; Goldsmith & Wall, 2019; Jaishankar, 2019; Stratton et al., 2017). Online culture is powerful due to its ability to create new gender and racial norms mediated through social networks. New socio-cultural norms constructed in the virtual reality can further harm the victims of online transgressions (see Powell et al. 2018 for an example of the culture of meme and image-making constructing reality and causing further harm to the victims of online hatred). Contributing to this body of the growing literature on digital criminology, my thesis examines online victimization in the context of cyberbullying as a form of violence against minority communities. While cyberbullying victimization could be counted as a form of online victimization, there are several methods used to respond to cyberbullying.

2.2.4.   Responses to cyberbullying

Online victimization, cyberbullying victimization, and the consequences thereof deserve scholarly attention, but legal scholars conducting research on the emerging issue of cyberbullying note that freedom of speech has been used as a way of justification for engaging in online transgression, which adds a layer of challenges for responding to cyberbullying transgression. This presents the increasing challenge of deterring this behaviour. Social media platforms facilitate online hatred as a way of expressing one's beliefs and thoughts while embracing aggressors' freedom of speech. There is a disconnect between how aggressors (or bullies) understand their behaviour and how victims convey and interpret online aggression against them. In fact, discourse and content analysis completed on Reddit show those who post offensive contents believe in exercising of their freedom of speech (Lumsden, 2019; Topinka 2018).

From a legal perspective, an online form of bullying is punishable if it involves elements of hatred and aggravating circumstances. For instance, bias-based cyberbullying – cyberbullying occurring based on the victim's actual or perceived individual characteristics, including but not limited to race, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation – is considered as advocacy of hatred and is criminalized in the US (Henry, 2013). In Canada, hate propaganda is criminalized under Bill C-13, the *Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act* (Coburn et al., 2015). Hate crime is, therefore, one of the aggravating circumstances an aggressor is engaged in. Legal analysis of the relationship between cyberbullying and hate crime outlines three circumstances that can lead to criminalization. Identified by Franco and Ghanayim (2019), these circumstances are the degree of sexuality of the violent discourse (explicit intimate images and/or verbal sexual messages); the degree of intensity (the number of harmful messages, the number of participants involved in the distribution of these messages, and the extent of accessibility to these messages); and the degree of violence (the degree of details conveyed through electronic communication and the actual threat and extent the perpetrator has caused to the victim). While there is some clarity in imposing legal sanctions for instances involving hate elements, without the presence of hate elements, imposing legal sanctions as a response to cyberbullying presents challenges, especially when it involves questions relating to the protection of freedom of speech.

Relatedly, establishing what constitutes a 'threat' (or hate in this context) of cyberbullying can be challenged through the Canadian Charter-protected freedom of expression (Todd, 2008) and the US First Amendment protection (Henry, 2013) because everyone is entitled to free speech in the physical and online environments. Brady (2008) and Henry (2013) argue that for school administration, controlling off-campus cyber-speech is particularly problematic due to the protection granted under the First Amendment. In the Canadian context, Freedom of expression, including freedom of speech, is a fundamental right under Section 2 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982). However, Section 1 of the *Charter* (1982) states:

> The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.

According to this Section, the rights and freedoms, including freedom of speech, are subject to *reasonable limits* prescribed by law (Boyko, 2021). More specifically, the *Charter* limits the

protection of freedom of expression if it can cause harm and propagate hate, leading to legal sanctioning as a response of online bullying.

Another challenge for sanctioning cyberbullying offending relates to the difficulty of establishing direct consequences for online bullying. For instance, Henry (2013) points out that whereas the consequences of physical bullying and hate can be factually assessed and presented in courts, determining the direct harms and consequences of cyberbullying and cyberhate that happened in the virtual environment is challenging. Furthermore, when cyberbullying is legally sanctioned, it can contribute to decreased rates of reporting among children and adolescents. Coburn and colleagues (2015) argue that the criminalization of cyberbullying may discourage youth disclosure for two reasons: disclosure may limit their access to technology and the internet, and disclosure can get their peers in trouble, therefore, encouraging bystanders not taking any actions against bullies and providing support for the bullied (Benzmiller, 2013). Previous studies have also identified that in most cyberbullying cases, the victims and perpetrators are known to each other, whereby they may decide to 'solve' cyberbullying confrontations on their own. Therefore, in addition to the fundamental right protection (i.e. the freedom of expression/speech), sanctioning of cyberbullying acts can present several challenges with respect to the establishment of consequences of cyberbullying causing hate and direct harm. Given these challenges, the focus of this study remains on understanding about those who engage in this behaviour through subjective lived experiences of bullies and the bullied. Not only does this approach enriches the literature on online bullying, but it also helps to identify possible responses to online bullying outside of legal sanctioning.

Beyond legal sanctioning, social sciences researchers offer different ways of effectively addressing the problem of cyberbullying. Rather than imposing legal sanctioning, social sciences researchers propose developing strategies for preventing traditional and cyberbullying that focus on adolescents' online behaviours. A study from Australia suggests that some programs tailored to combat traditional bullying are effective in reducing cyberbullying aggression (Pennell et al., 2021). Focus-group interviews with high school students in Australia indicated that students felt comfortable disclosing experiences of being a victim of cyberbullying through their school-based 'Adopt-a-Cop' program (Pennell et al., 2021, p. 5). Likewise, Gradinger and colleagues (2015) evaluated the effectiveness of the Austrian traditional anti-bullying program, called ViSC, in the cyberbullying context in 18 schools in Austria. A comparison of the control group (665 pupils) who did not participate in the program and the treatment group (1,377 pupils) who participated in the program showed a significant difference. The ViSC program was effective in preventing cyberbullying and cyber-victimization, as the treatment group showed a decrease in cyberbullying offending and cyber-victimization, while the control group showed an increase in cyberbullying offending and did not change in cyber-victimization. Similarly, Broll and Huey's (2015) qualitative study conducted in one of the school districts in Ontario recommended the use and adoption of diversionary strategies where school resource and patrol officers advocated for improving youths' education on safe technology use. This study is important because this research work consists of 12 interviews with SROs and patrol officers who represent the criminal justice system in the community. The results of this research indicated that existing laws on relation to cyberbullying were sufficient (i.e., the interviewees regarded the criminalization of cyberbullying as unnecessary). The interviewees disclosed that there is a need for young people

to understand the consequences of cyberbullying by educating youth about safe technology use and healthy relationships.

Although the use of SROs is a debatable issue locally given the over-policing of racialized communities and schools in Winnipeg (for example, see Brohman, 2021; Ennab, 2022), empirical evidence from Ontario and Alberta suggest that the recruitment of SROs on-campus is effective. For instance, an analysis of individual and focus group interviews with SROs in Alberta indicated that social media can cause psychological and physical violence, among many other types of violence (Abela & Donlevy, 2020). The results of the qualitative analysis showed that SROs presence was helpful to identify the types of violence occurring on school grounds through social media platforms. In another study by Broll and Howells (2021), SROs' presence was also preferred by the school administration, as they performed law enforcement, teaching, and counselling roles for school children and youth. The authors used mixed-methods approach to analyze surveys and in-depth interviews with principals and vice-principals in Secular and Catholic public-school districts in Ontario. Forty-six surveys were filled out by principals and vice-principals, 14 interviews were conducted with those who filled out the survey, and the researchers interviewed 13 current and former SROs. The results of the survey indicated that around 90% of school administrations positively rated the work done by SROs, commending a positive relationship with SROs. Consistent with the community-policing approach, more time spent on school grounds resulted in positive relationship building with youth. For officers, this result was perceived as having a positive benefit. Most interestingly, interviews with the officers suggested that they provided counseling services to youth on issues related to mental health, family conflict, and criminality, which eventually provided an opportunity for SROs to create a positive relationship with students. The researchers cited an example whereby a student who had suicidal thoughts approached an officer for counseling. As the SRO indicated, the collaboration of the vice-principal and the SRO produced a positive effect in preventing self-harm. Therefore, although the presence of SROs on school grounds is not preferred by the local community in Winnipeg, what is proposed by the proponents of the soft approach (i.e. preventing cyberbullying incidents through the cooperation between school administration and SROs) is supported by these studies conducted in Alberta and Ontario.

Based on Castell's (1996) network theory, Broll (2016) argues that interconnected institutional actors, such as school teachers, school administrators, parents, and even SROs, operating within a social system with a common unified worldview and shared goals can form a security network for reducing the traditional and online forms of bullying. Broll (2016) argues that parents, the educational system, and the law enforcement system should ideally form a strong alliance which will help them pursue the shared goal of preventing cyberbullying, consequently providing security and safety for young people. According to Broll's (2016) qualitative analysis of 34 interviews with parents of the children affected by cyberbullying, teachers, and school resources officers (SROs) in Ontario, parents played a central role in preventing online bullying from happening, whereas the educational system and law enforcement actors served secondary roles. Parental involvement is central because of the direct control parents can exercise over their children's safety. For example, a parent in the study indicated that the most effective approach to prevent the repetition of cyberbullying was to directly monitor their children's online behaviour, utilizing a "panoptic" approach to surveillance as indicated by a parent: "'My wife and I, we keep dropping in and checking on [our daughter] to see what is

happening'" (Broll, 2016, p. 741). In the eyes of the parents, involving the school administration would exacerbate their children's situation because of the perceived fear that the perpetrator will follow their child (or the victim in this context) more if the incident gets reported to school authorities. The results of the interviews with school administrators indicated that SROs only play a symbolic role, whereby they appear as official figures who advise, provide legal knowledge, guide 'in the right direction' or even 'scare' cyberbullying perpetrators through their presence (mainly resorting a deterrence tactic) (p. 743). Parents assumed that SROs do not take cyberbullying instances seriously because of the length of the incident to investigate. In fact, an official investigation of cyberbullying (just like any other safety-related school incident) takes significant time for SROs to complete. Broll suggests that cooperation among the three actors is needed for effectively preventing cyberbullying victimization and offending.

Notably, parental role can play a significant role in preventing cyberbullying. Broll and Reynolds (2021) concluded that an authoritative parenting style could prevent cyber-victimization. Multivariate analysis of 435 pupils in Grades 7-12 in Ontario revealed that an authoritative parenting style prevented both cyber-offending and victimization, after controlling for other variables (gender, technology use, friend's involvement with cyberbullying, minority status, and socio-economic status of participants' family background). Adolescents' odds of cyber offending were about 3.6 times lesser if they had authoritative parents, compared to their peers with neglectful parents (Broll & Reynolds, 2021, p. 458). Similarly, results with respect to cyber-victimization showed that adolescents with indulgent parents were about 72% more likely to have experienced cyberbullying, compared to their peers who reported having authoritative parents (p. 458). The researchers recommend that an authoritative parenting style, which consists of high demandingness (e.g. setting rules, monitoring children's behaviour) and high responsiveness (e.g. offering support, acceptance, and warmth), can prevent children and youth from engaging in uncontrolled behaviour through electronic devices. Therefore, we can conclude that family, rather than criminal justice agents (e.g., SROs), play the most significant role in deterring online offending and victimization.

In this literature review, I have detailed the proposed responses to cyberbullying and the challenges associated with some of the responses, as well as what cyberbullying presents as a form of online transgression. I have also offered a review of the literature on online victimization and digital violence to suggest that a cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization. Norms and rules that have consequences in the real world do not have the same extent of consequences in the virtual setting, bringing the importance of applying the concept of self-presentation in the context of virtual reality. In the next section, based on the above-discussed literature review, I aim to develop my conceptual framework by analyzing the existing theories on cyberbullying aggression and the model of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959).

2.2.5. *Existing theories*
Several scholars from multi-disciplinary backgrounds have studied cyberbullying and the formation of identity in the virtual world. Traditionally, the conceptualization of cyberbullying revolved around routine activities and sub-cultural theories that focused on the individualistic lens, rather than counting cyberbullying as a *social* phenomenon where digital technologies construct the meanings of harm, victimization, violence, and criminalization (Stratton et al.,

2017; Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Below, I offer a summary of literature review that focuses on the traditional approach to cyberbullying and online crime in general.

Modern cyberbullying can be based on the application of the micro-level deterrence theory, also articulated as rational choice. This theory appears to be effective to reduce cyberbullying offending on an individual level (Holt & Bossler, 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2018). The deterrence theory proposes that people make rational decisions before engaging in illegal activities. Cornish and Clarke (2014) contend that "[h]umans are rational beings who weigh the costs and benefits of any behavior and will ultimately act in a way that maximizes pleasure and minimizes pain" (as cited in Patchin & Hinduja, 2018, p. 190). Based on the rational decision principle, Cesare Beccaria (1963) outlined the main principles of deterrence theory (as cited in Holt & Bossler, 2016, p. 75). These principles state that humans will be deterred from engaging in criminal actions if the justice system's response is certain, swift, and proportionately severe. According to Holt and Bossler (2016), the certainty principle presumes the possibility of an offender being caught and punished by the justice system. The swift principle recognizes that punishment follows offending/criminal acts in a quick and swift manner. The severity of punishment must be proportionate to the offence. Therefore, Holt and Bossler (2016) propose that individuals' behaviour can be modified based on the deterrence principles, as people make rational decisions comparing costs and benefits before committing criminal actions. The deterrence theory is a useful approach to combat cyberbullying, as the existing literature applies and supports rational choice theory and deterrence approach for preventing cyberbullying behavior. The number of states in the US choosing the path to criminalize cyberbullying based on the deterrence theory has been increasing since 2010 (Hinduja & Patchin, 2021).

The toxic online disinhibition theory is another micro- or individual-level theory developed at the intersection of criminology and psychology. Conceptualizing online disinhibition theory, Suler (2004) outlines factors associated with cyberbullying that is described by online disinhibition effect (ODE). The author proposed that, compared to face-to-face communication, in an online environment, people expose their "true selves" upon making a decision to reveal their secret emotions and feelings (benign form) or to visit illegal places online (toxic form). Furthermore, the revelation of one's "true self" is possible through six factors that characterize online disinhibition theory: dissociative anonymity (people feeling safer about disclosing their inner thoughts and feelings); invisibility (concealment of identity that enables people to visit the places that are out of norms); asynchronicity (people's thoughts and expressions progress towards more benign or toxic forms following delayed and asynchronous responses); solipsistic introjection (one's subjective personalization based on fantasy and imagination of another person appears to be the reality); dissociative imagination (the Internet provides the opportunity to dissociate oneself from the offline physical world); and minimization of status and authority (people's willingness to speak up when authority figures and potential punishment exercised by them are absent). These six factors make it possible for cyberbullying perpetrators to avoid responsibility and assume the toxic form of disinhibition in an online environment where cyberbullying offending takes place.

Based on the toxic disinhibition theory, Udris (2014) finds that ODE is an effective approach to predicting cyberbullying. The increased level of the ODE positively correlates with cyberbullying (Wachs et al., 2019) and aggressiveness (Tsitsika et al., 2015), while reducing

empathy (Tokunaga, 2010). The ODE factors can also encourage online threats followed by rude language, hatred, and harassment while reducing empathy and self-control, as shown by the characteristics of cyberbullying (Tokunaga, 2010). Among the six factors identified by Suler (2004), the invisibility (concealment of identity that enables people to visit the places that are out of norms) and minimization of status and authority (people's willingness to speak up when authority figures and potential punishment exercised by them are absent) factors play the central role in cyberbullying perpetration that could lead to cyberbullying offending, cyberhate, and cyberbullying bystander effects. The invisibility and minimization factors also reduce one's sense of responsibility when using asynchronous communication online. Testing these two factors of online disinhibition theory (i.e. invisibility and minimization of status and authority), Wachs and colleagues (2018) found that the increased level of toxic online disinhibition was positively correlated with cyberbullying perpetration and cyberhate among teenagers in Germany. In this study, self-administered Likert scales were used to survey 1,480 adolescents (mean age 14.21 and evenly divided across genders). In addition to online toxic disinhibition, grade level and sex (specifically, being male) predicted cyberhate perpetration.

Using the same sample, in another study, Wachs and Wright (2018) identified the relationship between cyberhate perpetration and the bystander action. The authors defined online hate bystander behaviour as an action not responding to online hate and supporting hate by pressing the "like" button on social media platforms, but also an action of reporting to authorities, blocking the social media accounts of perpetrators. The results of the bivariate analysis revealed a positive relationship between being a cyberhate perpetrator and cyberhate bystander with the online disinhibition effect being a moderator of the relationship. Put otherwise, bystanders of online hate reported more online hate perpetration when they reported higher levels of toxic online disinhibition after controlling for the immigration status of pupils, socio-economic status, and the age of respondents. The review of empirical literature suggests that toxic online disinhibition mediates cyberbullying perpetration and cyberhate (Wachs et al., 2018; Wachs & Wright, 2018) if hate elements or aggravating circumstances are involved in online communication (Franco & Ghanayim, 2019).

In addition to the online disinhibition effect and its relationship with the prediction of cyberbullying, another leading theory examining cyberbullying aggression is Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (as cited in Holt & Bossler, 2016). This is an individual-level theory, which argues that individuals engage in criminal behaviour as a result of exposure to strain (as cited in Holt & Bossler, 2016, p. 87). This theory suggests that failure to achieve positively valued goals, loss of positive-valued stimuli, and presentation of negative stimuli become the strain. Exposure to strain will lead to cyberbullying offending. As mentioned previously, the effects of cyberbullying are disturbing and call for serious attention, especially in cases involving self-harm or internalized deviance (i.e. self-victimization). Agnew (2001) conceptualized the following four characters of consequential strain for bullying: bullying perceived as unjust; bullying perceived as high in magnitude or causing stress; bullying occurring without conventional social control exerted by authority figures like parents; and bullying exposing the strained individual to others (as cited in Hay et al. 2010, p. 132).

The existing literature suggests that the consequential strain for cyberbullying creates conditions for self-inflicted harm in youth. Building on the general strain theory, Hay and

colleagues (2010) argue that the consequential strain of being cyberbullied becomes the reason why adolescents choose to engage in internalization of deviance (i.e. self-harm). Using Agnew's analysis of general strain theory, Patchin and Hinduja (2011) argue that with the presence of three strains (failure to achieve positively valued goals, loss of positive-valued stimuli, and presentation of negative stimuli), anger and frustration lead them to engage in criminal activities. They argue that youth who experience anger and frustration commit crimes as a mechanism to cope with their negative emotions and experiences, which can account for the instances of bullying in an online environment. As a result, youth who reported strain or anger/frustration were more likely to participate in cyberbullying. Therefore, emotions related to anger and frustration as well as an experience of strain influenced cyberbullying behaviour. With the general strain theory, the consequences of power struggles and entertainment relating to negative emotions experienced by the victims of cyberbullying could become a strain for self-victimization, as suggested by Hinduja and Patchin (2010), Hay et al. (2010), and Broll et al. (2018). Although this qualitative inquiry revealed the motivations behind cyberbullying offending, an equally important issue for analyzing online communication and interaction through the presentation of self is yet to be explored.

2.3. Conceptual framework

I use Goffman's conceptualization of self-presentation (1959) to study social interaction in the context of cyberbullying. The study of self-presentation proposes that social circumstances could impact the presentation of the self and its behaviours in a group setting as well as on a one-to-one basis. The self is influenced by social interactions it has with other selves, and meanings arise in the process of interaction between people. The presentation of self is compared to a stage performance where the self, depending on situational factors, displays different social roles during its presentation. The process of displaying many roles on the front or 'performing' stage is referred as the dramaturgical model of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959).

According to Goffman (1959), the self is the product of interaction. Self is not an organic product, but is one of performance. Interaction is defined as the "reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's immediate physical presence" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). Social interactions and social contexts of a given situation can define the behaviour of one's (in)action and behaviour. Interactions that we make on a daily basis resemble dramaturgical stages where expressions and impressions are made. Goffman suggests that any social establishment and any interaction within an establishment can be observed and understood from the performers' and audiences' perspectives. In any social establishment, performers, whether performing on their own or with the cooperation of their team members, stage a definition of a given situation to an audience. Forming a definition of a given situation, the performing self or the performing team conveys social messages and meanings to the audience.

In this process of defining social situations, the self is staged by front and back stage interactions, where an interaction serves the purpose of having an impact on others' behaviours. The role of the self is to achieve its goals through performance and impression management. A performance is an activity used to influence others, and it occurs in the back and front stages of dramaturgical realization. The presentation of self, thus, can be explained via the dramaturgical model of social life, whereby individuals express themselves through front and back stages similar to a theatrical stage. Goffman claimed that individuals act, express themselves, and

behave differently in their front or back regions (stages). Using the same analogy, different people can form a team with united goals. Team members collectively cooperate in maintaining the definition of the situation toward their audiences.

Goffman's (1959) work is also crucial in discovering the types of communication that the presenter engages in during their performance. Goffman (1959) stated that the performer depends on two kinds of communications: expressions "given" and expressions 'given off' (pp. 2; 7). Expressions that are 'given' are deliberately deployed signs and symbols in verbal forms. In contrast, expressions deployed without conscious deliberation, often in nonverbal forms, are considered as expressions that are 'given off.' It is more challenging for the performer to stop giving expressions off rather than stop giving expressions. Whereas expressions that are 'given' mostly occur on the front stage, expressions that are 'given off' occur on the back stage, which are two different dramaturgical concepts explored in detail below.

Individuals perform for their audience, and this performance (or interaction) occurs on the front stage. The front stage is a public setting where desirable and expected expressions and performances are presented to the audience. Actors are expected to follow a set of social norms when performing on their front. The expressions and performances happening at the front stage aid the self in constructing one's self identity that corresponds to the audience's expectations and social norms (Robinson, 2007; Kilvington, 2021; Vryan et al., 2003). Similar to the process of interaction between people, personal identity may be constructed to some extent, as people are able to re-construct their presentation of self and their identity to different audiences. Exploring identity formation from the symbolic interactionism perspective, Vryan and colleagues (2003) state that "[w]e may selectively draw upon our personal histories and aspects of our biographies, and we often retrospectively reconstruct our past, particularly to maintain coherence within the present identity we seek to construct. We also position ourselves in alignment with or opposition to situational identities" (Vryan, 2003, p. 372). The creation of identity by selection and coherence with one's present identity shows that the performance given on the front stage emanates from the performer's past experiences that are kept in the performer's private back stage.

By giving a performance on the front stage, the self can assume a sincere or a cynical self. A sincere self's performance matches their impression of reality, whereas the cynical self's performance does not match what the self presents in real life. A cynical self can manifest out of good intentions, to the benefit of the community, or for personal benefit. Goffman writes that some occupations are forced to deceive their customers because of the demand customers require – audiences not allowing the performer to be sincere (p. 18). A doctor administering placebo and shoe clerks telling the customer what they desire to hear are cynical or insincere selves on the front stage because their performance does not match their beliefs and impressions of reality. Performances fostered and supported by the audiences constitute a genuine performance. While being sincere or cynical raise from situational demands in physical reality, not much is known about this quality of performance in virtual reality in the context of online bullying. Thus, when presenting an online self in the context of cyberbullying, words and symbols constituting online performance can present either a cynical or sincere self that is similar or dissimilar to the offline everyday self.

The front stage comprises of the displays of appearance and manner in addition to the staging of sincere and cynical selves. Manner denotes stimuli for conveying information about incoming situations. Manner is used at the time of active performance. It sets expectations for audiences. For example, an aggressive manner given off on the front stage leaves an impression that the performer is about to start a verbal interaction with hostility. Manner is absent in the virtual, but can be signified by avatars, the use of signs of emoticons, posts, and pictures. Appearance in the personal front region denotes physical appearance, size, looks, as well as bodily gestures (Goffman, 1959). Appearance imbeds into itself the social status of the performer (Goffman, 1959; Abidin, 2015).

Oftentimes, given (the use of words) and given off (gestures) expressions appear to be in coherence with one another. The appearance or status of the performer is manifested by given off expressions, whereas manner is manifested by given expressions. In the front region, a performer is actively engaged in giving appearances to embody certain standards and maintain their appearance through the use of manners and given expressions. Hereby, active communication of the performer with the audience through given expressions is referred to as "politeness" (p. 107). Politeness represents the direct manner – the given expressions and set expectations for the audience.

Without active communication or engagement with the audience, the performer gives off expressions or "comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them" (Goffman, 1959, p. 107). This constitutes "decorum" standards. The decorous behaviour of the performer presents appearance on the front stage (or represents the status of the performer). To save the appearance of the self, when the performer gives off expressions, the self further engages in moral and instrumental decorum illuminated through given off expressions. Moral requirements stand for moral standards that we follow in everyday social settings. Social norms and rules that we exercise in sacred places are examples of moral decorum. Instrumental requirements stand for rules of subordination, thereby it indicates the status of the performer. For example, an employer displays instrumental decorous behaviours when demanding something from their employees. These standards for appearance shown through decorous behaviour and standards for manner shown through politeness are hidden in virtual reality, and are central for studying asynchronous online interactions without the presence of visual cues, such as the tone of voice, facial expressions, and emotions.

Another feature that we often see both in the virtual and physical reality is the way a performer engages in masking behaviour in their front stage. Among multiple masks, a performer is capable of selecting a mask that can present their appearance in the front region. Masking is used to construct an appropriate staged behaviour. Masking is profitable to the performer and is used to convey an appearance and manner that are compatible with a given situation. It conceals some characteristics or behaviours by preventing the audience from accessing them. Goffman argues that the true motivations of certain behaviour can be concealed/masked by assuming a certain appearance. Errors, mistakes, and corrections are also concealed upon presentation, where the flawless end product is presented. Ideal impressions are created from masking efforts. In other words, a performer conceals or underplays activities, facts, and motives that are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his product – the projected image. Observation of online bullying brings an interesting perspective for

applying and interpreting the concept of masking in the front region presented by both the bullied and the bully's perspectives (Kilvington, 2021; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019).

Front stage language involves expressions that are given. It presents formal language use and forbids offensive language and behaviour. Others (or team players) sharing the same front region will share the same role as the performer. In contrast to the front stage language, "the back stage language consists of reciprocal first-naming, co-operative decision-making, profanity, open sexual remarks… rough informal dress, "sloppy" sitting … mumbling or shouting" (Goffman, 1959, p. 128). Goffman notes the significance of "playful aggressivity and "kidding" (Goffman, 1959, p. 128) happening in the back stage among team players, which makes a significant difference in the back and front stages of dramaturgy. The sloppy and "kidding" language applies to online entertainment or trolling actions that widely take place virtually. It is argued that in physical reality, in group settings, 'running jokes' or verbal expressions understandable by members of a certain social group occur in the back region. How and whether this behaviour changes from the back to the front stage in the context of cyberbullying will help to understand participants' online self-presentation.

Back stage relates to the performer's private space where the self of the performer is more honest and genuine. Goffman stated that the back stage is a restricted area where the language and behaviour pertain to "profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping, smoking, rough informal dress" (p. 129). The back region is hidden from the audience, and individuals are able to act differently if they wish to (for example, by being themselves without giving an active performance). Given that invisibility and minimization of status facilitate cyberbullying attacks, it becomes reasonable to assume that cyberbullying perpetrators stage different performances in their private back stage and public front stage in the virtual environment. The same assumption can be made about cyber-victims, as the virtual environment, in comparison with the physical world, constitutes a space where the self can operate differently in the back and front stages. In order to stage different characters, performers need to have their back and front stages under control. The act of impression management reveals the way how performers separate the front from their back stage.

Performers "successfully stage a character" (Goffman, 1959, p. 203) to stay in control of the performance, and more broadly, in control of the situation and interaction. Goffman describes this action as the activity of impression management. In a similar vein, Schlenker (2012) defines impression management to be "the goal-directed activity of controlling information in order to influence the impressions formed by an audience" (p. 492). Impression management can take place consciously or unconsciously with the goal to influence others' perceptions of objects, situations, and events through the regulation of social interaction. Building on Goffman (1959), Persson (2012) contends that in the model of the representation of self in everyday life through face-to-face interaction, physical proximity is the most important factor in separating between the front and back stage. Persson further explains that the "[d]ifferences between front and back stage are established through barriers to perception and physical movements from space to space" (p. 22). As a result of learning how to regulate one's body in different physical spaces, individuals learn to assign certain behaviours in the two regions. Moreover, the performer should stay in control of their performance while simultaneously reading cues (or feedback) given to the actor. Goffman writes about an observation he makes about people's verbal and non-verbal

interactions, physical appearance, and facial expressions. According to Goffman, individuals entering a tight social circle dress up like other members of the social circle. This individual smiles (a non-verbal facial expression 'given'), and as a result of their 'given' expression, other members of this social circle tend to respond with a smile. Although this interaction is non-verbal in nature, observation of people by other individuals in the physical environment makes communication meaningful. At the same time, other observations (such as how older members of this social group interact with each other) that are noted down by the new member, become the expression or behaviour that is 'given off' and occurs in the back stage area since it is controlled by the performer (i.e. the new member of a social circle).

Goffman offers another important observation about impression management on the front stage. At the time of a given social interaction, the performer faces the challenge of not displaying back stage behaviour in the front. Thus, whereas the performer can switch from the front stage to the back effortlessly, taking an opposite direction is challenging. Saving the front stage, therefore, demands extra effort from the performer because the front involves the control of given and given off expressions in front of an audience. In this way, a performer separates their front and back stages via active impression management. By managing impressions, a performer separates the front from the back stage. Impression management also involves the action of preventing the audience from entering both the front and back stages. Not only does a performer prevent the audience from entering the back stage, but the performer also chooses which self and character to project in their front depending on the type of audience. A reception area of any office setting serves as an example of the front and back stage impression management. Depending on who the audience is, the receptionist projects different selves and characters. If the receptionist (the performer) talks to clients (the audience), the performer operates in the front stage using formal language that corresponds with the front stage behaviour. However, in the absence of audiences, the performer interacts with their team members (colleagues), where in-group back stage behaviour and language are prevalent. The performer is able to separate front and back stage areas by impression management. When the audience is present, the performer prevents the audience from entering the back stage. At the same time, the performer projects their front stage self here as well. These are functions of impression management used to control the front stage and keep the front separate from the back region in a physical setting. Not much is known about how people utilize impression management in virtual reality. Assuming back and front stages are interchangeable when undertaking an online performance (Kilvington, 2021; Aspling, 2011; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019), studying the role of impression management is helpful to understand how front and back stages interact with online bullying and online victimization.

Another characteristic of impression management involves discipline from the front stage performer. Goffman presents an example of a sales associate that we still observe in our current days. Oftentimes, we see salespersons making exaggerating claims about the product they are selling. In order to display this behaviour on the front stage before their audience (customers), they usually are well-disciplined and are not too attached to the audience. They are well-disciplined to manage their emotions by suppressing negative or conflicting facial expressions in front of customers. Thus, real affective appearances should be restricted (Goffman, 1959). Goffman writes that only the appropriate to a given situation affective appearances should be displayed as a rule of impression management in the front stage to sustain all performances in the

front (Goffman, 1959). While a dramaturgical performance is sustained in everyday interpersonal interactions through impression management in a physical setting, the role of impression management for sustaining a dramaturgical model in a virtual setting is unknown. The lived experiences of cyberbullying explored through this thesis will shed lights on how the self engages in virtual impression management and makes sense about justice, online victimization and transgression in the digital age.

In addition to the separation of front and back stages by impression management, according to Goffman, impression management plays a main role in guiding the operation of the back stage. While back stage is an area that is not accessible to any audience, the motivations of team members and rules governing the back stage constitute back stage impression management. This operation of the back region helps team members and the performer to prepare and practice for routine activities that are presented on the front stage. Impression management happening in the back stage can contradict front stage performance. In the absence of audiences, team players display their loyalty to their group to seek trust from team players. Secrets are well kept in the team setting and performers display their authentic selves in the absence of an audience to their team members. In contrast with front stage impression management, genuine emotions are shared with team members to solicit trust and loyalty from others. Each performer on the back stage acts to endorse each other's behaviour to "sustain one another's morale" (Goffman, 1959, p. 130). This means each performer in the team setting strives to convey a message that the show presented by their team member went well, regardless of the outcome. In group settings, if members of the group member represent fundamental differences such as age difference, gender, sex, and ethnicity, then limitations on back stage freedom should prevail. Members should be considerate of the differences of team members and respect the boundaries. Making observations about setting up rules in the team membership context, Goffman writes, "the most important division is the sexual one, for there seems to be no society in which members of the two sexes, however closely related, do not sustain some appearances before each other" (p. 130). Team membership is an important concept that is exercised during social interactions. Through some of my findings, I seek to show how the self operates to form team membership in the absence of face-to-face interactions.

In this section, I have offered a summary of the conceptual framework used in my thesis. Drawing from Goffman's (1959) conceptualizations, my thesis examines social interactions occurring in the non-physical (virtual or online) setting, with the proposal that Goffman's concepts are applicable to the context of cyberbullying interactions. The application of Goffman's concept to the context of cyberbullying not only makes an empirical contribution to the field of digital criminology, but also enables the readers to understand how young people make sense of virtual reality, online victimization, online violence, and online transgression as part of their lived experiences. With this conceptual framework, I also seek to understand how young people cope with the consequences of digital technology-facilitated cyberbullying in their non-virtual and virtual realities. Before applying the dramaturgical model of everyday life to cyberbullying aggression, I offer a literature review on the presentation of self in an online setting.

2.3.1. The presentation of self online

The presentation of self and the formation of identity online are the two concepts that assist us in understanding online interactions. These concepts share similarities (for example, both study how the self operates in an online world), but the main difference is observed in the following: identity can be understood in many ways, but, in general, identity stands for someone's unique characteristic that makes them belong to one or another group (Schlenker, 2012). In contrast, self-presentation is an activity of how people try to shape the attitudes and behaviours of others through social interactions and an activity of how people respond to the presented activities of others based on their identity (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 2012). The current literature is rich with concepts exploring the creation of virtual identity via the internet and social media platforms (for example, Ionescu, 2013; Marmura, 2013; Fox & Ahn, 2013). However, the current literature lacks an explanation for how self-presentation is conducted online. I aim to fill this gap by expanding on how those engaged in online bullying stage themselves for performance in their online and physical worlds, examining 'given' and 'given off' expressions and the act of impression management.

Identity formation in the virtual world is a prominent topic that has been explored by many scholars. For example, Turkle's (1995) ground-breaking work on the analysis of identity formation in the media and Internet era examines different aspects of self in the cyber and physical spaces, while arguing that one's self transcends in the virtual environment by leaving behind the identity they attain in the physical environment. Turkle (1995) finds that the Internet and Internet-related technological platforms, such as Multi-User Domain, allow people to create new identities. Moreover, hidden aspects of one's identity can be revealed through cyberspace, which can differ from one's physical self. In the age of the Internet, identity is constructed and re-constructed, as people start acknowledging the constructed nature of reality, self, and others. Online platforms can mediate and facilitate these possibilities of multiple identities to think of ourselves as "fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicious, flexible" (Turkle, 1995, pp. 263-264). The internet has become the space for learning human identity and how the online environment shapes interactions, communications, and behaviours of people. For this reason, at the intersection of online transformative spaces and the possibilities of having "multiplicious" identities online, it is useful to explore how the front and back stages of self are presented to the public.

Similarly, Robinson (2007) calls the "multiplicious" identity formation process "online self-ing" (p. 103). The author argues that those who engage in this process of online self-making do not transcend the most fundamental aspects of their physical selves in the online environment. There is a proliferation of scholarly work examining the concept of multiple identities (Ionescu, 2013; Marmura, 2013; Fox & Ahn, 2013). This literature draws the conclusion that the Internet creates a new environment where the construction and adoption of new and subjective identities are possible, whilst these identities being different than what one assumes in their offline reality. Visual representation of self through avatars, memes, GIFs, texts, and symbols are used as expressions of different and new identities.

The formation of multiple identities that are different from one's identity in the physical world is possible due to the introduction of online and virtual communication and self-expressive platforms and devices. Studying the effects of technological advancement on our daily life,

Thompson and Cupples (2008) explore the way identity is formed online using the concept of 'cyborg' – an entity, which is part biological and part machine (hybrid), that teens appropriate for describing their relationship with their phones. The interview analysis in Thompson and Cupples study concludes that texting facilitates asynchronous virtual interactions in a cyborgian sense. For the ability of technology to facilitate interaction across geographical boundaries with the hybrid interactions of humans, bodies, texts and machines, the authors define this concept as digital sociality. Digital sociality introduces an important point of cyborgian (hybrid human and machine) identity, but how people make sense of their online self and how they present their selves to online audiences are the gap in the literature that I address in my thesis.

Furthermore, in addition to the assumption of different identities on-line and off-line, identity and the presentation of self are also commodified in virtual reality. Ibrahim (2018) argues that the impact of adopting and accepting multiple identities formed in the virtual world by physically being present in the offline world has created the problem of one's self "simultaneously [becoming] a subject and object for consumerism, which can be branded and drafted into marketized economies where it can be promoted and become content for advertising" (p. 97). The author takes social media influencers as an example of such a process, whereby the real identity of the self is hidden, but only the ideal identity of the self is considered as a 'real' part of an identity, whilst at the same time, becoming the object of production, commodification, and consumption.

As a result of multiple identity formation and commodification of identity and self-presentation, the new social media culture of influencers produces 'microcelebrities' (Abidin, 2015; 2016), who strive to shape public opinions through persuasions of authenticity, interconnectedness, and intimacy established virtually by their followers on social media. Scholars writing about the culture of self-commodification examine social media platforms, such as YouTube and Instagram, and focus on the digital sociality and affordance of social media in facilitating digital labor in the form of branding and advertising (which ultimately produce microcelebrities). Abidin (2015), for example, questions the digital labor newborns produce for their mothers. This presents ethical challenges of labor in social media and the commodification of childhood, rather than using social media to commemorate milestones of one's life. Moreover, Ruiz-Gomez and colleagues (2022) argue that popular social networking sites and mobile apps actively advertise products to children and make kids "promotional intermediaries" for marketing campaigns (p. 127) who are both consumers and promoters of social media markets. The marketing campaigns introduce children to the possibility of becoming an influencer and normalizing the emerging influencer culture. Hurley (2019) suggests the presentation of the self to the public on social media by influencers creates "fantastically authentic" (p. 11) selves that are realized by multimodal affordances of social media platforms and are based on fantasy-based imagery-level of self-presentation. The emerging concept of fantastical authenticity is used to examine claims and mythical representations that are reinforced by social media accounts of different law enforcement institutions (Walby & Joshua, 2020; Walby & Wilkinson, 2021). Thus, not only does Goffman's framework of the presentation of the self apply to individual selves, but it also helps researchers to understand the broader implications of self-presentation on institutional and community levels.

Compared to the exploration of identity formation online, the literature on the presentation of self in the online environment is limited. However, a few studies examined how people use social media to present themselves online using Goffman's dramaturgical model. For example, studying the virtual presentation of self in the context of the emerging influencer culture, Abidin (2016) shows how social media influencers engage in the dramaturgical model of social interaction. For the performance to be successful, the cyber performer must become literate in terms of the site or community language, as well as implicit and explicit shared values. The online performer or influencer reveals their back stage everyday activities (or behaviour) to the public audience to seek attention and to create an appearance of relatability to their followers (Abidin, 2016). One's self engages in impression management to send a specific message (advertisement, for example) to the public (i.e. followers) through given and given off expressions, as well as displaying direct engagement (or appearance in front stage) with the audience. As a result, the self learns to strategically collaborate, act, and negotiate their back and front stages of performance with the purpose of monetization.

Likewise, Aspling's (2011) qualitative inquiry conducted with 10 individuals in 2011 showed that people can perform different roles on Facebook and on personal blogs. The researcher found that on Facebook, people are able to separate the front from the back stage. In other words, when people update their feeds (or post on Facebook), the updated items fall into the front stage performance because of their prior thoughts and motives given to stage a successful character on the front stage. Aspling also found that people behave somewhat differently on their personal blogs, which the author calls the "reversed dramaturgy" (p. 46) because the respondents intentionally presented their front stage as back stage. According to the author, the intimate (back stage) was staged/brought up to the front stage, which results in the interviewees using personal blogs engaged in the selective opening of the back stage (in the form of performance on a front stage to their blog readers, while selectively presenting information that belongs in the back stage region). Whereas Facebook was used as a clear demonstration of dramaturgy, the boundaries separating the back and front stages are blurred when posting on personal blogs, indicating that the self presents itself differently in their virtual space. Aspling (2011) recommended future research explore the social processes for online social interaction and self-presentations in-depth, including "how social interaction on the web is to be understood, how it differs from face-to-face interaction and how and to what extent it is social" (p. 44). I aim to fulfill this gap through the study of online bullying.

As a way of understanding how social interaction on the web differs from face-to-face interaction, in the context of cyber-hate as a form of cyberbullying, Kilvington (2021) argues that online platforms have become virtual stages of hate whereby virtual stages have blurred, resulting in anti-social behaviours and expressions. Online performances are affected by disinhibition (see Suler, 2004 for anonymity, invisibility, and dissociative imagination characteristics), which blurs virtual front and back stages and which can shape human behaviour online and aggravate instances of cyber hate. More specifically, the author argues that despite a virtual front stage being a space for presenting one's ideal self, it also increases the number of given expressions of hate. As a result, similar to what Megele and Longfield (2022) claim, Kilvington (2021) maintains the idea that the increased number of online hate occurrences "desensitize" humans and normalize expressions of hate online (p. 266). The author attributes this problem to the blurring of virtual front and back stages of dramaturgy under the influence of

disinhibition effects offered by the virtual environment, which eventually shapes human behaviours and attitudes toward one another.

In addition to the differences in front and back stages of virtual life, impression management is, again, important in the consideration of how the self is presented online. Impression management facilitates gang members' operation in the virtual world for organizing their activities (Urbanik & Roks, 2020; Urbanik & Haggerty, 2018). These scholars point out the importance of impression management when using social media as a way of connecting and building trust with their participants to conduct urban ethnographic studies with street-involved gang members. The presentation of online self is versatile in many aspects of social sciences and my thesis enriches the literature on online impression management by looking at cyberbullying aggression and victimization.

Examining individual self-presentation, Persson (2012) contends that physical boundaries between front and back stages are central to offline (physical) impression management. Given the power of technology mediating human interaction, it is evident that social media replaces physical face-to-face interaction. Facebook status updates serve as an example of social media users presenting themselves in a controlled manner because performers on social media are capable of editing and modifying their performance with 'given' expressions. The level of control inherent in online self-presentation is impossible to achieve during face-to-face and physical interactions. At the same time, social media users "overshare" information because 'given off' expressions are not controlled anymore (Persson, 2012, p. 26). Sending out overly unconsidered expressions, thinking out loud, and becoming indiscreet in communication are some examples of "oversharing" (p. 26). Such behaviours would likely violate social norms and the principles of back and front stages in the offline world. Thus, Persson (2012) concludes that social media does not facilitate the regulation of one's behaviour – the learned behaviour through offline (or physical) social interactions – by becoming a risk of not being able to regulate one's speech (that is meant to be kept in the private back stage regions). Extending Persson's (2012) analysis, it can be presumed that cyberbullying perpetrators have difficulties in regulating their interaction via social media because the virtual social media space does not separate the front stage from the back stage region, compared to the offline and physical environment where the front and back stages are clearly differentiated. In this way, impression management is another aspect of the representation of self that requires clear and detailed exploration.

In this section, I have provided a brief review of the existing literature that applies Goffman's concept of self-presentation in virtual context. Not too many studies have solely focused on any type of online transgression (except for Kilvington, 2021). My thesis applies Goffman's concept to examine how people identifying cyberbullying victims and aggressors present themselves virtually. I also seek to understand how people make sense of their online interactions, how they cope with cyberbullying victimization, and how these subjective lived experiences can be explained through the presentation of self as a conceptual framework.

Goffman's approach better suits unveiling how young people interact online – the purpose of the study. More specifically, Goffman's approach is helpful to explain how cyber victims and cyber perpetrators of bullying stage their selves both in online and offline environments. Because technology can mediate and facilitate human interaction, this aspect of

how communication is 'given' and 'given off' is worth studying (and has not been explored thoroughly). Moreover, it is also crucial to study how cyberbullies perform at the front and back stages in their dramaturgical model to present themselves both online and offline. The examination of the dramaturgical model will reveal how the process of impression management takes place in the virtual world.

3. Framework for inquiry and research design

3.1. Framework for inquiry

A framework for inquiry is crucial for any qualitative study. A framework for inquiry guides the researcher to conduct a meaningfully coherent study and present their findings systematically. There are five major approaches to inquiry that are commonly used in social sciences: narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research, and case study research (Cresswell & Poth, 2017). Each approach to inquiry undertakes different objects and levels of analysis, which assist the researcher to design their research methodology and the overarching analysis by tying the conceptual framework with the research design, findings, and discussion.

A qualitative phenomenological framework for inquiry best fits my theoretical approach because it enables me to apply Goffman's dramaturgical model of social life in the context of online interaction. At the same time as Goffman's concept on the dramaturgical model of self-representation reveal about one's self-representation, the qualitative phenomenological framework for inquiry (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006) assists with unfolding this process of self-representation in a virtual environment, thereby, answering the research questions (i.e. how young people present themselves online in the context of cyberbullying and how they cope with the consequences of cyberbullying). I also use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to supplement my qualitative framework. This approach to data analysis has helped me keep the chosen methodological approach well-organized and structured. My data analysis guided by IPA has enabled me to understand what cyberbullying means for participants, how they decide to virtually present themselves after experiencing cyberbullying, situational and contextual factors associated with the causes of cyberbullying, and the importance of participant-generated visual data. While the phenomenological framework for inquiry enables researchers to elaborate on participants' subjective lived experiences, I find that the integration of IPA into the phenomenological inquiry strengthens the quality of this project.

Therefore, in this thesis, I integrate IPA into the qualitative phenomenological framework for inquiry to explore the participants' subjective experiences. The use of the phenomenological framework for inquiry and IPA makes a methodological contribution and enables me to closely examine and reflect on participants' narratives. Even though the scope of this thesis does not lie in the full examination of phenomenology and the dramaturgical model of social interaction, it is important to note how these two conceptual and methodological/philosophical approaches overlap (Davis, 1997; Lanigan, 1988). Below, I explain phenomenology as *(1)* philosophical thinking and *(2)* a methodology that is used to interpret participants' subjective experiences of online bullying. Then, I guide my readers through the recruitment and sampling strategies, verbal and visual data collection methods, interview preparation or interview schedule, data analysis

and ethical considerations. As a concluding note, I offer a review of IPA and how it assists with my data analysis.

3.1.1. *Phenomenology as a philosophical stance*

It is important to understand what phenomenology is before using it as a way of designing research. Heidegger's approach to epistemology (in a sense that I question 'how do we know what we know?' and 'how subjective experiences become meaningful to one's self') inform my understanding of phenomenology. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) was a German philosopher (Wheeler, 2020) who placed a significant value on the concept of lived experience. By examining what constitutes "Dasein" – the inherently social being – (translated as there-being), Heidegger raises a fundamental question: what does '*to exist*' mean? (Wheeler, 2020). It is this question that informs the foundation of my research inquiry because it is important to unpack and understand how my participants conduct their virtual selves or their virtual *being* in their everyday lives in the absence of cyberbullying. Although human beings co-exist and share common experiences, the subjective experience of each Dasein can differ from one another. The human way of *being* has no fixed meaning (argued Heidegger, as cited in Wheeler, 2020). For this reason, before exploring cyberbullying, it becomes imperative to understand how participants subjectively make sense of their online *being*-ness.

Outside of normative and positivistic thinking, Heidegger notes that humans are born into the world with pre-theoretical entities that help them to comprehend the meanings of things surrounding them. Through interpretation, Heidegger proposes to unpack the meaning behind the pre-theoretical entities in order to understand what the *Being* constitutes in and of itself. Heidegger uses his own vocabulary to accentuate the process of meaning-making of the Being and suggests that Dasein – the inherently social being – (translated as there-being) operates in three different modes of encounter (or existence) at any given moment (the temporal) (Wheeler, 2020). The modes of encounters help Dasein to uncover the way the *Being* (or Dasein) operates. Heidegger offers an explanation for knowing how Dasein makes meaning of particular situations they face by three different modes of encounter: readiness-to-hand, present-at-hand, and un-ready-to-hand. In its readiness-to-hand mode, Dasein engages in activities or makes sense of things because of the pre-theoretical or a priori conditions. For example, when a person takes an electronic device in their hands, they do not examine its contents or what it is made of. In Dasein's mind, an electronic device is not an independent unit that Dasein assesses consciously. Rather, the subjective experience Dasein has in relation to the electronic device allows the *Being* to use the electronic device and assess its utility subconsciously. The Dasein does not make a distinction between the object of use (in this case the electronic device) and its subjective self. This is because Dasein has made a connection between the objective and subjective entities, whereby the object is relative to the subjective mode of Dasein. Likewise, we engage in tasks on an everyday basis without making an effort to analyze or closely examine the tasks we do because they appear to be intuitive and automatic. They are informed by preconceived practices (or a priori) that we do not consciously examine.

In comparison with the readiness-to-hand mode of encounter, Dasein faces present-at-hand mode of encounter with objects that are defined by a priori theoretical reasoning (Wheeler, 2020). Using the previous example of an electronic device, Dasein in its present-at-hand mode will assess the electronic device's independent units, such as its weight, color, design, and

model. The Dasein interprets the electronic device as independent from Dasein's being (and not in relation to Dasein), where Dasein makes a conscious assessment about objects it has come across to. This mode of encounter leads to the un-ready-to-hand mode where Dasein questions the pre-existing theoretical reasoning in the present-at-hand mode.

Dasein engages in problem-solving activity during its un-ready-to-hand mode using a pre-construct and theoretical way of thinking in the present-at-hand mode that leads to the subconscious and relative readiness-to-hand mode. In fact, if the electronic device is out of function, the Dasein will use its present-at-hand mode of encounter using its ability of reasoning to engage in the problem-solving task until the problem gets fixed by reaching the unconscious present-at-hand mode of encounter. The three different modes of encounter are important because of Dasein's holistic being in the world. Dasein's relation to the world and objects in the world help Dasein to exist in the world for the sake of (something) and having purpose towards (something), which is essential for its existence (Wheeler, 2020). Dasein always exists as a subject relating to the world through these modes of encounter.

The three modes of encounters form the understanding of Dasein's surroundings from the past to present, and to future. Meanings of objects in the readiness-to-hand mode stand for the world before Dasein's birth (or existence) in the word. For Dasein, the readiness-to-hand mode is the past with its pre-theoretical constructs. The experiences formed in the readiness-to-hand mode shape Dasein's unconscious epistemological knowledge in the present time. The experience of the past and the process of making sense in the present time inform future actions. The modes of encounters in a temporal sense are dependent on Dasein's relation with others. Dasein's being in the world is similar to what it is to ''being with others'' (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016) because Dasein co-exists with others, and its interpretation of experiences shape and are shaped by others' beliefs, norms, and values collectively. In Conroy's (2003) words, meanings are "not constructed as individual thinkers without relation to other people… Our understanding and interpretation of the world is co-constituted and synergetic" (p. 39). Dasein is 'thrown' into the pre-existing world (or faces situations) of pre-determined objects, cultures, languages, and peoples from which it is unable to detach themselves from it but makes subjective meanings based on their interpretation of the world. Thus, Dasein's being in the world is temporal, perspective, and dependent on situational factors, such as its existing relationships with others, culture, and language that manifest into interrelated modes of encounter. Dasein's understanding of its virtual *being* should be explored in order to understand how it operates when it faces cyberbullying and other types of online transgression. In doing so, I take into consideration participants' 'lived through' experiences accounting for the differences in their backgrounds and how these differences affect their subjective experiences and interpretations of cyberbullying. This approach to working with qualitative data helps me to explore online transgression and justice in the digital age and identify why cyberbullying could create social inequalities through online victimization.

3.1.2. *Phenomenology as methodology*

What a novice researcher can learn from phenomenology as a philosophical study/thinking is the possibility of applying the above-discussed concept to a qualitative inquiry. A phenomenological framework for inquiry aims at exploring participants' subjective experiences. Phenomenology as a framework for inquiry "turns on the experiences of individuals and how they have both subjective experiences of the phenomenon and objective experiences of

something in common with other people" (Cresswell & Poth, 2017, p. 76). It helps the researcher to understand the essence and meanings of a certain phenomenon in-depth (Flood, 2010; Ehrich, 1996). The epistemological assumption of phenomenology lies in the premise that every single self has a unique subjective experience that is linked to the social world (Flood, 2010). Dasein's modes of encounter with relation to others and the world shape the subjective experiences of participants. Dasein makes interpretations to make sense of its experiences and objects that it encounters. Noting the importance of subjective lived experiences, the researcher aims to interpret and report those experiences in an objective manner. To do so, researchers become active participants of their study while passively observing what participants do (Smith et al., 2019).

Phenomenologists engage in hermeneutic or interpretative processes to better understand the subjective narratives and feelings of participants. For instance, applying phenomenology in a clinical context, Finlay (2021) argues that reflections of subjective experiences in the most "uncontaminated by predetermined theories and explanations of behaviour" (Finlay, 2021, p. 118) is necessary for phenomenological inquiry to engage in a hermeneutic interpretative process of understanding one's subjective experience. Furthermore, Finlay argues that being in the world constitutes "interpretation of body, mind, self, and world, as opposed to suggesting dualism and polarities like individual-social, mind-body, or person-world" (p. 118). A subjective experience is grasped by dialogical conversations between the participant and the researcher where an interviewee reflects on their experiences. The researcher's role is to start and maintain a dialogue that is focused on "bodily (What is happening in your body just now?); cognitive ("What sense do you make of that?), affective ("What are you feeling?"); and relational ("What is it like to be sitting here telling me that story?)" to gain an understanding of the participant (p. 119). Thus, applying phenomenology as philosophical thinking to research framework for inquiry, the objective of a phenomenological framework for inquiry is an interpretation of the subjective self as central.

A researcher using a phenomenological inquiry develops a textual description of the experiences and structural description to convey the meanings and overall essence of participants. A textual description stands for the "what" (the phenomenon), whereas a structural description sheds light on "how" [respondents] experienced the phenomenon in terms of the conditions, situations, or context" (Cresswell & Poth, 2017, p. 78). Thus, both textual and structural descriptions convey information on a subjective experience, which collectively represent objective experiences of the phenomenon in common. As a result of textual and structural descriptions, researchers then present the "essence" of the phenomenon. Consequently, focusing on the participants' subjective lived experiences, this framework for inquiry aims to answer questions related to "what" respondents experience (in terms of feelings and consequences), "how" respondents cope with this experience (the "what"), and "why" this experience influences their presentation of self in online and offline environments (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Van Manen, 1990).

In the scope of this project, I bring together the conceptual framework of the presentation of self and a phenomenological inquiry. While the concept self-presentation suggests that one's self changes depending on group and social orders by producing social significance for the self, Heideggerian phenomenology broadly looks at how Dasein interprets its relationships with

others to make a meaningful sense of its social existence. The model of self-presentation in the virtual environment is regarded in a phenomenological sense. A phenomenological inquiry enables me to understand how participants form their virtual presentation of self and how their experience/engagement in cyberbullying shape their virtual presentation of self. To do this, for example, I examine the concepts key to the presentation of self, including 'given' and 'given off' expressions and impression management happening in virtual front and back stages of dramaturgy. Interview questions guided by the phenomenological framework make the application of Goffman's dramaturgical model of social interaction viable in the context of the virtual environment, where human interaction is mediated through digital communication technology. Goffman's dramaturgical model becomes viable in examining people's interactions, behaviour, and expressions in the virtual environment. Phenomenology, as a framework for inquiry, is in parallel with Goffman's model of self-representation which aims to learn about participants' lived experiences (for example, see Tadros et al., 2020; Rouleau et al., 2012; Van Manen, 2016; Qutoshi, 2018).

3.1.3. *Bracketing in phenomenological inquiry*

Combining the concepts of presentation of self and phenomenology, I apply Goffman's conceptual framework to understand how a virtual self is constituted and defined in a phenomenological sense (Hacking, 2014). This thesis uses a phenomenological framework for inquiry to examine the subjective experiences of self-representation of cyber-victimization and offending for its capacity to unfold the meanings of 'lived through' experiences of participants in relation to the phenomenon (i.e. having previous experiences related to online bullying, hatred, and harassment) in their present-at-hand and un-ready-to-hand modes. My goal is to understand participants' subjective perspectives, instead of giving explanations purely from my pre-existing knowledge in the readiness-to-hand and present-at-hand modes of my past (Wheeler, 2020; Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017; Flood, 2010). Concurrently, I focus on each participant's narratives that will add to my existing knowledge for making sense of the phenomenon of what it is like to get involved in online bullying. This will help to conceptualize online victimization in the context of cyberbullying and will enrich the current theoretical paradigm of Goffman's model of dramaturgy.

To step back from my readiness-to-hand and present-at-hand modes of being, I will use a bracketing technique that helps to set aside my prior experience with the phenomenon (Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Qutoshi, 2018; Smith et al., 2009). Bracketing connotes the researcher's self-reflexivity practice. Bracketing permits the researcher to acknowledge and be aware of their biased subjective interpretation that could be used to make sense of what was shared by the participant. To navigate through this process, Smith and colleagues (2009) propose to focus on the participant's experiences while setting aside the researcher's subjective preconceptions of a studied phenomenon. Finlay (2021) notes that a researcher's subjectivity cannot be completely set aside in the interpretative process, but to recognize where the researcher's subjective understanding takes place in the interpretative process. Bracketing helps to actively listen to, pay close attention, and be open towards the participant to see with "fresh eyes" (p. 122) the participant's world in a non-judgmental way. Researchers bracket their existing knowledge, cultural norms and values, and their feelings and needs, in an effort to be open towards the participant to trace or 'dig out' the true meaning of their experience.

Researchers can use the following questions to bracket their prior experiences for self-reflexivity and engage in an interpretative process (i.e. hermeneutics):

- What is lying beneath the 'face value'?
- What am I missing (explicitly or implicitly said)? What is so 'normal' to me that I can't see it?
- Am I listening/responding within the participant's world or from mine? Am I staying on the same page with the participant?
- What is the historical and temporal nature (e.g. their upbringing, where they come from, what school they attended, their personality traits, relationship with significant others before, at the time of, and after cyberbullying) of the experience to the participant?
- What is their body language telling me (facial expressions, the tone of voice)? (adopted from Conroy, 2003, p. 50, Table 4).

As a novice researcher, these questions for self-checking (or reflexivity) guided my interview sessions with participants and the analysis of textual and structural descriptions (Cresswell & Poth, 2017) that involved careful re-reading data, re-listening to interviews, interpreting, and writing. Bracketing was key to conducting a phenomenological inquiry and interpreting the lived experience of online bullying because it has helped me to be aware of my background, my childhood and upbringing, as well as socio-cultural differences from my participants.

3.1.4. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

While bracketing was key to conducting a phenomenological study, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was helpful to design my study within the chosen framework of inquiry and planning out my research study. Based on phenomenology as a philosophical stance to understand the essence of experiences, IPA attempts to capture people's unique experiences in certain situations. IPA has helped me to structure my thesis and connect different ideas and concepts in a systematic way. As the title suggests, it is an interpretative (or hermeneutic) approach for examining hidden meanings of respondents' lived experiences by questioning how they make sense of encounters given their pre-conceptions of prior emotions and exposures to culture, language, and relationships. Having a good idea of what phenomenology is and what the phenomenological framework of inquiry aims to achieve, in my interview questions, I focused on participants' experience of cyberbullying and virtual presentation of self. IPA helped me to plan and write interview questions and interview script that situates participants and myself as a researcher in equal positions.

In this sense, a researcher using IPA plays a double hermeneutic role because the "researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of x" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). Stepping into the world of their participants, the researcher assumes a role of a participant, too, because the phenomenological interviews involve both empathetic active *listening* and *questioning* one's lived experience. As Smith and colleagues (2009) put it, "[W]e [IPA researchers] are attempting to understand, both in the sense of 'trying to see what it is like for someone' and in the sense of 'analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something'" (p. 36).

Researchers conducting IPA are also interested in an idiographic approach analysis, whereby Dasein's experience is formed in relation to a phenomenon. In coherence with Heidegger's philosophy, participants can offer a personally unique perspective on their relation to a phenomenon. The idiographic approach forms Dasein's understanding of its existence in relation to some other entity. Similar to Horrigan-Kelly and colleagues (2016), Smith and colleagues (2009) note that experiences shared by participants during interviews reflect their relation to others' actions, beliefs, and norms, as well as one's culture and family dynamics. In the context of this thesis work, it is important to note that Dasein's behaviour in relation to others and encounters with others shape their understanding of a given situation (their engagement in online bullying), similar to Goffman's argument of the self being shaped by situational characteristics, such as the audiences and team players, manners and appearances the self is expected to display. This Being of Dasein in relation to the phenomenon (involved in online bullying) can constitute a unique idiographic experience that reveals how respondents present themselves and their identity in the context of online bullying, how they make sense of online bullying in their physical reality as well as cope with feelings and emotions arising from their online interactions.

Moreover, to analyze their data, a researcher conducting IPA uses a cyclical process to produce meaningfully coherent findings about one's lived experience. In the interpretative (or hermeneutic) process of doing IPA, reflexivity, too, is important. The researcher conducts a self-check or brackets their fore-conceptions. Bracketing helps researchers to reach a thorough and complete understanding of their researched subjects. Although the researcher brackets their preconceptions and focuses on the new object (or text), their fore-understanding helps to understand the new object under consideration (Finlay, 2021; Smith, 2007). Smith (2007) and colleagues (2009) offer an insightful note on the process of bracketing while conducting IPA. In Smith and colleagues (2009) words, ''fore- structure is always there, and it is in danger of presenting an obstacle to interpretation. In interpretation, priority should be given to the new object, rather than one's pre-conceptions'' (p. 25). Acknowledging this challenge, they state bracketing can also help a researcher to enrich their fore-conceptions better. Comparing and contrasting interview responses, a researcher further engages in an interactive cyclical process of interpretation. Building on several participants' narrative accounts is helpful and constructive to shape a holistic approach to studying subjective meaning-making. For example, researchers can ask themselves "Are there similar events talked about within the conversation or within other conversations with the same participant?" (Conroy, 2003, p. 50). Not only does this question help build on interpretations by multiple participants, but it also helps the researcher to do a self-check to effectively engage in IPA. The use of IPA, thus, illuminates the phenomenological framework for inquiry because it enables the researcher to think in non-linear and dynamic ways. IPA concurrently lets researchers design their study in a structured manner.

Scholars across different disciplines use phenomenology as a method of conducting qualitative research and IPA to interpret their data. Studying the effects of secondary prisonization, Tadros and colleagues (2020) examine the essence of lived experiences of sisters who have siblings serving sentences. Results derived from this phenomenological study lead to a policy and therapeutic recommendation directed toward improving mental health and support for siblings of incarcerated persons. The results also revealed the family members of incarcerated people indirectly experience the negative consequences of incarceration. Using interpretative

phenomenological analysis in their research design, Blagden and colleagues (2011) explore why convicted sex offenders in a European country deny their offences and how their self-identity changes over time (coming to accepting their guilt). Taking an idiographic approach of IPA through narrative accounts, the researchers found that situational, social, temporal, and contextual circumstances of sex offenders shape the way they see themselves, including stigma and shame. A recent study by Starr and Smith (2022) uses an interpretative phenomenological framework to better understand how art enthusiasts interpret artwork. Similar to Blagden and colleagues (2011), Starr and Smith found that art viewers used historical, social, and situational context to make sense of art. The use of IPA in the analysis shows how a phenomenological analysis is dependent on the context of participants' backgrounds and socio-cultural contexts that help to elicit thick descriptions in relation to participants' lives. All these studies use phenomenology and IPA as a guiding framework for designing qualitative research. Similar to these studies, I contribute to the field of the phenomenological framework for inquiry and enrich this method for inquiry by using IPA and participant-generated visual methods as a way for triangulating and accessing thick meanings of interviewees' lived experiences of cyberbullying.

3.2. Research design

3.2.1. Procedural ethics

This research project was approved by the University of Winnipeg Human Research Ethics Board (UHREB) on November 22, 2022. Obtaining the UHREB clearance was one of the challenges associated with commencing this project on time. The UHREB suggested narrowing down the focus of the study by reducing the possible participant pool because my research project was potentially "harmful" to participants, which pertains to the importance of relational ethics discussed in the next section. The reviewers' conceptualization of "harm", in my view, was based on subjective assumptions or "imaginations … of reviewers" (Haggerty, 2004). I had to also justify the use of a visual method as a data collection technique, as reviewers were interested in "quantifying" participant-generated visual materials. With the support of my supervisor and the Ethics Committee in the Criminal Justice Department in this difficult process, the study got cleared after nearly 3 months of extensive review.

To mitigate possible risks, such as triggering traumatic events and causing stress, I implemented several risk management strategies. Pre-screening questions (Appendix A) were used to form a general idea of participants' current state and level of comfort/readiness in becoming a participant in the study. I also avoided asking participants to describe their victimization experience by keeping interview questions general and open to interpretations. And I provided participants with a list of mental health support resources, which was included in the formal consent form.

Before starting the interview, I asked the pre-screening questions again and proceeded to obtain signed consent. I provided a description of the research project, its purpose, and the scope of the project. I also described the interview structure with its verbal and visual data collection methods. Interviewees were clear about their voluntary participation and their right to take pause, stop the interview, and withdraw from the study (including the writing phase). To protect anonymity, participants used pseudonyms. I addressed interviewees using their pseudonyms in the audio recording of the interview. At this stage, participants' identity was fully anonymized. To protect confidentiality, personal identifiers, such as the neighbourhood participants live in,

names, schools, and names of their friends, were anonymized. If the drawing or photos shared were uniquely identifiable or published on their social media profiles), they were blurred and cropped. I took these measures to protect anonymity and confidentiality. Participants signed and dated an explicit consent form. Before obtaining full consent to interview, record, use direct quotes, and use visual data (Appendix D), I asked if they had questions about the study and the consent procedure. After addressing questions or concerns, participants signed and dated the consent form using their pseudonyms. All participants consented to be interviewed, recorded, and their visual data be used in knowledge production. Thirteen out of 14 participants consented to be quoted directly. For their knowledge sharing, time, and commitment, each participant was offered $30. The same protocol was followed if interviews took place through Zoom, but due to the geographical distance, I signed on behalf of the participant and shared a scanned copy of the consent with them via email. In the middle of the interview and before the visual data collection part began, I made sure participants were not distressed. I also asked for their feedback at the end of our interviews. None (except for one) of the participants was distressed. The participant who was significantly distressed took a pause first, after which we continued our conversation. After this attempt, we stopped the interview since the participant's emotional state did not improve during the break. This participant was reminded of mental health resources. I followed up with the participant to check in again on the next day of the interview.

3.2.2. *Relational ethics*

At the same time as following the guidelines of procedural ethics, practicing relational ethics was an important aspect of this research. Relational ethics pertains to "day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 264). After conducting the first 3-4 interviews, I understood what 'everyday ethics' practice could mean in the context of my study. Practicing relational ethics meant being a good and careful listener. It also re-defined the concept of "harm" for me after talking to a participant who was highly distressed during the interview.

What do novice researchers do when a participant not only sheds tears but also starts sobbing? I had expected that some participants would shed a tear during the interview because interview questions may trigger negative emotions from their past. However, seeing a participant being under significant distress was stressful for me as a researcher to process my own emotions and keep myself under control. It required me to put my feelings aside and focus on making the participant feel less distressed. At the time, it meant taking pause before completely stopping the interview. At the time, it meant the participant was left aware of mental health support resources. It also meant checking with the participant who they are going to see after the interview, where they will be going, and whether they can get there safely.

Thinking about everyday ethics or ethics in practice now, I contemplate what 'harm' means in this context. Was it harmful to the participant to engage in the conversation about cyberbullying (even after the clearance of pre-screening questions)? Did the questions cause harm to the participant? Or, conversely, did the questions help the participant to seek further mental health support? If so, would this be considered as harm or benefit to the participant? What does this mean for me as a researcher? What is the significance of this research and could this be realistically helpful for the participant to seek help? These are the questions I seek

answers for as I re-play in my mind the interaction I had with the significantly distressed participant, and I seek answers to these questions throughout my thesis with the readers.

From the procedural ethics perspective, I believe that I caused harm to the participant and was able to follow the formal ethics protocol to prevent harming my participant further. Thinking in terms of relational ethics, I believe that it has helped my participant to understand themselves better and acknowledge that seeking formal support to cope with the consequence of online bullying was normal. This might have been the first step the participant took to start their healing journey. Although this interpretation may sound too sensitive or dramatic, this is the reality of what online victimization causes in the physical world, where the victims of cyberbullying feel lost and hopeless. The conventional "harm" that the participant experienced through their participation in this study might have benefitted them in the long term.

There were several times when participants did not show up for their interview ('ghosting' the researcher). Participants were either hesitant to share their experiences with me or they simply missed appointments and did not want to re-schedule. This presented a challenge in recruiting participants, but more importantly, it implied that prospective participants felt unready to speak up about their experiences because of the stigma and shame related to online victimization, including cyberbullying victimization (Faucher et al., 2014; Hay et al., 2010).

At other times, participants expressed their gratitude. They thanked me for listening to their experiences and asking questions about their vast range of experiences. Participants felt their voices heard and experiences acknowledged, which are achieved through the practice of relational ethics. Some participants asked me to define what cyberbullying stands for or whether I have ever been involved in cyberbullying myself. Participants were engaged in our interview conversations and they were treated with equal power and position (Jackson, 2021). Asking for their feedback and checking on them at the end of the interview was part of practicing relational ethics. During this time, participants indicated that they felt "*lighter*" (participant Jean It Jack) and "*easier*" (participant Raj). This form of appreciation relates to conducting ethical research whereby participation in the research project can be beneficial to the researched subjects.

3.2.3. Recruitment

I used two methods of recruitment to conduct this study: online and in-person recruitment. With the rise of social media use, I used an online recruitment strategy through social media. Researchers across all fields have increasingly used it to successfully recruit participants (Bragard et al., 2020; Benedict et al., 2019; Tadros et al., 2020). Social media recruitment had the advantage of reaching out to a wide range of potential participants in a short period of time (Bragard et al., 2020). This method of recruitment also extended the geographical boundary because it enabled participants from Ontario and Quebec to take part in my study. The University of Winnipeg Student Association (UWSA) and The University of Winnipeg's Instagram pages helped facilitate online recruitment. The UWSA featured my poster (Appendix B) on their Instagram twice and on their Twitter page, as well as through their online newsletter bulleting. The University of Winnipeg featured my recruitment poster on its Instagram page once. Participants contacted me via text message with their interest in taking part in this research project. After a participant reached out via text message, I scheduled a phone call with them to describe the study and ask the pre-screening questions. After this clearance, we scheduled an in-

person or online interview through Zoom. Online recruitment took place in December 2022 and January 2023.

I also did in-person on-campus recruitment in January 2023 at The University of Winnipeg. I placed posters on news bulletin boards across the campus. I did face-to-face recruitment and handed out my recruitment brochure (Appendix C) on campus spaces as well. The brochure contained my contact information and a QR code that students could use to send an email to me. I was able to directly recruit several participants, but I faced a challenge with participants missing interview appointments and deciding not to participate. I also had the opportunity to circulate the recruitment brochure in Criminal Justice (CJ) and Human Rights (HR) classes. In doing so, I did a 3-5 minute class presentation once to invite potential participants to share their experiences with me. The Faculty teaching CJ and HR classes shared my poster with their students online as well.

3.2.4. Sample

Within the context of the current qualitative phenomenological framework, I used purposive sampling deriving from 14 post-secondary students. Purposive sampling is "a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants" (Etikan et al., 2015, p. 2). With purposive sampling, the researcher recruits respondents who can and are voluntarily willing to provide the information through their knowledge, particular characteristics, or experience. This purposive sampling consisted of students with lived experiences of online victimization and perpetration at any point in their life, including early childhood, adolescent, and young adult years. This type of open criteria for sampling and recruitment helped participants to reflect on the overlapping experiences of bullying and victimization. The fluid manner of identifying participants addressed the possibility of the overlap between cyberbullying victims and perpetrators.

My sample consisted of 14 participants: eight interviewees identified as woman, four – as man, and two as 2SLGBTQI+. Five participants identified as Black, four – South East Asian, two – Asian, one – Métis, one – Indigenous, and one – white. The youngest participant I interviewed was 18 years old at the time of the interview, while the oldest was 40 years old. The average age of interviewees was 23 years. Around 43% of the sample were 21 years old at the time of the interview.

I conducted eight in-person interviews in the Centre for Access to Information and Justice (CAIJ) space. With the possibility of online interviews expanding the geographical scope of the study, I interviewed a participant residing in Ontario and another one in Quebec, with four additional participants living in Manitoba at the time of the interview. Coincidentally, the two participants from Ontario and Quebec reached out to me via email as they were referred by the participants interviewed earlier. Although purposive sampling was the main method to connect with my participants, snowball sampling appeared to be an appropriate sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is a non-random sampling strategy where researchers use personal networks to gain access to participants who are traditionally difficult to reach out to (i.e. hidden populations) (Browne, 2005).

Among the 14 participants interviewed, nine finished high school in Canada and five students shared their experiences formed outside of the country. I interviewed three students who attended high-school in Asia, one in the US, and one in the Caribbean region. I did not exclude the participants with international backgrounds because their willingness to be interviewed suggests that cyberbullying is a global phenomenon with no geographical boundaries. Interviewing participants with diverse backgrounds helped me to contextualize the impact of cultural norms on participants' response to cyberbullying and coping strategies (for example, Chapter 6 covers universal and culturally unique ways of responding to cyberbullying transgression).

3.2.5. An interview schedule

After choosing the framework for inquiry, making ethical considerations, as well as recruitment and sampling strategies, a qualitative researcher's next task is to plan out how they will collect data. As a novice researcher using a phenomenological framework for inquiry with IPA, I found using an interview schedule was helpful in preparation for my interviews (see Smith, et al., 2009). Van Manen (2016) provides guidelines to conducting a phenomenological interview. The researcher focuses on issues, such as what questions to ask and when and where to conduct interviews. To understand the lived experiences of participants, the interview questions pertaining to the verbal data consisted of semi-structured questions exploring 5 general categories: what it is like to be online; what cyberbullying is; effects of online bullying; current social media engagement; and needs and supports.

I used an interview schedule for this research. An interview schedule is a list of interview questions that serves two general purposes. First, an interview schedule helps to answer the research question through a set of different questions (for example, experiences relating to online self, coping mechanisms, and needs). Second, an interview schedule helps the researcher (especially a novice one) stay organized during the interview. With their vast experience of having cyberbullying and cyber-victimization interactions, participants were treated as experts in online communication. Despite my interview questions being semi-structured, an interview schedule played a key role in providing better structure for each interview. Participants presented a breadth of experiences on the topic, and thus, following an interview schedule helped us to stay on topic. The interview questions were structured in a logical order (with questions beginning with asking about participants' virtual self and moving onto the experiences of online bullying, coping strategies, available supports and needs, and ending with the task of generating visual materials).

3.2.6. Interview script

Smith and their research team (2009) suggest novice researchers using IPA to integrate descriptive, narrative, structural, contrasting, and evaluative questions into their interview script (p. 60). The following questions are examples from my interview script that present the use of IPA questions:

Descriptive: What do "private" and "public" mean to you when you are using social media or staying online?

Narrative: Think about a negative encounter online. Did you know the person who you stayed in conflict with? Generally, how does it feel like to be involved with this negative interaction? If I have not experienced it, what would you tell me about this?

Structural: Can you tell me at what point the regular online interaction escalated to something more serious?

Contrast: Did you feel as if you were someone else in the virtual space, compared to who you are in your physical reality?

Evaluative: How has the experience of cyberbullying changed your relationships with your close friends and loved ones?

Comparative: Can you tell me a little bit about how the negative interactions made you feel back then, and whether these feelings have changed over time?

In addition to these examples, the interview questions addressed the challenges of defining one's identity in online and physical environments and disparities in presenting one's self both online and offline, including the representation of self to the public (front stage) and the private (back stage). Questions pertaining to the influence of the public health order and lockdown exacerbating (or not) cyberbullying experiences were asked to understand the degree of perceived victimization or perpetration. The inclusion of questions that related to the lockdown and pandemic was helpful to compare pre- and post-pandemic experiences. Demographic questions, such as the respondents' age, race, and gender were helpful for gaining sample characteristics, but also helpful in identifying whether these demographic characteristics were associated with cyberbullying victimization and online misbehaviour, and whether these characteristics had an impact on the creation of a new cyber-self that was more vigilant or open for self-exploration (Turkle, 1995). Other questions explored how participants coped with harassment and bullying online (both the victim and the perpetrator), feelings of shame and guilt, and whether the participants' victimization had affected their intimates in terms of emotions, stress, and the intimates' representation of self. The latter question was important, as the current literature on victimization (in both physical and cyber forms) suggests that one's victimization affects loved ones, such as family members, close friends, and partners (Shapland & Hall, 2007). This type of victimization is part of the 'secondary cyber-victimization' literature (Van Der Meulen & Koops, 2011) and requires as much attention as the study of primary victimization.

3.2.7. *Conducting the interviews*

I conducted interviews from December 2022 to February 2023. I completed the interview transcription by the end of March using transcription software. All interviews were checked and edited after transcription was completed by the transcription software. Regardless of the type of interview method, interviews, on average, were 45 minutes long, excluding the time participants spent generating visual data. While the longest interview transcription was slightly over 1.5 hours, the shortest was slightly over 10 minutes. Drawing and sketching ranged from 15 – 30 additional minutes.

Each interview started with an introduction of myself as a graduate student and a researcher, followed by the participant's introduction, stating their pseudonym, how they found out about the study, and the reason why they wanted to participate. The introductions provided us with a way of establishing rapport while reminding participants of the reason why they chose to become a part of the study. I followed the sequence on my interview schedule, however,

sometimes the interview questions were asked in an unstructured manner because participants felt comfortable sharing about their experiences without being prompted. Bracketing my own experiences played a significant role during this stage of data collection. For example, I carefully observed participants' body language, voice, and tone and made notes about this change. In order to better understand participants' narratives, I often used prompt questions, such as "Can you tell me a bit more about X?" and "What do you mean about X?" I also used probe questions focused on the *how* and *why* of certain choices and decisions. Bracketing was also helpful to delve into participants' unique experiences. Bracketing helped me to situate and contextualize participants' narratives accounting for their socio-cultural background and the context where and how online bullying occurred. Bracketing was helpful to set aside my previous knowledge about cyberbullying and focus on the given participant's narrative during interviews.

I conducted in-person and online interviews. While the in-person interview is an effective way of collecting data, an equally effective and efficient method of collecting data involves Zoom platform for synchronous and live interaction. An individual, password-protected, single-use interview link was shared with each participant for anonymity and confidentiality. Online interview methods appeared to be as effective as in-person interviews. Online interviews are convenient, easily accessible, and save travel time and money (Gray, et al., 2020; Deakin & Wakefield, 2013; Hamilton & Bowers, 2006). Researchers who used online interviews previously indicated that interviewees felt comfortable sharing their lived experiences involving sensitive information and traumatic events (Madge, & O'Connor, 2004, as cited in Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Similarly, participants seemed to be feeling comfortable and open to answering questions. Talking on Zoom in their private spaces provided a possibility for the participants to share private and intimate information and build a positive rapport with me as a researcher (Brandy & Myers, 2019).

3.2.8. *Collecting visual data*

As much as phenomenological inquiry enables the researcher to expand on the subjective and commonly shared experiences of respondents, I believe that this framework for inquiry alone is insufficient to delve into second-layer or thick meanings that participants will have to share with me. Goffman's dramaturgical model of social life in the virtual environment and IPA guided the structure and content of interview questions that articulated the challenging lived experiences of participants, such as detrimental post-effects of cyberbullying and being unable to seek appropriate support (see Chapters 3 & 8). Therefore, I decided to use visual methods of data collection because it offers the possibility to unfold thick meanings and enable participants to self-reflect and make their experiences meaningful (for their benefit). The collection of visual data triangulates and strengthens my data as well (Pink, 2013).

For these reasons, the collection of visual data became part of the careful planning of IPA research. After completing the verbal portion of the interview, I invited participants to take part in the visual data collection portion of the study. I reminded participants of voluntariness, their rights to pause, stop, or withdraw before this portion of the interview began. Nine participants chose to complete either a drawing or share a picture with me (photo-elicitation technique). I offered to take a break or schedule a separate interview timeslot for collecting visual data, but participants were comfortable with completing this part of the interview right after finishing the

verbal data collection. Before delving into the benefits of visual methods, I explain in greater detail the two different visual techniques I used to collect data.

The photo-elicitation technique is used to evoke distinct memories and emotions in participants (Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2012; Pain, 2012). This technique decenters the authority of the researcher and invites participants to stay engaged with the interview topic by presenting their inner selves and emotions on an in-depth level beyond what a traditional interview can reveal (Harper, 2002). Although respondent-generated pictures do not represent empirical truths or 'reality' (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), the visuals can provide a unique way for the participants to communicate their experiences related to sensitive topics. The photo-elicitation technique helps me to analyze interview data by making strong inferences to the emotions of participants, particularly surrounding questions related to the consequences of online bullying and victimization. This visual technique also provided a venue for participants to engage in an interesting interview task (for example, sharing pictures with me), contributing to the quality of data analysis. The use of visual data offers in-depth analysis or second layer meanings, which delves into the participants' inner and social worlds in a non-intrusive way (Bagnoli, 2009). Glegg (2018) suggests that this visual method accompanying the qualitative interview enables communication, facilitates the relationship between the participant and the researcher, as well strengthens the quality of data generated by participants.

Besides photo-elicitation, drawing is an alternative practice to verbal communication and can unfold 'thicker' meanings that are difficult to express (Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011; Campbell et al., 2010; Brown, 2001). Research studies using participant-generated drawings and cartoons indicate that drawings can reveal taboos and associated with taboos stigma while combining socio-cultural, educational, scientific, and environmental knowledge to convey meanings that are not verbally expressible (Mutonyi & Kendrik, 2011; Campbell et al., 2010). Participant-generated drawings also create powerful visual content for policy-makers as a way of direct presentation of their thoughts and reflections on their past (Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011). The drawing technique benefitted the participants of the project because it opened up venues for them to self-reflect and understand their internal feelings (that are difficult to express in words).

My participants were offered to share a picture with me that represented what cyberbullying is to them. With the drawing technique, they were asked to draw a cartoon or a picture of someone having the same experience as theirs. Through the use of these visual techniques, participants conveyed emotions that they associate with cyberbullying. After they shared a picture or drew a visual presentation, I probed participants to explain their visual representations. I asked probing questions, such as what the visual illustrations presented, why they appeared meaningful for them, what emotions they felt while drawing, and how the drawings made them feel after. Furthermore, I asked what was needed for the main character appearing on the visuals and what kinds of support were available for them. Participants who shared pictures with me presented their feelings of being a target of online bullying, the way they coped with their victimization, as well as the types of support needed for them.

The use of these visual techniques offered emotionally-rich data that were otherwise unvocalized by participants. Several participants presented their drawings in a storytelling form (Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011), which focused on the consequences of online bullying and

victimization. This unpacked secondary meanings that were not previously vocalized during the verbal part of the interview. With the help of the drawing technique, moreover, a participant reflected on what it is like *to be* or *exist online* and *being engaged in* cyberbullying, which offered a rich narrative experience in addition to verbal interview data (see Chapter 4). It was a double meaning-making and double hermeneutic process for me as a novice researcher (Smith et al., 2019). Other participants felt empowered talking about their experiences, emotions, and coping strategies. They also felt that their experiences and feelings were acknowledged (rather than being ignored), which gave participants the chance to reflect on their experiences and interpret the meaning of their 'lived through online bullying' experience. As Copes and colleagues (2018) suggest, visual techniques are valuable for their ability to help participants to reflect on and share their personal narratives, leading to a therapeutic benefit for participants. The visual techniques enabled participants to speak up about their hidden feelings and thoughts and made them feel heard by an active listener (Clark, 2010). In this way, visual data unpacked second-layer meanings and enriched the quality of data because they evoked responses that were not shared verbally.

3.2.9.   *Data analysis*

I started the analysis of textual and visual data immediately after I finished transcribing all interviews. The data analysis phase was completed in April and May 2023. Doing data analysis meant finding answers to the questions on what constitutes 'good enough' data analysis *and* quality writing. Smith (2004) raises these key questions while learning about one's lived experience through IPA. Smith and colleagues (2009) suggest using a 6-step analysis for interpreting results when conducting an IPA study. These are reading and re-reading transcripts; initial noting; developing emergent themes; searching for connections across themes; moving to the next interview; and looking for patterns across cases or interviews. In doing an interpretative phenomenological analysis, the first three steps played a central role for me to analyze interviews.

The first step of data analysis involves reading and re-reading the interview data. At the time of re-reading interview scripts, interviews were re-listened as well. During this initial step, I took each interview as a separate narrative story with a unique experience. By re-listening to audio recordings at this stage, I could hear again and note how participants' voices, tones, and speed of speech changed when I asked certain types of questions. This refreshed my memory by bringing me back to the interview session. I made comments on the printed interview scripts while identifying how I could use or apply Goffman's concept of the presentation of self. Different life stories, different backgrounds, cultural contexts, and levels of engagement in online bullying explicitly emerged at this preliminary step of the analysis.

Each interview was treated as a separate data set and independent of the knowledge gained from the previous interview (Smith, 2007; Conroy, 2003; Finlay, 2021; Blagden et al., 2011; Starr & Smith, 2022). By treating each interview as a separate unit, I sought to improve the credibility of my data analysis and bracket my experiences as well as the previously gained knowledge through interviews. The participant-generated data were also treated in the same way. Some visual data added more nuance to the verbal data (for example, see Figure 5 and the description of the visual adding in-depth description to the verbal data). Some participants took the opportunity to add new insights and explain their understanding of the virtual world and their

experience of cyberbullying (for example, see Figure 1 for more details). I undertook IPA to interpret participants' verbal and visual narratives.

Based on the comments during Step 1, I tried to understand why these experiences mattered and counted as important for participants. In a sense, by re-reading interview portions and the comments I made in Step 1, I was trying to make sense of the participant, who also was trying to make sense of their experience (an example of a double-hermeneutic process of data analysis). With this process, I was able to identify some key issues using descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments and gain a holistic picture of participants' narratives. A descriptive comment looked closely at what words an interviewee used to describe cyberbullying. They focused on words and expressions that connected with emotions, harming, consequences, targeting, and the fact that traditional bullying is being transferred online.

As it has been noted in Step 1, linguistic comments focused on the interviewee's change of tone and voice, talking speed, as well as long pauses they took right after being asked a particular question. Taking a long pause or speaking fast conveyed emotions that, as a researcher, made me pay close attention to interpreting and decoding this nuance (Conroy, 2003). For example, one of the participants took a long pause when asked about the availability of support. In this context, the participant previously disclosed that cyber- and traditional bullying made them feel lonely. When asked about support, the participant took a long pause before saying that support is not easily accessible or available because talking to other people about their experiences online made them feel worse (see Chapter 5 for more details). So, choosing to be alone and feeling lonely was the only option the participant was left with. I believe that taking a long pause reflected the participant's thought process as it made the interviewee acknowledge, then share their internal feeling about loneliness and the lack of support. Linguistic commenting played a large role in interpreting and understanding participants' lived experiences. Conceptual comments related to abstract ideas like what are the consequences of being a target of online bullying, how frustrating it is to be targeted online, as well as applying Goffman's concept in different contexts with respect to coping strategies and virtual presentation of self. This step also included the analysis of emotionally-rich visual data, which helped me to do an in-depth analysis to unpack and present second-layer meanings (Boden et al., 2019; Smith, 2004; Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011). Conceptual comments helped me to identify themes on needs, online behaviour, and the fact that cyberbullying has become a 'normal' or everyday experience.

The third step involved the process of developing different themes, followed by putting themes together (the 4th step of analysis). After making conceptual, linguistic, and descriptive commenting, I color-coded themes identifying characteristics of online bullying and how one identifies as a bully or bullied, consequences of online bullying, virtual presentation of self on the front stage and back stage, virtual impression management, as well as needs and supports. At this stage of data analysis, the sub-themes and the core themes were identified in each interview. The 5th step repeated steps 1-3. Here, I analyzed each interview and its corresponding visual data. At this stage, I also compared and contrasted participants' narratives. The most commonly shared experiences (or sub-themes) were thematically organized into a core theme. Thus, after identifying, comparing and contrasting all sub-themes, I was able to identify core themes and re-organize the color-coded smaller sub-themes into four general findings (step 6): understanding cyberbullying and participant identity; situating cyberbullying in the context of online

victimization; the presentation of virtual self and coping with the consequences of online victimization; and exploring cyber-bullies' virtual presentation of self. I present the four findings in the next four chapters. IPA analysis is a useful data analysis strategy that could be used to understand how one 'performs' self-images and 'manages' their front and back stages of performance, similar to Simpson and colleagues (2022).

3.3. Conclusion

This chapter details my framework for inquiry and its importance in answering my research questions. With the understanding of phenomenology as a philosophical thought and as a methodological approach, this chapter raises the importance of examining human experience not only from a phenomenological stance (as Heidegger suggests), but also from a sociological standpoint. This approach offers the readers a new way of interpreting Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model and its viability in the virtual setting. With a careful research design, including recruitment, sampling, data collection, and IPA strategies in an ethical way, I next examine cyberbullying and participant subjective identity, the virtual presentation of self and coping strategies that are largely dependent on the participant's subjective identity, characteristics of cyberbullying victimization and online victimization, as well as how and why participants engage in cyberbullying transgression.

4. Understanding cyberbullying and participant identity

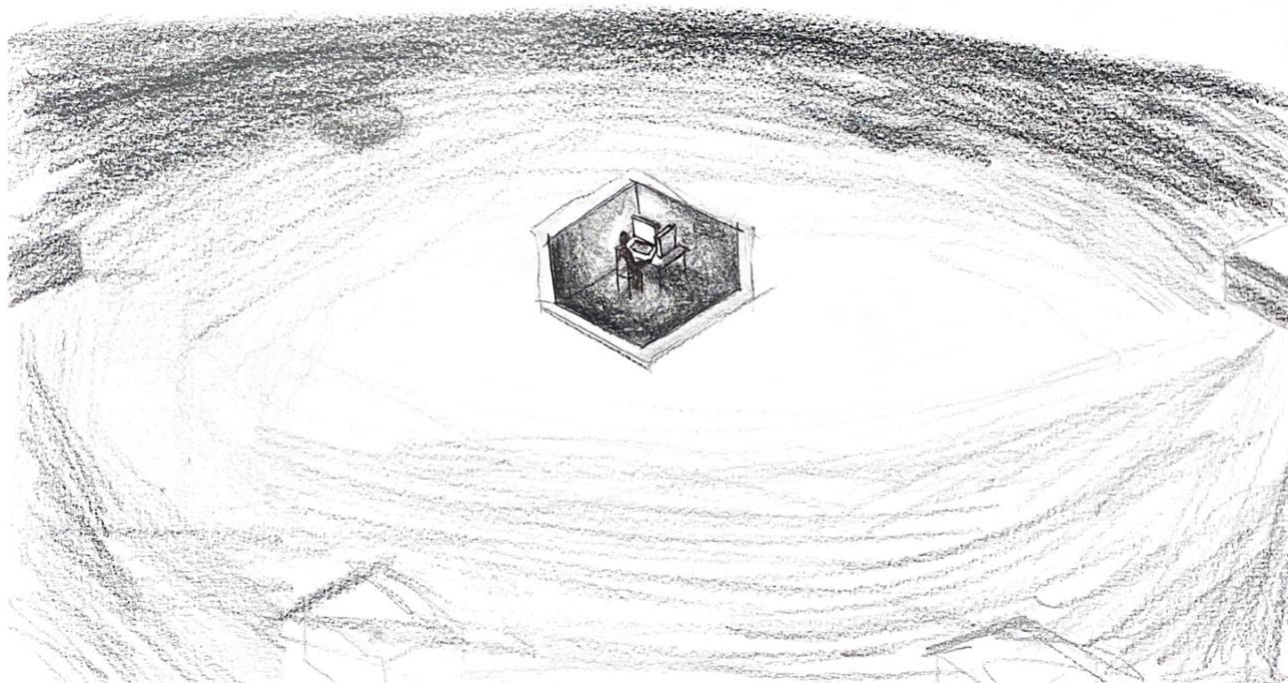### 4.1. Being in cyberspace and experiencing online bullying

Figure 1: Bob Bobski's representation of cyberbullying

Bilguundari: *Can you describe it [Figure 1] for me?*

Bob Bobski: *It's in a sense that, like the real world is so far apart that you can't go anywhere to actually interact with other people. So you are in near your space and in the computer, in the in the cyberspace, and that becomes your interactive world… I guess it's like in mindspace of the person who is in the cyberspace. There's no need to get colors. It's just, like, describing how it might be.*

[continues his description]

And if cyber bullying happens… you become, like, kind of trapped and anxious and your world is getting unsafe. But I mean, all you have to do is, like, go out and like, interact with people. But the big downside of the Internet is [that] it makes it so inconvenient to go out and interact with people. So you're like in this like, black box forever. And then if cyberbullying happens, that black box is contaminated with like negative energy and like, that world becomes kind of. Anxiety inducing and terrible. It's not only the cyber bullying but the bullied. And at the same time, the real world is so far apart. (Bob Bobski)

Bob Bobski's description of cyberspace through the visual technique of drawing/sketching introduces the readers to the concept of cyberspace and interaction therein (Mutonyi & Kendrik, 2011; Campbell et al., 2010). Central to a phenomenological framework for inquiry is one's lived experience through the phenomenon (of cyberbullying). With this powerful participant-generated visual data, at the time of the interview with Bob, I could "delve into" his unconscious introspective self – one's subjective understanding of the self that is shaped by subjective experiences and feelings (Saner & Geelen, 2013).

In this chapter, I examine participants' subjective understanding of the self and their identity as a victim or victimizer of cyberbullying. I demonstrate how participants choose to describe online bullying from their subjective lived experiences of online bullying (Hayward, 2012). This chapter proposes that depending on the context of cyberbullying, participants choose to identify as both the bullied and the bully, since there is no binary identity of perpetrator and victim (Kowalski et al., 2013; Notar et al. 2013; Li, 2007; Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Depending on the chosen identity, participants also choose their manners of the virtual self-presentation (see Abidin, 2019, for categories). Because there is no sole identity of a victim, victimizer, and perpetrator, these identities and the corresponding to these identities virtual selves can be assumed all at the same time. The chapter concludes by contextualizing the effects of the global pandemic lockdowns on cyberbullying events and its implications on participant identities and their virtual presentation of self.

The description of the virtual world visualized by Bob Bobski unveils the concept of *being* or *existing* in virtual reality. Bob Bobski's sketch illustrates Dasein (or social self) in cyberspace, living in cyberspace, living *in* or *with* the computer that is represented as a black box, and being unconscious about one's *"mindspace [being] trapped"* in the black box. My participant places an emphasis on the sketch being in black and white. Through this visual expression of the absence of different colors, the readers get a sense that Bob's cyber-world might be a dull and unexciting space where he feels *"trapped"* inside. The first paragraph quoted

from the interview describes what it is like to *exist* in cyberspace and the value Bob puts in the idea of *existing* online as part of his everyday practice. With this description, Bob unpacks the pre-theoretical and non-normative meaning of *being* and *existing* in cyberspace (Wheeler, 2020; Smith et al., 2009; Conroy, 2003; Tracy & Redden, 2016). Bob gives a description of the self that has social relations within the vast the digital space with no geographical boundaries. The pre-theoretical and non-normative subjective experience of *being* and *existing* in cyberspace where there are no signs of cyberbullying is equivalent to Bob's physical presentation of the self and existence in the physical world. Online interactions or communications with others in virtual reality shape Bob's online *being*-ness and *existence.* Bob's subjective understanding of being in the digital world and interacting in cyberspace shapes his views about his existence in the digital world. In other words, the participant focuses on what it is like to be online and assume an online self-identity that eventually becomes the participant's interactive cyberworld where he is able to communicate with others who also assume virtual selves.

The second paragraph drawn from the interview excerpt is where Bob introduces me (the interviewer) to the idea of cyberbullying occurring in cyberspace. In Bob's words, cyberbullying *"contaminates"* his interactive space – the space where he assumes an online *being* and digital self (Thompson & Cupples, 2008; Robinson, 2007). Bob previously shared that this cyberspace and the interactions within the cyberspace are more valuable to Bob than any other non-virtual physical interaction. Thus, when this space is *"contaminated"* by cyberbullying, it destroys Bob's most valuable and safest place to be, despite it being unexciting and colorless. Bob's subliminal cyberspace gives him a feeling of being *"trapped"*. With the introduction of cyberbullying, the participant's virtual interactive inner world becomes a place of *"anxiety.* This is the current reality Bob Bobski – a participant who identifies as a 21-year-old male, who grew up outside of Canada – lives in. With the powerful visual representation of his introspective virtual self, Bob shared with me how what roles the Internet and digital age played in his adolescent years and how access to the Internet enabled him to assume different identities and self-presentations, including the identity of an online bullied and bully.

4.2. Characteristics of online bullying

Cyberbullying is a broad phenomenon with many different definitions (Cesaroni et al., 2012; Kofoed & Staksrud, 2019). Adding another perspective to this body of knowledge, through my thesis, I demonstrate the relationship between cyber-victimization and cyber-bullying. Taking up the proposals of Smith (2019), Hayward (2012), and Carlson and Frazer (2021) to explore cyberbullying as a phenomenon from a qualitative approach, I argue that the flexibility participants assume in terms of their identity as a bully or victim helps us understand how cyberbullying is defined and characterized from a phenomenological lens.

After completing the data collection, I noticed that the definition of cyberbullying varied from one participant to another. Participants referred to several characteristics of cyberbullying (that overlapped with the existing literature) providing insights into how they defined cyberbullying. The participants I interviewed focused on characteristics, such as the nature and seriousness of online conflict, anonymity, targeting, and intent behind online bullying. Depending on the context of their lived experiences, their identities changed assuming the roles of bully or bullied. For most of my participants, the role of a bully or bullied was used concurrently, and depending on the role / identity they assumed in their narrative, their virtual

presentation of self has changed accordingly. Below I demonstrate my findings with a discussion of the characteristics of cyberbullying.

4.2.1. *The severity of online bullying*

When asked to describe what cyberbullying is, the participants interviewed focused on the events occurring in their past. After conducting the first few interviews, I quickly noticed one factor that shaped the definition of cyberbullying related to the level of severity of negative experiences. For example, reflecting on their experiences being similar to online 'drama' or emotional events resulting in distress (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009; Ranney et al., 2019), Marciline describes cyberbullying as:

> *One way cyberbullying, depending on what it is, just ends up becoming like the dumbest internet drama. Unless something like actually life impacting, like someone's sharing your nudes or something online that I can understand how that would be, like, so much worse.*

In this description, Marciline compares their online conflicts with a severe form of technologically-facilitated crimes, such as distributing photos and images without one's consent. Marciline contextualizes their experience of online *"drama"* to define what cyberbullying is from their perspective. In doing so, they share a story of an online friend with whom they had no prior face-to-face interaction. After a few months of virtual and online friendship, Marciline's friend impersonated their social media account. According to Marciline, their experience is interpreted as a form of cyberbullying, just like sharing intimate images would count as a form of cyberbullying. However, in Marciline's subjective experience, the impersonation of one's online profile page is as not as harmful as it is for someone else, whose pictures are distributed without their consent. For this participant, the severity of the negative experience is minimal in the example they provide on online impersonation. In this example, Marciline counts their experience as *"online drama"*, which is a lite form of cyberbullying. Although the online drama is a light form of cyberbullying, sharing this example, the participant does not see themselves as a cyber-victim. This identity of the self is different than what another participant shares below.

Marciline's experience of impersonation is in contrast with what Raj experienced. Raj experienced a severe form of cyberbullying where an anonymous perpetrator hacked his social media account, then impersonated Raj to share inappropriate pictures with Raj's friends in his name using his social media account. This experience shaped how Raj defined cyberbullying. The level of severity of this online event informs his identity as a cyber-bullied victim. Although what Marciline and Raj had experienced is commonly known as 'impersonation', the level of severity they place in this online impersonation and the subjective experience describing their experience help them characterize what cyberbullying is. While for Marciline impersonation is seen as *"online drama",* for Raj, the same experience of impersonation is counted as a serious case of cyberbullying. My participants' subjective views of cyberbullying echo Ranney and colleagues' (2019) findings, where cyberbullying was described to be a more serious phenomenon than cyber or online drama. The severity of online transgression makes participants construct their experience of cyberbullying or cyber (or online) drama. Raj experienced a more severe form of impersonation, compared to what Marciline experienced, which the participant

calls *"online drama."* For Raj, his experience of impersonation counts as cyberbullying transgression.

4.2.2. *Anonymity afforded by cyberbullying*

In addition to making the distinction between cyberbullying and cyber drama, participants (regardless of age, gender, and nationality) placed a strong emphasis on another characteristic of cyberbullying – anonymity. When asked about technology's role in facilitating cyberbullying, participants expressed their concern about the nexus between technologically-facilitated communication and the bully's behaviour. The definition of cyberbullying was heavily influenced by technology's ability to offer anonymity and the bully's ability to use anonymity for their benefit. The exiting literature on online bullying repeatedly stress importance on online affordability – easy access to the Internet, availability of the Internet, and anonymity that the Internet offers – as a characteristic of any social media platform (Hurley, 2019) where it opens up numerous possibilities for youth and adolescents to engage in online transgression (Suler, 2004; Goldsmith & Wall, 2022), including cyberbullying and cyber-hate (Udris, 2014; Wachs et al., 2019; Wachs & Wright, 2018). Treating affordability and anonymity as central to the definition of cyberbullying, Lindy condemns technology for granting access that allows bullies to victimize others. In the same vein, Marciline and Raj believe that anonymity online and the lack of consequences coupled with *"people's true evil nature"* (Raj) spur cyberbullying. Human nature, avoidance of responsibility, and anonymity granted online, thus, become another set of characteristics of cyberbullying that helps to define and understand more about the phenomenon through lived experiences.

Aside from the affordability of social media, when communication is facilitated through technology, those who engage in cyberbullying display an online disinhibition effect in virtual space (Suler, 2004). Online disinhibition can take benign (one's "true self" is revealed through sharing hidden emotions and feelings) and toxic (one's "true self" is revealed by visiting illegal places or engaging in illicit activities) forms. Since anonymity gives people the opportunity to express themselves freely in the virtual space, participants repeatedly noted that anonymity helps bullies to assume a toxic disinhibition form. For example, anonymous accounts created by victimizers allow them to shield themselves from taking any responsibility for their actions and misconduct. Anonymity or invisibility (concealment of identity) plays a large role in online transgressions that are constituted as cyberbullying (Suler, 2004) because online bullies present their *"unfiltered selves"* (Fayi). Namely, my participants who identify as both the bully and the bullied contend that the anonymous interaction helps them avoid responsibility and assume the toxic form of disinhibition in an online environment where cyberbullying offending takes place. Anonymity and responsibility avoidance encourage online threats or transgression among interviewees that are exacerbated by rude language while reducing empathy and self-control (Goldsmith & Wall, 2022; Tokunaga, 2010; Kilvington, 2021; Yar, 2012).

While it is argued that "true" selves are easier to be revealed in cyberspace, existing research also suggests that traditional physical bullying is correlated with the rates of online bullying (Kowalski et al., 2012). In fact, the participants I interviewed indicated that they experienced traditional bullying in schools, then cyberbullying as early as grades 5 and 6 in Manitoba (also see Salmon et al., 2018) and elsewhere outside Canada. Participants agreed that with the rise of social media, in-person bullying has transferred from physical reality to virtual

reality. Although traditional and cyber-bullying are similar in some sense (Bonanno and Hymel, 2013), cyber and traditional physical forms of bullying left different impressions or sets of experiences on my participants, including the differences in content used to ridicule the targets of bullying, the rate these contents shared with others, and the avoidance of responsibility that online communication offers. For example, Marciline characterizes cyberbullying as *"nothing new. It's just changed platforms. It's become a little more nasty because it's easier to be a lot meaner online than you would in-person because there's no threat."*

4.2.3. The content of cyberbullying and targeting

The contents of cyberbullying have become "meaner" over time, according to my participant. Again, when the bullies' identity is anonymized, they avoid taking responsibility for their actions online. The interview excerpt above is shared by a participant who was bullied both traditionally and online. Their experience of traditional bullying illuminates what it is like to be cyber-bullied, with cyberbullying being another version of traditional bullying, but with content that is more offensive and serious. The level of seriousness shapes Marciline's experience of online bullying, whereby they believe that online bullying has become more serious and offensive compared to traditional physical bullying.

Moreover, my participants collectively characterized online bullying by its ability to target a group of people or a single individual. Interviewees stated that cyber-bullies have the purpose of engaging in online transgression and presenting a self that appears more powerful online than who they are in their physical reality. The presentation of self and the value of power will be discussed in Chapter 7, but for the purposes of this chapter, it is important to note that anonymity enables cyber-bullies to assume a self that portrays an image of a powerful individual who is able to target anybody in the digital world, regardless of their power and status in physical reality. When asked to describe what cyberbullying presents, Jean it Jack quoted below states the purpose for the bullies is to engage in cyberbullying. Jean It Jack identifies the purpose of cyberbullying by stating that it is used "to take someone down":

For me, it's just. Yeah, just that constant targeting and, you know, that mission, I guess, to take someone down. From behind the screen. (Jean It Jack)

Talking about the intention of online bullying, Jean It Jack shared with me a picture that reminded them about bullying happening on a popular online discussion platform Reddit (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Jean It Jack's representation of cyberbullying

Bilguundari: *And what is your general relation to this picture?*

Jean It Jack: *You know, I kind of feel [of what] I've had it on Reddit. It's almost like whether you're like private or public, as long as you make a post, like so many people can interact with it. And I've had that. I was doing what I was asked. I asked a question on the app and I have like a of people look at it or hostile or like, you know, like lashing out or stuff. It, it was like, I just asked a question. You have like all these people are coming at me, they don't know the full story or they don't know everything that happened. So it's like, you know, what's going on?*

The participant shares an example from their past when they were targeted publicly on Reddit for asking a question in the online discussion community. Explaining this picture further, they say that the cursors and hands point at the victim, making them feel sad and a target of bullying in the Reddit online community. Previous research on social media and the facilitation of public shaming and bullying on social media focus on Reddit as a platform being used to spread and proliferate misogynistic and racist ideologies (Lumsden, 2019; Topinka, 2018). Jean It Jack was not targeted on this platform in defense of any ideologies, rather they were targeted and bullied by strangers on a Reddit online community for posing a question that was not related to any far-right and far-left political ideologies or agendas. Jean It Jack's online interaction through Reddit indicates how social media platforms can be used to target strangers. Studying the participant's visual presentation in-depth, I recognize that in contrast to Bob Bobski's presentation of cyberbullying, Jean It Jack presents their visual data in colorful detail. The participant voiced that the red background on the picture signifies anger and madness, which the cyber-bullied participants often identify as a consequence of being a target of online bullying (Dignan, 2005; Tsitsika et al., 2015; Landoll et al., 2015; Holfeld & Mishna, 2019). Through this visual representation, the viewers and readers get a sense that digital technology facilitates online bullying that occurs in a public space. Technology gives people in an online community the ability to target anyone resulting in the target's anger and distress.

While this is what Jean It Jack feels about cyberbullying, Fayi offers her insights by emphasizing the role of online platforms in facilitating negative engagement with broader outreach to a community that is beyond her physical boundaries. In the interview excerpt below, the reachability and fast-spreading characteristic of cyberbullying is emphasized by the number of people who get access to online content:

It feels, you know, full forced to me to read something over and over again. It's almost worse than having someone say something mean to you in person. You know, once someone says something mean to you in person and like one another person is around and someone says something online and you know, 20 people can see it before you even notice. And those 20 people show other 20 people and it just grows.

Reaching a broader audience online is a characteristic of cyberbullying that differentiates cyberbullying from traditional bullying. In addition to reaching a broader audience, similar to Marciline describing cyberbullying as being *"meaner"* than traditional bullying, Fayi describes her experience as being "*worse*" than traditional bullying. Fayi's interpretation of cyberbullying

is characterized the number of bystanders who have access to offensive contents and endorse cyberbullying (Benzmiller, 2013).

With these experiences of online victimization (being targets of bullying by strangers, being targets of offensive content, and having broad audience), some participants chose to *"fight back"* (Michele) or retaliate. This behaviour makes them become an online bully as well. In this sense, those who identify as victims also identify as perpetrators, showing there is no pure distinction between the bullies and the bullied in the context of cyberbullying. There is no sole or binary identity of a victim-perpetrator as previously noted (Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Rollins, 2015; Johanis et al. 2020). For this reason, most participants I interviewed identified as a bully and bullied, rather than identifying as purely being a victim (the bullied) or the perpetrator (the bully). The distinction between identifying a bully or a bullied depends on the situation and the context of online conflicts. Depending on the context of their online communication, they assume these two roles concurrently.

The characteristics of online bullying, the context of online bullying, and the way of *being / existing* in cyberspace outlined above shape my participants' choices of identifying as a bullied or a bully. My conversations with participants on the virtual presentation of self varied by the context of participants' chosen identities. It was evident that the identity of a participant shaped the manner and strategies that participants used to present their online selves virtually. The virtual presentation of self is examined later in Chapters 6 & 7 from the cyber-bully and cyber-bullied perspectives, where one participant could assume both identities concurrently and use contrasting virtual self-presentation online. Before moving on to exploring these concepts and practices, the context of the global lockdown during the pandemic further illuminates participants' recent experiences with online bullying and their subjective understanding of cyberbullying. The pandemic closure plays an important role for contextualizing the social effects of cyberbullying as I had expected the COVID outbreak would push the cyber-bullies and cyber-bullied towards an increased engagement in online transgression and victimization. The context of the global lockdown offers an opportunity for readers and myself (as a researcher) to interpret the dynamics of cyberbullying when unanticipated events happen in our lives and virtual reality becomes the only way we interact with others and maintain our social relationships with others, similar to Bob Bobski's description of his interactive cyberspace and the value he places in it.

4.3. Contextualizing cyberbullying within the global COVID-19 pandemic

This project took place during the post-pandemic period (interviews conducted from December 2022 to February 2023), when on-campus and in-person activities throughout the campus were encouraged among students. With this post-pandemic outlook, participants were able to reflect on their recent experiences of cyberbullying and the pandemic lockdown as well. As a researcher, I assumed that people's screen times drastically increased at the peak of lockdowns. During the interviews, I noticed that not all participants increased their online presence drastically. Some participants reduced their digital footprint and used the lockdown period for self-improvement. However, other participants, like Jean It Jack, contextualize their experience within the large-scale events and movements seeking justice, which resulted in a spike of online disagreements, and even online hate (Cohen-Almagor, 2018, 2022; Madden & Alt, 2021). For example, aligning with the characteristics of online bullying, Jean It Jack

dedicated several hours to actively participating and defending social justice causes. Jean it Jack view themself as a *"social media and social justice warrior"* – a term used by Jean It Jack to denote the formation of online communities that engaged in the following activities at the peak of the pandemic:

> *George Floyd and how… he died and then everyone took it upon themselves to be like social media, social justice warriors. And then they decided to fight for the difference. You know, #BlackLivesMatter, #StopAsianHate, all this other stuff. Every Child Matters, all this stuff… And I feel like with that the different sides came into play. So there's like the one side that's like against it and I saw one side those for it, like for those causes. And so like, you know, you spend hours of your day like defending these people. You're like this was actually like racially motivated while all this other stuff. And then you'd have people like either like see your comment and like respond and like go into the statistics only to just point of like random stuff or they like get like really angry and then they start like threatening you like DM-ing you, IP address. But like sending you threats, like for you to hurt yourself, like kill yourself and all of that stuff so it's like some people like take it too far. I guess it's like politics that makes people take it too far. But yeah, I mean, there are some people who take it really seriously.* (Jean It Jack)

The social justice warriors, by their engagement in a social justice cause, face situations where online clashes between different groups with different ideologies spark online conflicts. These conflicts result in losing personal information, such as IP address and home address (commonly known as doxing). This is a direct effect of online conflict, online bullying, and online victimization. Moreover, this participant believes that when people force their opinions on others, without negotiations and acceptance of different points of view, the online conflict transfers to online hate with serious consequences, such as leaking one's address and being disrespectful to others. Online hate, as this participant deems, arises from online conflicts (Cohen-Almagor, 2018). Despite the negative consequences faced by social justice warriors, Jean It Jack had the chance to express themselves in digital space and virtual reality (Pande, 2018; Madden & Alt, 2021). The identity and online expressions of social media and social justice warriors not only drags participants into online conflicts by making them assume cyber-bullies and cyber-victims' identities, but also facilitates the possibility to advocate for digital justice through the expression of their ideas openly in online communities. Through online communication, advocacy-based *"social justice warriors"* (as Jean It Jacks puts it) open up online spaces for seeking justice. Advocacy-based *"social justice warriors"* create online environments to participate in social digital participation in social issues (Stratton et al., 2017).

At the same time, this behaviour assumed online relating to the free expression of ideas and advocacy-based digital engagement in social issues (as we have seen in the example of social justice online warriors) connects with Heidegger's concept of existence and being in a phenomenological way (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009; Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Van Manen, 2016; Van Manen 1990). In a phenomenological sense, people are "thrown" into the pre-existing world (physical reality) in-relation-to them, from which an individual self is unable to detach itself (Wheeler, 2020; Conroy, 2003). The pre-existing world that people are "thrown" into and their existence "in relation to others" in this pre-existing world shape people's actions and behaviours in physical reality (Conroy, 2003).

IPA analysis with a particular focus on double hermeneutics (Smith et al., 2009) enabled me to observe that the social justice online warriors and their 'enemies' are those who engage in online conflicts by *detaching* their online existence from physical reality. In online space, they are not constrained by other people's opinions or diverse views. Put otherwise, those who engage in online conflicts and bullying do not exist 'in-relation' to others in the cyber world. This is in contrast with what scholars argue to be true in the context of physical reality when studying communication in the offline physical world (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). One's existence 'in-relation' to others or social communication shapes one's future behaviours (Conroy, 2003; Goffman, 1959; Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016). This is the essence of the theatrical dramaturgy and its front and back stage performances. Specifically, front stage behaviour is shaped by social interaction with others and one's existence 'in-relation to others'. However, in the context of online social warrior conflicts, the sense of existing 'in-relation to others' is lost or undermined by people who assume virtual lives. The lack of understanding of others' perspectives enables people to interpret and understand social movements and mass events from their biased perspectives only, that in their mind should, anecdotally, be the one and only truth.

While the global pandemic and large-scale social movements have produced social justice online warriors that contributed to cyberbullying and online hate, COVID-19 lockdowns affected some participants positively. For example, AP and Jean It Jack believe that they benefitted from the pandemic closures. AP stated that she had felt the *"safest"* during this time. Within this context, AP felt safe at home because she and her friends experienced multiple threats online from a stranger who she identifies as a stalker. By blocking the stalker's account and limiting her digital footprint, AP was able to change the *"way they interact[ed] with people"*. With the pandemic lockdown offering the opportunity to change for the better, AP learned to control herself and process her emotions associated with the fear that the bully / stalker presented. Similarly, Jean It Jack learned to limit their screen time with the realization that active engagement in online conflicts only damages their mental health and produces anxiety and fatigue. The COVID-19 closure affected these participants positively because it improved their self-reported mental health. Moreover, some participants indicated that the detrimental effects of the pandemic closures attributed to the normalization of online bullying and the projection of anger, which will be discussed in the next chapter with respect to online victimization during the global pandemic.

4.4. Conclusion

In addition to contextualizing the positive and negative effects that the pandemic lockdowns had on cyberbullying and its characteristics, this chapter unpacked the characteristics bullies and bullied participants identify with respect to describing and defining cyberbullying. Most importantly, this chapter brought several examples deriving from verbal and visual data pertaining to the notion that there are no pure victims or pure victimizers when we study about cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon and the identity people take when talking about their experiences associated with cyberbullying is fluid. This is because the majority of participants chose to engage in cyberbullying in their defence after being targeted online. The digital age enables people to assume different roles and identities. Therefore, one's identity as a bully or a bully is dependent on the context of cyberbullying. This finding enables me to explore what constitutes cyberbullying victimization and its relation to online victimization which is central to the discussion of the next chapter.

5.   Cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the characteristics of online bullying from a qualitative and phenomenological perspective. Central to the previous chapter, I have found that the identity of a victim and victimizer (or a bully) is fluid. The previous chapter also unpacked the meaning of online existence using Bob's sketching and using Jean It Jack's verbal interview data in the context of social justice warriors. While these concepts are foundational for answering my research questions, the sole focus of this chapter is on participants' experiences shaping their identity as a cyber-victim and showcasing that cyberbullying victimization can count as a form of online victimization. Adding to the existing literature on cyber-victimization, this chapter unpacks and describes the connection between online victimization and cyberbullying victimization through interviewees' narratives and their artwork. Based on the collected data and the literature on cyberbullying victimization and digital harm, cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization that, similar to cyberbullying identity, is also subjectively defined by my participants. The effects or consequences of cyberbullying identified by participants, the frequency of victimization, and the 'other'-ing effects experienced by interviewees are the common characteristics of online victimization and digital harm. To situate cyberbullying victimization in the context of online victimization and understand victims' perspectives, I use an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) for analyzing verbal and visual data.

5.2. Cyberbullying victimization and online victimization

5.2.1. *Subjective interpretation of cyberbullying victimization*

From an IPA perspective, it is important to understand how victims interpret negative comments as cyberbullying transgression because, as we have seen in the previous chapter, the context of online confrontation shapes one's self-identity as a victim or bully, which in turn, also shapes how bullies and victims present their virtual selves. When the perpetrator is deemed to be closely associated with the victim, as opposed to being a stranger, offensive words/comments are interpreted as cyberbullying transgression. This creates a feeling of betrayal, which makes these participants identify as victims of cyberbullying. This finding aligns with Burgess-Proctor and colleagues' study (2009) where the distinction between online conflict and cyberbullying is made. For instance, M describes how hurtful it is to get cyberbullied by her significant others, which makes her identify as a victim of digital harm: *"With my parents, because, they're supposed to be the ones who're there for you, you know? But it's hard when they're the ones who's saying, like a bunch of negative things about you."* M implies that the way she was criticized online by her parents constitutes her experience of online victimization and the way she constructs her identity as a victim of online bullying. Previous work on the distinction between cyberbullying and online conflict takes into account who the victimizer is (Tokunaga, 2010; Newall, 2018, Whittaker & Kowalski, 2015; Çimke & Cerit, 2021). Similar to what M shared, victimization caused by close friends and family members are identified as cyberbullying rather than being counted as meaningless, yet offensive, online conflict or drama (Ranney et al., 2019; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009)

Similarly, Lindy also points out that her conflict with a family member makes her identify as a victim. Lindy faced multiple threats online, from her ex-partner and a family member. When asked to elaborate on the effects and impacts of online bullying, she chose to

describe the impacts associated with cyberbullying – namely, the feeling of betrayal and avoiding new interactions with her family member: *"[w]e didn't talk for years. And there was avoidance of, like, I guess, feelings of betrayal or. And I guess I did feel lonesome because I didn't have that relationship anymore"* (Lindy). In this context, like M, Lindy refers to the online conflict she had with her family member who she trusted and confided in. Receiving offensive text messages and having online conflicts with the significant other constitute Lindy's experience of victimization. When cyberbullying originates in the family, its effects linger and break positive relationships between family members. Adding to the growing literature on online victimization, the feeling of betrayal in the context of cyberbullying accounts for online victimization. When a conflict occurs between significant others and between strangers, the former accounts for the experience of online victimization.

The distinction between being bullied by significant others or being bullied by strangers is clearer when Marceline shared a story of high school pupils creating public pages on social media using Instagram to 'roast' (shame the target for entertainment) the victim. This participant had been victimized online by close friends and by their peers through the social media platform, in which her peers made fun of her hair colour. Despite the offensive content being posted online and shared for public viewing, this participant states she did not interpret this post about her as victimizing. Marciline's self-identity is in contrast with that Fayi described in the previous chapter, where Fayi believes that the reachability and fast-spreading characteristic of online bullying through digital media shapes her identity as a victim of online bullying.

With these two contrasting experiences and self-identities, the experiences of cyberbullying shape subjective interpretations of victimization. Making the distinction between an objective and subjective interpretation of cyberbullying, cyberbullying victimization, and what constitutes as 'fun' in the context of cyberbullying Marciline states:

> *I find it unnecessarily funny, not in the sense of, like, I think what they're saying is funny. I just, I think it's so funny that, like, you're so obsessed with someone, you know, like, it feels like an obsession at that point because it's like, especially when it's people that I know don't really care, because, like, I've seen it happen to people or it's like your words aren't going to hurt them because they don't really care what other people think.*

When sharing their thoughts on what is interpreted or perceived as cyberbullying, the participant denies what is commonly viewed as 'funny' by their peers. In contrast, the participant offers their subjective analysis of 'fun' by saying that the perpetrator's obsession with the target of cyberbullying makes the perpetrator's action look funny. Moreover, Marciline suggests that it is the *"care"* or the relationship that they have with the victimizer that helps Marciline to determine one's self-identity as a victim. Therefore, according to M, Lindy, Fayi, and Marciline's subjective and common experiences, online victimization, like cyberbullying, is not a fixed notion, but it is dependent on the subjective interpretation of what victimization is in the bullied's eyes. The interpretation of the situation connects with the relationship the victim has with the bully (or the victimizer), leaving a sense of betrayal. Resonating with Ranney and colleagues' (2019) findings, the participants in my study ignored negative comments that were left by strangers (like the post that 'roasted' Marciline's hair colour on Instagram). From the

victims' perspectives, their relationship with cyberbullying perpetrators determines what constitutes online transgression as well as online victimization.

5.2.2. *The frequency of online interactions constituting cyberbullying victimization*

Depending on participants' subjective interpretation of online bullying and victimization, in some cases, one's experience of identifying as a victim related to the frequency of insulting comments received online. In this case, regardless of the relationship the participant had with the victimizer, the frequency of online interactions and harassment becomes a characteristic of determining online victimization. For example, Blue reports a case that lasted for two consecutive months, where a stranger targeted Blue by posting offensive and harmful comments during livestream videos Blue made and pictures he posted on a social media platform. Even though this participant had never known the perpetrator in their physical reality, the frequency of online transgression determines what constitutes online victimization for Blue. The frequency of cyberbullying victimization determines the extent of online victimization. Echoing Burgess-Proctor and colleagues' (2009) findings on cyberbullying and online victimization, the participants of this study placed an emphasis on the frequency of online bullying, where high numbers of online harassment counted towards cyberbullying victimization.

5.2.3. *The "other"-ing effects of cyberbullying victimization*

For some participants, the context of cyberbullying helped them differentiate between identifying as victims or non-victims. Online comments related to victims' race and gender were factors associated with being identified as online victims of cyberbullying. Several interviewees felt uncomfortable and ashamed of their race and gender, given that their online victimizers targeted participants based on these social characteristics. For example, targeting a certain group of teens based on their gender instigated guilt in victims. Blossom says:

> **Blossom:** *...whenever they see a video or view a picture of a girl wearing anything less than mere length skirt or like anything revealing, they feel like it's right to comment on it inappropriately...*
>
> **Bilguundari**: *... And how did it make you feel back then and how did it change over time?*
>
> **Blossom:** *I think back then it just was an immediate guilt reaction, like I told you, and I just switched it to a private account and I have not returned it back to a public one yet. And I still do think twice before posting a picture online now, even those just the people I know because I choose the ones that I want to follow me... I think if this thing happens all over again. I would still find myself to be guilty. It's just something that I think comes with. I don't know why we do that. But I still, every time anything wrong happens, I blame myself first.*

In this conversation, coming from a South Asian culture, Blossom reveals that normative views on gender roles and appearances are taken seriously even in virtual settings among people with South Asian background. When bound within the normative cultural standards, participants feel guilt and generally do not blame the victimizer. Not only are they targeted online in this situation for their appearance, but they also blame themselves for being a target of cyberbullying or a

target of online victimization. The way this participant makes sense of her online presence and the behavior of her victimizers online is in accordance with Sundén and Paasonen's (2018) arguments, where women attribute reasons for being victimized online to themselves through self-shaming and guilt.

Furthermore, regardless of the participants' sex and gender, participants experience race- and ethnicity-based cyberbullying (Broll et al., 2018). When the victimizers' intent is to target the victim's race and ethnicity, not only does this become the general characteristic of cyberbullying (discussed in the previous chapter), but it also leaves a long-lasting impression on participants, making them see themselves as victims of an online transgression. Lindy, who once was physically bullied for her ethnicity, is now a parent. To this day, Lindy still notices how her child and other young members of her family experience physical bullying and cyberbullying for their race and ethnicity. Lindy points out that she used to get bullied physically for being "*Indigenous*" and *"living in poverty."* Her daughter and nephew experienced cyberbullying for the same reasons on Snapchat (a popular social media platform), in a group setting. With the introduction of social media, Lindy sees the intergenerational effect of ethnicity-based bullying being transferred from physical bullying to cyberbullying (Kowalski et al., 2012). Seeing her younger family members becoming victims of online transgression contributes to "othering", discrimination, and prejudice against racial minorities. This interviewee's experience is similar to what other social media communication scholars have noted previously (see examples from Reddit in Lumsden, 2019; Topinka, 2018; and in the context of massive multiplayer online games in Sundén & Paasonen, 2018), and it adds Snapchat as a popular digital media platform facilitating cyberbullying among teenagers:

> **Lindy:** *It just, you know, like I said, I've been bullied, I've been the bully. So it's kind of, you know, it's not a good feeling. And it hurts even more that my children are targeted by a bully. It's not just like once. It's like several times, you know, like even my nephew or my niece, you know, being targeted. It's not a good feeling.*

> **Bilguundari:** *Do you know why they're targeted?*

> **Lindy:** *I'm not sure, but it may be because of our, um. We're Indigenous. Um. I know when I was a kid, that was a big reason. Or because, you know, we were, um. Well, it's obvious we were living in poverty, right? So I think, you know, that definitely…*

Similar to Lindy's point, Raj shares an identical experience, where the self-reported consequence of ethnicity-based bullying are extraordinarily severe to the point that he negates who he is and his physical appearance:

> **Raj:** *I was more scared of people judging me like that. I don't want this to happen again or I don't want someone to say this to me again… I can't be in the moment. I'm just paranoid, actually. Very self-conscious… I think also try to not be my own race. Like try to assimilate as much as I can, to fit in. So it's just a coping mechanism. Even when I got racially bullied, I didn't tell my parents.*

> **Bilguundari:** *Why is that?*

Raj: *Because I felt down about it. I don't want them to feel that way.*

In this particular example, the context of cyberbullying presents the experience of online victimization. Not only do the bullies target someone's race, but the consequence is detrimental to the extent that one would want to change the way they look and prevent themselves from seeking help from their parents. The context of online bullying led the participant to take protective measures against making his parents feel victimized. This finding aligns with previous research conducted in Germany with adolescents on ethnic or racist cyber victimization, where first-generation immigrants, were prone to cyber-victimization compared to non-immigrants in Germany (Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2022). The literature on cyberbullying also identified that racial and ethnic-minorities as well as girls and women are at-risk of online bullying (Broll et al., 2018; Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Faucher et al., 2014; Salmon et al., 2018; Ballard & Welch, 2015), which is also commonly shared by my participants. Based on the collected verbal data, I argue that racial and ethnic minorities as well as girls and women's experience of cyberbullying is largely shaped by socio-cultural differences that do not align with the mainstream culture and its values. In the context of the Indigenous, Asian, and South Asian cultures, the collective cultural value makes them appear different from their peers who were brought up in the individualistic culture. This pre-existing (or a-priori) difference becomes the reason for others to target racial minorities. Digital technologies mediate cyberbullying transgression that disproportionately targets certain groups of individuals (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Powell et al., 2018). IPA enables me and the readers to see a holistic picture of the participant's background, upbringing, and socio-cultural values that are different than what my participants' peers experienced growing up (Smith et al., 2009; Conroy, 2023). One's background and lived experiences can expose them to the risk of getting cyberbullied, which eventually shapes one's virtual presentation of self.

5.3. Indirect victimization of online bullying

Visiting Raj's narrative again, the possibility of indirect victimization of his parents made Raj internalize his negative experience associated with online bullying. This participant concealed the possibility of causing significant others to be indirectly victimized. When asked about indirect or secondary victimization of significant others, participants reflected on how their experience shaped their relationship with their significant others. Raj shares:

Bilguundari*: And this experience. How did it change your relationship with your best friend?*

Raj: *I knew I could trust him. And I knew I felt like, I had support at that time.*

Bilguundari: *Yeah.*

Raj: *Someone would believe me: "Okay. I'm not alone in this." I think that was very important. It would have been much different if he wasn't there. And. I had to do it on my own. I think he probably helped me through it, be like "Don't worry. People know this is not you. You're not like this. People know this is just a hacker and you wouldn't do something like this." So he really helped me calm down enough.*

Raj's experience of online victimization strengthened the relationship with his close friend as the relationship progressed to be more trustworthy and understanding.

In contrast, some participants reported that the experience of online victimization did not change their relationships with their parents. Parents and older family members could offer support, but due to the generation gap, they would often times blame the victim for drawing negative attention. Thus, when asked about how their experience made their significant others feel, interviewees focused on how their significant others interpreted the situation they were in, some of which made participants easily acquiesce to their significant others' judgmental assumptions, resulting in self-blaming. For example, "*[y]ou cannot really talk to anyone around you because they'll definitely blame it on you that you posted something like that*" is the reason why Blossom would decide not to share their experience with anyone. Likewise, Michele's experience is indistinct to Blossom's, but with Michele being proactive in disclosing her experience with significant others, she notes the following:

> **Michele**: *Well, you know, some of them well, some of them were supportive and some of them felt bad for me. But others had, you know, negative feelings.*
>
> **Bilguundari:** *And what do you mean by that? It's interesting.*
>
> **Michele:** *Okay. Well, not everyone will support you. Some will say "well that is your choice, maybe you brought it to yourself." And with all the judgment and assumptions and explanations that maybe they tried to give you just to make you feel guilty and bad or. Yeah, just bad for yourself that you experienced, which is sort of that way.*

The significant others of the participants I interviewed were not indirectly victimized by the participants' experiences of online victimization. Close friends and family members were the main sources of support for the victims. However, due to generation gap, family members sometimes took the stance to blame the victim (or the participant), in contrast with friends who would offer non-judgmental emotional support.

The relationship the participant has with their victimizer (family vs. stranger), the frequency of online targeting (once vs. multiple times for an extended period of time), as well as the context cyberbullying occurs (targeting race and gender) lead my participants to identify as the victim of cyberbullying and digital harm. Cyberbullying victimization is, thus, a form of online victimization. The self-identification of a victim of cyberbullying (or targets of online victimization) depends on their subjective interpretation of what online victimization is. With the experience of online victimization, participants' significant others, such as family and friends, become the main sources of support. Furthermore, participants' experiences of online victimization do not affect their significant others in the form of secondary victimization, but it can strengthen the relationship between close friends. With the discussion of online victimization and its connection with secondary victimization, the way online victimization affects its victims in their physical world is discussed next.

5.4. Consequences of cyber-victimization in participants' physical reality

In addition to the factors constituting online victimization, my participants focused on the effects of online victimization that include both physical and mental health-related consequences. The direct consequences of cyberbullying and its effects on participants are physically damaging for the participant, extraordinarily harmful to participants' mental health (Dignan, 2005; Tsitsika et al., 2015; Landoll et al., 2015; Broll et al., 2018; Holfeld & Mishna, 2019; Peter & Petermann, 2018; Tokunaga, 2010), and can interact with pre-existing traumatic events, carrying the possibility of suicide and self-harm (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Erreygers et al., 2022). The effects of cyberbullying will be explained below through a phenomenological perspective based on the verbal and visual data, and I argue that these effects of cyberbullying victimization are a form of online victimization, which adds to the literature on cyber-victimization through a phenomenological lens.

An analysis from a phenomenological standpoint reveals that my participants' common responses to cyberbullying aggression include immediate negative emotional reactions, such as fear, anxiety, and confusion. In addition to these effects, other negative consequences, such as having insomnia, or conversely, hypersomnia, feelings of depression, and overthinking were commonly cited by participants as the consequences of online bullying. If the readiness-to-hand mode of encounter is the unconscious and a-priori being that people assume online (i.e. regular interactions with no experience of online bullying or conflicts), the cyberbullying aggression would constitute the present-at-hand mode and the consequences producing the unreadiness-to-hand mode of encounter. The present-at-hand mode (assessment of the current situation) helps participants to identify and realize that online victimizers target the interviewees. As a result, my participants need to learn to process these feelings and make sense of these feelings. The 'making sense' process directs my participants to engage in a close examination of the situation. In other words, victims of online bullying deliberately examine the situation to which they are "thrown" into, leading to the assessment of the situation in their unreadiness-to-hand mode.

For instance, reflecting on her experience, Fayi describes the feeling in the moment of what she identifies and describes as cyberbullying. In the exact moment of online victimization, in her readiness-to-hand mode of encounter (Wheeler, 2020), Fayi's experience is worse than any conflict happening in her non-virtual world. Based on these feelings, Fayi experiences the negative effects of online aggression:

> *I remember my first time. I'm kind of really experienced online bullying in about Gr 8. And it was actually from a friend. And I remember, like, almost like a panic attack in my chest. I was just like. It was like a pain and I was confused, disorientated and just like emotions were flying everywhere. Just physically I just was like a wreck within like 10 seconds of reading something negative that I just didn't expect. Mentally, I mean. Gr 8. Ten years later, I still remember it clear as day.* (Fayi)

When participants like Fayi are "thrown" into situations like cyberbullying, they feel lost and disoriented. These feelings are the consequences that Fayi experiences in her unreadiness-to-hand mode through which she makes a sense of being bullied online. Fayi elaborates more on the meaning-making process in her unreadiness-to-hand and present-at-hand modes of encounter through the visual representation of her experience (see Figure 3).
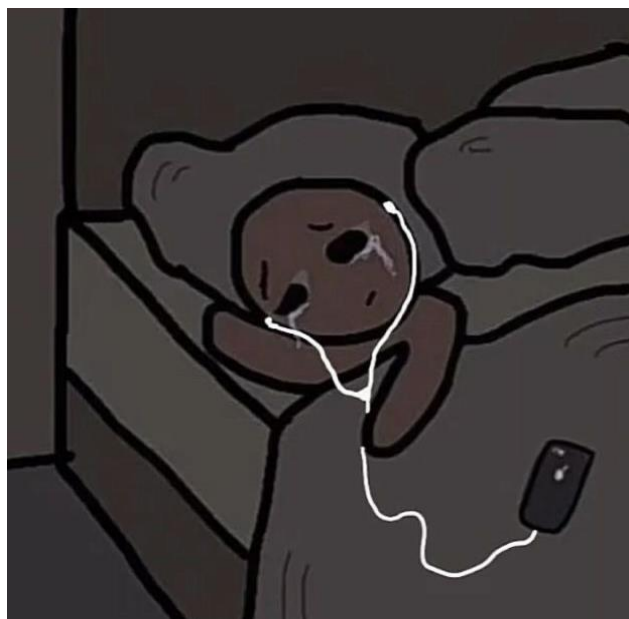
Bilguundari: *Can you describe this picture? Who is in there? Is the person crying?*

Fayi: *Yeah. I feel like that's just what it felt like when I was younger. You read something and it just kind of, like, hits you. [I] really had anxiety and anxiety and panic attacks. And I would just sometimes listen to something. Just stay in darkness, you know, online darkness and darkness just emotionally, mentally and physically just in my room and isolate myself when I felt like that, which made me feel even more alone. So I definitely had days really I would see something or someone make comment and I would just be so upset and I would just need to tune it out….*

Figure 3: Fayi's representation of cyberbullying

Fayi: *Like, I remember just coming home, just closing my door and just turning off the lights and just trying to escape it because it was pressure. When there was a group chat, chats are made without you and people are talking and there's video calls and there's it was just so much that I would just feel like overloaded and I would just lay in darkness and I just cry. I'd just be upset. And I felt really alone. I felt ashamed. Like I just wanted to curl up and cry. And that's what I feel like. This photo.*

Fayi's visual representation of cyberbullying illuminates her experience of online victimization and the consequence of online cyberbullying. The unreadiness-to-hand mode of encounter was represented with her *"tuning out"* because this was the immediate response that helped her to make sense of the situation. The feelings of sadness, loneliness, emotional darkness, as well the dark room Fayi is in are the representation of online victimization and are representative of processing negative emotions, making her readiness-to-hand mode of encounter. The visual representation and the interpretative analysis of the visual data elicit emotions and distinct memories associated with Fayi's experience (Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2012; Pain, 2012; Pink, 2013). Similarly, AP feels anxious about the situation, coupled with anger:

I would literally be shaking. My hands would just be shaking and then make my heart would be beating to be very fast. And I would just be angry all of a sudden. And the anger that I had here, I would later spill the anger on my little sister and even on the like, even on the plants that didn't look good in my balcony and just let go and just break it destroyed. I just could not control my anger. I had like little anger issues. I didn't I mean, it's the thing like that. Supposed there's a thing and you just don't have a solution for that. How would you feel? There's nothing that you can do. It's not feeling you just feeling harsh on yourself… Stop eating. And I had an eating disorder because of this…

The pernicious effect of cyberbullying on mental and physical health is reported by AP's description of anxiety, anger issues, and an eating disorder. Another visual representation offered by Blossom sheds lights on the post-effects of online bullying. Blossom describes her drawing (Figure 4) as the following:

Blossom: *She's just looking at her phone and thinking what she should do. And her mind is filled with negative thoughts.*

Bilguundari: *Including?*

Blossom: *Regret, anxiousness, stress and guilt. And she's crying and she's basically just in a turmoil, thinking what she should do about the bullying that she's been faced.*

Figure 4: Blossom's representation of cyberbullying

Focusing on participants' subjective experiences and interpreting these experiences from their perspectives, the visual data and the description participants give to describe their visual data shape what constitutes cyberbullying victimization and digital harm. This is an innovative way of collecting, producing, and analyzing data. This qualitative methodological technique also helps participants to share their experiences in a less-invasive way by providing them a chance to reflect on their experiences as well as benefitting participants as this method helped them to feel *"good"* or *"better"* about their experiences (Jean It Jack, Fayi, Raj) (Copes et al., 2018; Jackson, 2021).

Moreover, the feeling of loneliness was identified as a common consequence of online bullying. My participants focused on the theme of loneliness in every interview I conducted. Stated above, Fayi felt lonely while trying to cope with her online victimization. Likewise, Blue also felt lonely and put his feelings as "*You feel like a disgrace to society or maybe to some people.*" These are the serious and damaging mental consequences commonly felt by participants. And the most concerning situation from the past was voiced by Marciline, in which cyberbullying partially contributed to previous attempts of suicide. Explaining what makes one engage in self-harming behavior and its relationship with cyberbullying, Marciline said the following:

People think that like self-harming is like a one issue. It is it almost never is. Self-harm, and depression, and suicidal tendencies – don't start with like a little thing… It's like, the problem is, there is already so much happening that sometimes that [attempted suicide] was the final straw.

In the context of this attempted suicide, Marciline pointed out a few factors that lead a teen to suicide ideation and committing self-harm. In their case, traditional bullying at school and the hostile relationship they had with their parent caused distress for Marciline. With the introduction of social media and communication therein, Marciline was targeted by one of their closest friends online. Moreover, if traditional bullying stopped after leaving the school ground, cyberbullying continued at their home (Tokunaga, 2010). These were the three factors that led Marciline to harm themselves. The vast spread of technological advancement triggers existing traumatic conditions, which exacerbated the negative consequences of cyberbullying.

The visual data generated by Marciline better explained their internal feelings and their general view on cyberbullying victimization. Marciline drew a picture of a person whose experience of online bulling is identical to theirs (Figure 5). When asked to describe the picture, I noticed a change in Marciline's tone and voice. During the verbal part of the interview, they seemed to stay enthusiastic about providing different types of answers, being open to share childhood experiences, and bringing different types of examples upon being asked follow-up questions. In fact, the interview with Marciline lasted for 2.5 hours (including visual data collection method). The participant did not even request to have a break during this two-and-a-half-hour timeslot, as the interview session, in my estimation, went very well.

Figure 5: Marciline's representation of cyberbullying

However, when I prompted Marciline to describe their artwork, she became quiet, reserved, and hesitant to speak. The tone of their voice changed and the speed of her talking slowed down. With no signs of significant distress and with the aim to conduct an IPA interview, I made a note of this change (Smith et al., 2019) and prompted the participant with some questions. When asked to describe the drawing, Marciline started with the description of the eyes on their drawing:

Marciline: *I always draw four because I have glasses. And the fifth one – represents some form of mental illness, be it depression or not. On top of that, her ears are red, sort of like knuckles. When I get really angry, I tend to go completely red…*

[continues their description]

[There is] more black on it [the fifth eye]. I think of mental illness, especially like stuff like depression, anxiety. I think of like an inky black. Which is kind of scribbling look. Which is why, like, the whole drawing has a very, like, scribble kind of darker look.

Bilguundari: *Mm hmm. I don't see any other parts of the face. Where are they?*

Marciline: *Oh, that's, that's a stylistic thing. Well, actually, the mouth is related… Because I couldn't speak my mind ever. She doesn't have one ever…*

At its face-value, this drawing may seem a colorful and vibrant picture. However, this visual representation helped Marciline to openly talk about their deeply-seated internal feelings associated with cyberbullying and online victimization. The darkness that the participant places a heavy emotional weight on, the absence of mouth, and the existence of an eye on the forehead signify Marciline's internal feelings of online victimization. As we have seen throughout this and the previous chapters, visual representation are powerful and effective at introspectively examining participants' lived experiences and feelings, as other researchers using this methodology claim *"[f]rom a theoretical perspective, the findings suggest that visual images can play a fundamental role in capturing students' understandings of given concepts or issues"* (Mutonyi & Kendrick, 2011, p. 246).

In addition, Marciline emphasized the prevalence of cyberbullying and that cyber-victimization has become an everyday experience with the introduction of cyberbullying and online communication:

Anyone could be cyberbullied… At any given time. You just see someone on the phone. Like [for example] you can see a lot of scrolling on the bus, you see, their phone scrolling through. And they could be reading messages that could be along the lines of like they should go and kill themselves. They can just be reading that… You never know what they've done. You know where they're from, where they came from. You don't know where they're going. And you don't know what's going on in their lives.

With this and other participants' contributions, we gain a better understanding of online bullying, its effects on victims, and how experiences of cyber-victimization are shaped. Cyberbullying shares common characteristics with other forms of online victimization (Ballard & Welch, 2015; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009; Erreygers et al., 2022; Lumsden, 2019; Cohen-Almagor, 2018) and it is, thus, a form of online victimization. The way participants make sense of their subjective experiences are similar to the way participants interpret their experience of cyberbullying and their identity as shown in the previous chapter. Learning about online victimization and participant identity of online victimization through visual data is an innovative way of interacting with participants and making their feelings and experiences acknowledged while collecting in-

depth data about one's lived experiences. These experiences present emotionally-rich data for me as a researcher, but at the same time, these experiences require the readers and myself as a researcher to conduct emotional labour, suppressing subjective and personal feelings while staying objective in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

5.5. Conclusion

After analyzing what cyberbullying is (discussed in the previous chapter), I focused on exploring how cyberbullying victimization becomes a form of online victimization through verbal and visual data. My qualitative findings demonstrate the negative effects of cyberbullying, which previously were identified by quantitative researchers. Enriching the previous findings that largely view cyberbullying through an individualistic and interpersonal lens (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Patchin & Huinduja, 2011; Broll et al., 2018), my qualitative findings suggest that cyberbullying victimization originat es from differences in social norms and cultural practices (pertaining to Lindy and Raj's experiences), and it disproportionately affects minority groups. Cyberbullying victimization is interpreted as a form of online victimization for its characteristics, such as the frequency of victimization, the targeting of minority groups, and the negative effects associated with cyberbullying. Moreover, at the same time as my participants express concerns about cyberbullying becoming part of daily experience, several researchers note online transgression in the digital era has become normalized and young people desensitized to the effects of online bullying (Megele & Longfield, 2022; Kilvington, 2022). With these findings, it is logical to seek answers with respect to the virtual presentation of self and coping strategies used by the victims of online bullying, which are explored next. The presentation of the self is a study that investigates how social situations and circumstances shape one's behaviour. Cyberbullying being a social phenomenon and situation commonly experienced by young people in the digital age, the next two chapters explore the virtual self-presentation of participants who identify as online bullies and online victims of cyberbullying.

6.   The presentation of virtual self and coping with the consequences of online victimization

6.1. Introduction

After focusing on the characteristics of cyberbullying and the characteristics of online victimization and how these each construct and define one's fluid self identity as a cyber-bully and cyber-bullied, this chapter offers an in-depth analysis of the virtual presentation of the self. Applying Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgy in everyday life in a virtual setting, I will begin with the discussion of masking and the projection of a positive self online, followed by the description of the display of a cynical self and strategies regarding impression management. This chapter mainly focuses on the experiences shared by participants who identify as victims of online bullying. I demonstrate participants' interpretation of their unique, yet common, experiences (Cresswell & Poth, 2017; Van Manen 1990) and offer an analysis of how and why participants who identify as the victims of cyberbullying use Goffman's (1959) concepts of dramaturgical model of self-presentation in the virtual setting. With the aid of visual data analysis, I will conclude this chapter by examining participants' coping techniques in their virtual reality and some possible responses to cyberbullying events suggested by my participants. The participants' coping techniques and their suggested ways of responding to cyberbullying victimization also reflect the use of back stage management, including back stage membership in their physical and online environments.

6.2. **Masking and the projection of positive self**

Masking and projection of positive self is a common theme that participants shared with me during the interviews. Masking is used to convey many different images to present one's self online. Interview data show that a virtual environment offers the possibility for participants to assume multiple identities and the corresponding multiple selves at the same time. This is coherent with Turkle's (1995) work on online identity. Given that online victimization and verbal transgression are not purely separate, it is apparent that masking and projecting behaviors happening on the front stage can be used differently by the same performer depending on which of the two roles (the bully or the bullied) the performer assumes, as it was found in the previous chapters. When assuming the identity of both the bullied and the bully, participants mask their authentic selves. Young women who identify as victims of cyberbullying choose to display the happiest moments of their lives or the successful moments of their lives more often, whereas male participants, regardless of their self-identification as bully or bullied, choose to share information that does not relate to their personal lives. Based on the findings, it stood out that regardless of gender differences, the bullied victims of online interactions withdraw from engaging in online activities.

When participants assume the identity of the bullied, their front stage interaction with the audience becomes dull, silent, and limited, regardless of their gender identity. They become reticent about their personal life on social media, compared to their friends. For Blossom, for instance, being a victim ended her potential "*career*" (as she describes) and interest in becoming a social media influencer like her friends. All participants I interviewed said that their being self-recognizant and reticent about their digital footprint was the biggest change they made in terms of their online behavior. Combined with masking efforts, the participants indicate their online presence becomes less visible as they become more cognizant about their digital footprint and online behavior in front of their virtual audience after experiencing some form of cyberbullying or online victimization.

After experiencing negative online interactions, for participants such as Fayi, virtual platforms serve as spaces for expressing their ideal selves. For example, Fayi explained:

> *I know that, like, I post on my birthday and I post when I go on a trip. So, you know, people don't really see the in-between, where it's not all beaches and sunshine like sunsets and everything like that. It's easy to. Online - I feel like it's easy to show all the good things, yet experience all the bad things.*

The masking technique used in the front stage of dramaturgy is carefully staged by this participant. Fayi also shared that her private ordinary daily life events are usually curtailed due to her previous victimization. Fayi actively engages in masking and concealing *"bad things"* and *"in-betweens"* from her public audience on her back stage while projecting a happy self to her public audience. Participants who identify as the bullied use the masking technique for their benefit with the goal of projecting their ideal self. After experiencing cyberbullying, the performer (the bullied) conceals activities that are inconsistent with their ideal self (Goffman, 1959). Through their online posts shared publicly, these participants project the impression of "happiness" and "success" as the product of their idealized selves. This finding aligns with previous findings (such as Aspling, 2011; Abidin, 2016; Merunková, & Šlerka, 2019) where a

popular platform is used as front stage performance. My participants engaged in the virtual front stage performance (for example, by making online posts) with the purpose of projecting a successful self-image for the public.

With the aid of Marciline, Fayi, and Blossom's visual data, I have discussed the physical and mental health-related consequences of cyberbullying. According to these participants, the projection of a positive self is a result of experiencing these consequences occurring in the victims' virtual and non-virtual back stage. These conditions related to physical and mental health consequences of cyberbullying are not shared on victims' virtual public front stage. Neither are these consequences shared on victims' non-virtual (physical) front stage. An ideal version of the victim's self is presented virtually in their front stage. This is in contrast with their back stage feelings of guilt, self-blaming, and sadness of their physical reality. For example, as a response to cyberbullying events, my participants limit their digital footprint by posting less, sharing private information less, and filtering or choosing to share what appears to be their ideal selves – the self that conveys a successful image for public viewing. The struggles they experience in their physical reality due to online bullying are not shared with their online audience on their virtual front stage. The experience of being a target of online bullying affects the online presentation of self in a way that this experience reduces participants' digital footprint, yet encourages them to share idealized versions of their selves online.

It could be argued that masking in the front stage and projection of a positive self represent what Hurley (2019) calls "fantastical authenticity". Even though participants' online presentation of an ideal self may have been projected on their social media, they engage in this online behavior as a coping mechanism in their online reality. The motive for displaying an authentic self for bullied victims is different than what participants in Hurley's study identify, such as social media influencers persuading their public audience to gain popularity. Abidin (2016) and Ibrahim (2018) also explore the presentation of self and commodification of self through the influencer culture and stress the importance in the practice of how influencers use and project their idealistic self-image to be relatable to their audience. The motivation in the "fantastically"-ideal online self-presentation in the influencer culture is different than what my participants strive to present. My participants choose to present their ideal selves in order to cope with their online victimization. And yet, conceptually, my participants and the influencer culture share the same practice of projecting the performers' ideal self in the digital word.

6.3. Projection of a cynical self as a way of virtual coping with online victimization

As a way of coping with their online victimization in virtual reality, participants project their cynical selves. A cynical performance is needed for participants to feel comfortable in their online reality. A cynical self does not match the bullied participants' physical reality, yet, it serves as a coping mechanism for them. In their virtual and non-virtual front stages, cyberbullied participants engage in actions that are different than their real impressions of reality. With the experience of online bullying, just like some occupations choosing to prioritize their cynical self (see Goffman's (1959) example of a doctor administering a placebo treatment, p. 18), my participants choose to display a cynical self to the benefit of themselves because they strive to hide the consequences of cyberbullying from the public audience. Victims of cyberbullying choose to display their cynical selves in order to be seen as ordinary Internet users rather than

being seen as the bullied person. The projection of a cynical self is a way they cope with the consequence of cyberbullying online.

Explaining the reason for displaying their cynical self, participants reflect on their past. And in contrast with the negative effects discussed in the previous chapter, participants choose to self-identify differently than what is commonly recognized as a victim of an online offence. Reflecting on her past experience, Marciline says:

> *I was mostly dealing with that shit on my own and doing a lot of research because the thing is ... I don't let them help because the thing is ... that's called like a victim and saviour complex. I'm not interested in that because I don't need to be saved. I am not a victim. I'm a survivor. I got out of those situations on my own. I dealt with them on my own. I know that's not always the most healthy. And I'm working with not always dealing with things on my own, but at the same time, it's important to be able to do things on your own. So I did a lot of research into psychology and ways how it can affect me and ways to deal with it because I didn't want to be this helpless person that thinks that they can do nothing about their situation when I could… So I changed the way I thought… I changed… the outlook, "Oh, this is about me, they hate me" [to] it's like, "No, it's not necessarily about me. It's probably actually about something else."*

The participant reveals that changing their perception of who the bully is and learning to cope with the problem of cyberbullying on their own (rather than seeking external help) have become the way they cope with cyberbullying. Consequently, the intention of not being seen as in need of a saviour has helped this participant overcome the negatives associated with online bullying. Marciline took the approach of displaying a cynical self which is of benefit to them. Displaying a cynical self in their virtual and non-virtual front stages, Marciline self-reflects and understands how they were able to develop inner strength through this lived experience. This type of experience makes participants feel empowered (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018). My participants felt empowered and felt a sense of self-growth when they were able to move on from a negative experience. Leaving negative experiences behind gave them hope, improved their self-esteem, and was seen as self-growth. By being able to cope with the consequences of online bullying in their front stage, these participants developed a sense of higher self-esteem as well.

6.4. Virtual impression management

As a product of their learned behaviour, participants who self-identify as victims of online bullying engage in active impression management – actions associated with keeping the front stage separate from the back stage. Goffman (1959) argues that keeping the two stages separate from each other and not allowing any audience to enter their front and back stages is a difficult task a performer confronts. More specifically, back stage dramaturgy is argued to be the hardest to prevent the audience from entering (Goffman, 1959). Performers develop the technique of impression management to separate the two stages and prevent audiences from entering restricted areas.

Active impression management in non-virtual reality involves disciplining of the actor's performance on the front stage. Applied in the context of cyberbullying, front stage discipline for the victims of cyberbullying emanates from one's past experience of online bullying that is kept

private in their back stage. A separation of the front and back stages is beneficial for those who were cyber-bullied as it helps them to conceal their history of online victimization. Cyber-bullied participants learn to discipline their virtual impression management in their front stage. A well-disciplined front stage performer learns to suppress their inner feelings and emotions and conceal their history of online victimization. A well-disciplined front stage performer only projects positive moments of their lives through online posts as a way of coping with their online victimization. In doing so, cyber-victims display their ideal selves and conceal emotions associated with their feelings of anger and sadness that they experience in their non-virtual physical reality.

The suppression of their real emotions encourages participants to discipline their virtual front stage performance. Stopping to share about their true feelings on social media means that they limit, strategize, and regulate (for example, only sharing content that relate to their portrayal of ideal selves and not sharing anything personal) their online behaviour on their front stage. The set limits and regulations prevent the public audience, including their online bully from entering the front stage of their virtual performance. This is how victims of cyberbullying learn to actively engage in virtual impression management. In the following interview excerpt John illustrates how he learned to strategize impression management:

> *I think now anything public would be just kind of general knowledge. Anything I would consider public would be anything that I wouldn't be afraid to tell a stranger on the street… But in terms of private, if I'm not okay with sharing it with people that aren't in my closed group, then generally I wouldn't share at all. Like I consider family matters or, or even just like matters to do with myself, private. Like, I like to handle my issues before I share them with the world.*

By learning to distinguish public content from private, John learns to prevent the public audience from entering their private back stage. In addition to explaining how he separates the public (front) and private (back) stages online, John sheds light on the fact that what constitutes their public stage in physical reality also constitutes his public front virtual stage. This participant believes that his physical public front stage aligns with his virtual front stage, and his virtual back stage aligns with the physical back stage.

Furthermore, John shared with me the technique he uses to separate or control his 'public' and 'private' stages of his virtual reality, which is similar to his management of front and back stages in his non-virtual reality:

> *My Instagram is private… I've just been more aware of who's following me, but it depends on the on the social media, too, because my Instagram, I consider myself more private in the sense that I only really want friends and family following me. And then obviously because of that, I share more on Instagram and I'm more of a bit more open… I like to be very open like an open book, but I'm, for example, Tik Tok. I've recently gained quite a bit of a following. I had almost like 50,000 followers and it just really changed what I posted on there. Like I was a bit more conscious and like, you know, when you looked at like my TikTok person and my Instagram, just like very different night and day.*

This excerpt of John's interview presents the role of social media in guiding virtual impression management. Having two different profiles on social media, where access is granted for public and private audiences upon approval is the direct way of managing audiences from having access to their front and back stages of virtual reality. In particular, the participant compares and contrasts the content posted on two different popular social media platforms – Instagram and TikTok[1]. Depending on his audience, the content he shares on each platform differs. This is a strategy that John employs for directly separating their online audiences by approving follower requests and posting content that is desirable for public and private audiences. Like Aspling (2011) argues, John demonstrates a successful character on his public account, whereas on his private account, he engages in "reversed dramaturgy" whereby Instagram is treated as a virtual public front stage that is used for sharing his back stage self. In the physical world, as suggested by Goffman (1959), impression management manifests into reality when a performer willingly chooses to display their front or back stages of behaviour (see the example of a receptionist from Chapter 2). Similar to this impression management strategy, participants such as John decide what content is appropriate to share when they assume a public front stage self and a private back stage self in their virtual world. Therefore, for John, the online audience (public or private) shapes his virtual presentation of the self and guides his virtual impression management strategy.

Furthermore, this strategy of virtual impression management helps John to prevent online victimization from happening. Having these two profiles separate like "*day and night,*" John generates online content on his public profile which makes him comfortable sharing with strangers. On the other hand, his private back stage self is displayed with the audience who appear to be his significant others. By keeping the two stages separate from one another, John prevents his social media pages from attracting negative reactions from public audiences in the form of derogatory comments and public shaming. Thus, for this participant, his virtual front and back stages of dramaturgy are in synch with their non-virtual front and back stages of dramaturgy. The impression management in the front and back stages operational in the participant's physical reality is congruent with the impression management in their virtual back and front stages.

Some participants, such as Blossom who also identify as a victim of online bullying, do not perceive impression management to be as simple as what John explains it to be. Even though Blossom is cognizant of her digital footprint and limits her interaction on her private and public social media pages, she believes that personal privacy is compromised in virtual reality:

> *I don't think anything's private anymore. And honestly, because I think once your name is out, it's out. [I] could find everything from our friends trademarks to the schools we were in, the jobs we do, everything online. It's probably it's because I'm on Linked In as well so they can find out the jobs I'm in … I feel like maybe nothing is private anymore.*

Again, while John finds a way of building virtual impression management, for Blossom, digital platforms, such as Linked In, are designed to keep private information public. The virtual impression management in this case becomes merely impossible for Blossom. Without the ability to control public audiences from visiting virtual and private back stage areas, participants

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[1] At the time of the interview, the popular platform TikTok was not as controversial as it is currently.

become prone to experiencing cyberbullying and online victimization (as seen in the previous chapter), and they must find ways to cope with their victimization.
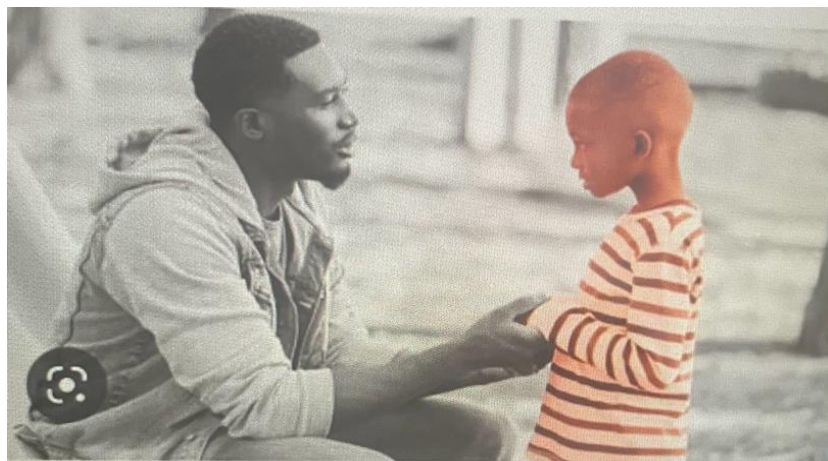
6.5. Coping with cyberbullying in the back stage

Participants find ways to cope with their online victimization in their virtual and non-virtual back stages of dramaturgy. For instance, in their non-virtual physical reality, victims of cyberbullying conceal their victimization and portray (or try to present) a cynical or inauthentic self that does not match their physical reality. G said:

I'm mentally, I'm just kind of pretending that I was strong. And then you didn't need anybody to, you know, talk to those, like, talk about, like, I don't know, just discuss those things with anybody. So I didn't talk to anybody about these. But then the people that around me, they could see the effect on me.

G tried to conceal her victimization and tried to present a cynical self in order to cope with her experience of online bullying victimization. Through the presentation of a cynical self, G has internalized the effects of cyberbullying as she chose to hide her experience and emotions from others. Like G, a few participants identified internalization as a common way of coping with negative feelings associated with cyberbullying (Hay et al., 2010; Garaigordobil & Larrain, 2020; Broll et al., 2018). Similar to previous findings, the internalization of negative experiences occurred in my participants' non-virtual back stage. The experiences of negative emotions and feelings are not shared with anyone and they remained in the participant's non-virtual private back stage. In coherence with their non-virtual back stage behaviour, G would not engage in online interactions, and keep the negative feelings in her private virtual back stage.

Because G internalized negative feelings and emotions associated with her cyberbullying victimization, G did not seek formal or informal support, which she regrets. Even though her experience dates back to her teen years, (when she was 13 and 14), she is still currently on a *"healing journey."* Her journey is represented by the picture she shared with me (see Figure 6). The picture that G shared during the interview expresses her feelings associated with coping and the lack of support. Reflecting on her experience, G shares how coping could look like had she opened up her back stage area to adults:

The older gentleman is healing the child even though that might not be the case but that's literally what I'm trying to do. And then, you know, like whatever has happened to me in the past I'd say I'm trying to heal that part of me, that child I was.

Figure 6: G's representation of cyberbullying

This visual reminds G of her healing journey. With the aid of the photo-elicitation technique (Harper, 2002; Prosser, 2012; Pain, 2012), G realizes and accepts now as an adult that her experience might have been easier on her if she had the needed support. Most importantly, this finding points to the fact that young people often lack emotional support and guidance from adults when they face online victimization. As a teen who tried to process negative emotions on her own, G is aware that her approach to coping was not the easiest and that her journey still continues to this day. This picture reminds her of the long journey she has started and the importance of adult intervention when adolescents experience online transgression like cyberbullying.

6.6. Informal support and back stage team membership

Whereas G's approach to coping with cyberbullying was difficult for her, other participants shared their ways of processing negative emotions and feelings in their back stage. In contrast to G, some participants chose to share their internal feelings and experiences with their significant others, including close friends or young family members in the same age range (cousins, for example). These people have become the main source of emotional support for victims of cyberbullying. They provide support in both in-person and virtual settings. Participants who chose to seek emotional support from their significant others opened up their virtual and non-virtual back stages and invited others to form a team membership operational in the victim's back stage.

By listening to the participants' narratives, I noticed that regardless of the virtual or non-virtual setting, the established back stage team functioned according to what was proposed by Goffman (1959). Only the significant others had access to victims' back stage because they offered emotional support to victims. With access to the victim's back stage, they form a team with shared goals. The team, eventually, operates through mutual understanding, loyalty, and trust. Goffman writes that team members display their authentic selves as well as share secrets with their team members. Similarly, team members providing support to the victims of cyberbullying create spaces where the online victims of bullying feel safe sharing their experiences (which signifies victims and their significant others displaying their authentic selves). Forming a back stage team is another way for participants to cope with online victimization.

Through the formation of back stage team membership, the victims of cyberbullying seek informal support from their significant others (i.e. team members). AP employs this coping strategy by forming back stage team membership with her friends who were also cyberbullied by the same perpetrator. The back stage operation of victims is in contrast to the back stage operation of online bullies who also form teams (the theme that is explored more in the next chapter). While back stage membership formed by bullies does not have set boundaries resulting in the endorsement and proliferation of offensive content, the participants experiencing online victimization solicit trust and loyalty for their team members in their back stage. In doing so, they display their authentic selves and share genuine emotions. AP and her friends formed a back stage team that helped the victims of online cyberbullying and stalking to overcome their emotions of fear. Figure 7 illustrates AP's emotion of fear. When asked to describe her drawing, AP says:
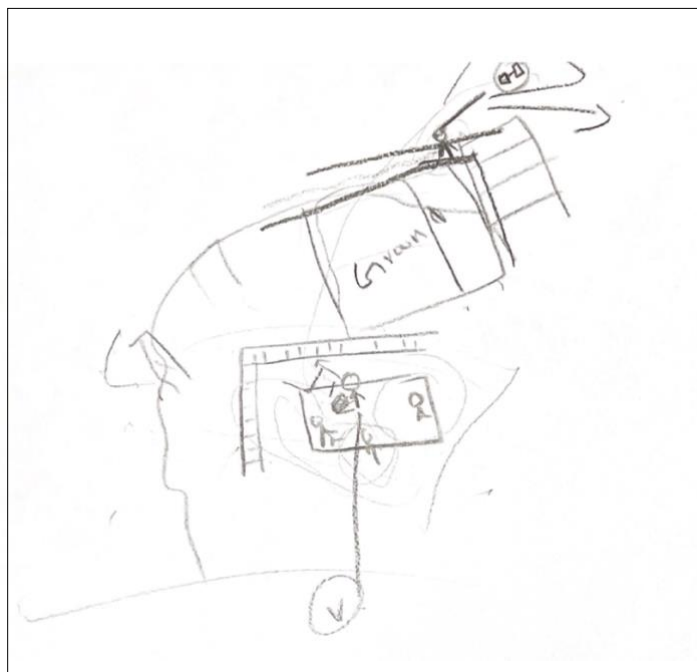
This small representation is about when I told that I was in kind of on a balcony with my family member, just looking at my phone, and then I got a notification saying, like, "I see you. You want me to come to your house and visit?" ... I saw someone behind this house just like peeking on my house. So that person had glasses on [the figure on the top right corner signified by two arrows pointing to the right]. *That is only what I could see. ... That was a really scary thing and you see the person there.*

Figure 7: AP's representation of cyberbullying

Adding to the description, AP also shared elsewhere during her interview that this scene (Figure 7) on the balcony would make her upset:

> *I would literally be shaking. My hands would just be shaking and then make my heart would be beating to be very fast. And I would just be angry all of a sudden. And the anger that I had here, I would later spill the anger on my little sister and even on the plants that didn't look good in my balcony ... and just break it, destroy it. I just could not control my anger.*

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the victims of online bullying commonly experience a spark of anger due to cyberbullying. According to AP, the perpetrator who tried to harass her online also targeted her friends by sending threatening text messages. Knowing that the same victimizer harassed them online, AP formed a back stage group where she sought emotional support from her friends. Thus, a collective experience of being cyber-bullied and harassed online helped these victims form a back stage team with the shared goal of providing support to each other (Goffman, 1959). Within this group setting, victims display their authentic selves to one another and contemplate ways to overcome their negative feelings. Within this group setting, the victims of online stalking and online bullying engaged in digital vigilantism as part of collective group resistance (Powell et al., 2018).

During the interview, I found out that AP and her friends took a retaliatory response to cyberbully the perpetrator as a way of seeking 'informal justice' that involved the process of responding to online victimization through personal networks, with no involvement of the formal justice bodies (Powell et al., 2018). Even though the visual representation of online stalking still evokes visceral feelings in AP, it is a representation of a meaningful moment for the participant. AP's sketch of the scene on the balcony elicits memories of fear while letting her "think

visually" (Alexander, 2013, p. 1). This is because the visual reminds her how the shared experience of online harassment helped the participant to form a back stage team that served two purposes. First, back stage team membership facilitated comfort and emotional support for each other. Second, back stage team membership facilitates retaliation and group resistance online (see, for example, Sundén & Paasonen, 2018, for online group empowerment). This was the most effective way for AP to manage and keep her emotions under control. This was the way for AP to cope with her online victimization. Back stage team operation is an important mechanism for participants to seek informal support to cope with their victimization. Informal support appears to be an effective approach to helping adolescents. However, informal support was not the most effective coping strategy that met the needs of all participants. Next, I offer another set of data that points towards to the implementation of other coping strategies.

6.7. (Un)availability of needed support and responses to cyberbullying

Participants identified informal support and team members as the most effective way of coping with cyberbullying victimization. Another commonly cited way of coping was holding the wrongdoer accountable for their online transgression. However, participants identified this approach as the least effective or realistic method for a few different reasons. Reporting about cyberbullying seemed ineffective because it puts participants at further risk of victimization (Faucher et al., 2014). My participants felt scared and vulnerable about being bullied again by the victimizer if the authorities found out about the victimizer's online behaviours (Coburn et al., 2015; Broll, 2016). My participants also cautioned against parents finding out about their online victimization. Once the school authorities are involved in the process of reporting, they notify parents about their kids' behaviour at school, which is usually perceived negatively. This made participants feel vulnerable. Moreover, my participants identified common challenges surrounding establishing proof beyond a reasonable doubt and establishing factual consequences of cyberbullying in physical reality (Todd 2008; Henry, 2013; Željko, 2021). But all participants believed that serious consequences arising from cyberbullying (such as suicide and self-harm) must be penalized. For these different reasons, interviewees commonly avoid reporting and taking a reactive approach to fighting against their online victimizers, which leaves them with the choice of learning to cope with their online victimization.

Participants should find a way to cope with their online victimization when reporting may cause more problems than non-reporting. Similar to AP's approach to coping with online victimization, a few participants indicated the importance of having both informal and formal support, especially when the victimization involves self-blaming, internalization and loneliness discussed in the previous chapter. When asked about needs, participants reflected on the need for adult intervention, including parents, teachers, and school administration, the need to have formal support, as well as responses to cyberbullying based on a restorative justice approach that is based on non-judgmental views and understanding of the participant, rather than blaming them for their online behaviour. Participants' recommendations in support of a restorative justice approach are described in the next few paragraphs.

Interviewees mentioned that having an active and understanding listener helps them to process negative emotions. While informal support can be offered by friends, participants still needed better support from parents. As G stated earlier, adult intervention could have made her

healing journey lighter. In a similar fashion, Lindy and Raj advocate for better adult supervision and intervention that could help the victim to improve their self-esteem:

> *Well, I think adult intervention. Or parent I will say parent, um, parents being a little more. Well, supervision for sure, and also demonstrating better behavior and correcting behavior. I think that would have made a difference. I guess bringing children's self-esteem up would also make a difference.* (Lindy)

> *Bringing elder or someone in authority like involving them will be a good way because the bullying won't actually take anything you say seriously because they look down on you. So having someone of authority tell them, 'Look, what you're doing is not right and there are going to be consequences if this happens again' – that will definitely stop it for sure.* (Raj)

My study participants like Lindy and Raj believe that adult intervention will be helpful to decrease online transgression and help the victim in overcoming the negative consequences of online bullying. Adult guidance will help the victim to develop better self-esteem, while supervision will help the bully understand the consequences of their action. Participants' suggestions are in accordance with Broll and Reynolds' study (2021) conducted in Ontario, where an authoritative parenting style was found to be effective at preventing youths from engaging in online misconduct.

In addition to parental intervention, one might assume that teachers and school administration should play a central role in supporting young people and facilitating discussions. However, my participants who attended high school in Manitoba did not endorse the idea of teachers' and principals' active involvement in facilitating conversations among teens. Participants who reported cyberbullying aggression felt powerless and ignored because the school administration could not effectively prevent or stop online misbehaviours. Although school principals had conversations with the cyber-bully, these discussions did not yield positive results, such as reducing online harm. A suspension for a day was a common response to cyberbullying. This response, according to my participants, was ineffective. It could further victimize teens because reporting encouraged bullies to single out and blame the victims for reporting. Another reason victims would choose not to report to school administration relates to their parents finding out about their engagement in cyberbullying, which they believe is a negative experience. Parental support was helpful if the child's involvement in online transgression was not associated with school sanctioning and misbehaviour. Parents perceived their children opening up about their experiences more positively than schools reporting about their children's online transgression and misbehaviour. Whereas the latter was deemed as a negative experience, the former led to a positive parent-child relationship where advise, guidance, and understanding helped the victims to improve their self-esteem.

I also noticed that none of the participants tried to report to police or SROs, as they did not think reporting would bring positive changes. The interview data suggest that parental intervention would be more helpful in helping victims to cope with the stresses arising from online bullying and preventing them to engage in cyberbullying as retaliation. This finding is contrary to Broll and Howells' (2019) study on the responses to cyberbullying where a

partnership among teachers, school resource officers, and parents was found to be an effective way for responding to online bullying. Participants did not believe in reporting to authorities would bring positive changes. My data suggest that informal support and parental supervision based on mutual understanding are the most appropriate ways to help people cope with cyberbullying victimization.

Moreover, participants who attended middle and high school outside of the country deliberately avoided reporting online victimization and hesitated to share their experiences with adults for various reasons, such as shaming and stigma and victim blaming. The generational gap between the interviewees and their parents deterred them from reporting. The interviewees' parents had a difficult time understanding what cyberbullying is and why it was harmful to the participant. The parents blamed the victims of cyberbullying for attracting negative attention. Without understanding how cyberbullying affects participants' mental health, parents and teachers blamed the victim and advised them not to report it to law enforcement:

> *Parents would not understand about that because they just were never with technology and things like that. So being through it all alone and just thinking about social media and now how I present myself there, it's like very hard to just completely go there. I just cannot.* (AP)

AP expresses what participants mean by the "generation" or "age" gap. This quote stands for the importance of lived experience like Bob did in Chapter 4 (in this case, growing up with technology and being bullied online).

Moreover, AP compares why it is difficult for her parents to understand the difficulty associated with coping with online bullying. Thus, the only support AP had at the time of her encounter with an online stalker was her group of close friends, as opposed to her parents or teachers.

> **AP:** *We didn't make a case because our parents … were like, yeah, this is, you don't want to get into police. I mean, you are just so little. They're going to question you about things. You have to focus on your study.*
>
> **Bilguundari:** *What about, you know, your teachers?*
>
> **AP:** *We didn't tell our teachers.*
>
> **Bilguundari:** *Why?*
>
> **AP:** *The environment is not like that. We don't have, we didn't have counselors back home. And just like teachers do teach. Purely academic. And then because the teachers are mostly so nervous as well, it's this small place. Everyone knows each other. So if the thing goes outside the house, everyone's going to know. That's why we didn't share it with anyone.*

Through this conversation, it is evident one's culture impacts theirs as well as their parents' decisions to report online transgression to law enforcement. Reporting to authorities, including teachers or requesting to see a therapist was seen as culturally unacceptable and stigmatizing as well:

> *No, we don't have counselors in general, even if they do. People don't really go there because it's considered a taboo kind of because mental health is not really. Awareness about mental health is not that prevalent in [the participant's home country] yet. If you do plan on going to a counselor or a psychologist, it's considered as "Oh, something's wrong with you"* **(Blossom)**.

To 'solve' the problem on their own without any needed support, participants take a 'hard on themselves' approach that often consists of self-blaming and internalization. In order to cope with the stresses arising from cyberbullying, they often delete and remove online content, delete chat messages, and block the victimizer's accounts. With no informal support, their only support is their close friends. Close friends and some family members were helpful to them in providing emotional support, but these significant others tended to blame the victim for attracting negative attention online and suggesting victims remove, delete, and block the perpetrator from their online pages. These short-term solutions made my participants feel guilty for having an online presence.

The short-term solution does not address the needs of victims. The victims of online bullying, harassment, and hate prefer having one-on-one support with a school counsellor or even a psychologist. As mentioned previously, victims of online bullying oftentimes feel lonely and do not receive or have access to emotional support. My study participants proposed to increase the number of school counsellors to help them with guiding, processing their emotions, overcoming the problem they have, and addressing problems they have with their peers. Similar to AP's informal strategy of creating back stage team membership, victims of online bullying will treat school counsellors as 'members' of their back stage team and be open to sharing back stage feelings, language, and emotions. With this need, some participants of my study raised the concern about developing a sense of accountability among the victims of cyberbullying that could become an effective approach for coping, with which I conclude this chapter on virtual self-presentation and coping strategies.

6.8. Developing a sense of agency and responsibility
Although having informal support from close friends and younger family members is more helpful than not having any support, participants still focused on the need for accessing formal support. For instance, Marceline stresses the significance of having formal counsellor support. This sort of support helps the victim to manage their feeling of loneliness. However, in the absence of formal counselling, Marceline takes an advocative and proactive approach to help victims of online transgression. They state:

> *They [those who have been bullied] are alone and they're like isolated in their experience… That's something that I felt a lot…. So I feel like a good support actually would be an outreach program…. It's a program where like you can go and you can just kind of sit down and have tea. And everyone in the room has had a very similar*

experience… And like you could have a therapist in there and you can like work together on self-improvement in a group, which is. Social therapy is really important because like it gives a sense of accountability, but it also stops you from feeling alone with your struggles.

This proactive approach focuses on the victim and precludes adult intervention (except for a therapist or a counsellor). People with similar experiences – facing online aggression – will have the opportunity to be listened to. This will help with their feelings of loneliness and create a sense of community, where their past experience is acknowledged and listened to (Das et al., 2019). Moreover, Marciline suggests that this type of restorative-based and victim-centered response will help the victim to develop "*a sense of accountability [agency]* " that gives the victim hope, motivates the victim to heal and develop a sense of security. This type of a restorative-based response may be equally helpful for the victims of online transgression to develop a sense of agency, which grants them a sense of control, rather than feelings of hopelessness and despondency.

Furthermore, G offered another type of response to cyberbullying from a restorative justice lens. G believes that the wrongdoer (or the bully) should develop a sense of responsibility that makes them understand how bullying makes victims feel:

At first they do need to understand that it's not okay to hurt other people just because they want to feel better about yourself or just because you think that, you know, you can do that…

By providing teens with the opportunity to empathize with their victims and take accountability for their online misconduct, cyber-bullies may learn to present themselves differently in virtual spaces and reduce their online transgression. This approach helps cyber-bullies to change their mindset through empathy and taking responsibility that may result in change (Corrigan, & Robertson, 2015). As it will be discussed in the next chapter, when the cyber-bullies feel empathy towards the victim, they feel guilt and regret for their actions and understand the harms they caused to the victim. These feelings help the bullies to desist from engaging in cyberbullying further. Thus, these two different approaches (creating a sense of agency in the victim and developing a sense of responsibility in the bully) suggested by my participants speak to the needed formal support. My participants voice the need for taking empathy-based approach where a counsellor offers non-judgmental and understanding support (through active listening or guidance, for example) to the victims of bullying and helps the bully to understand the harm they caused to the victim. These approaches to responding to online transgression may be helpful for young adults having the same experiences as my participants did when they were teenagers.

6.9. Conclusion

This chapter focused on the presentation of self from cyber-bullied victims' perspectives and coping strategies. The experience of being cyber-bullied forms one's identity of online victimization. The experience of identifying as a cyber-victim shapes how participants present their virtual and non-virtual selves. In particular, those who identify as cyber-bullied use different techniques to present themselves online. These participants' previous experiences shape their active engagement in controlling their front and back stages of virtual dramaturgy, where

impression management separating the virtual front and back stages plays a central role in the presentation of a virtual self in everyday life. With the integration of visual data, I have unpacked the ways victims of online bullying cope with their victimization and the role the concept of the presentation of the self plays in the process of coping with online victimization. Back stage team membership was most commonly used as a coping mechanism. Other ways of coping include informal support from significant others and coping with online victimization individually, the latter being the hardest way of overcoming the negative consequences of cyberbullying. Moreover, the participants who identify as victims of online bullying suggest that creating a sense of agency that gives hope and motivation helps overcome the consequences of cyberbullying. Participants also suggest that keeping the perpetrators accountable by letting them understand the results of their actions may help prevent further victimization from happening among young people. Most importantly, this chapter concludes with a note on the needed intervention and support, such as empathy-based soft approaches to responding to cyberbullying. This approach to responding to cyberbullying involves professional support from counsellors, therapists, and psychologists. It was found that young people who must cope with their online victimization do not have access to mental health support providers. With these findings, the next chapter uncovers what virtual self-presentation means for those who identify as bullies, why they choose to engage in cyberbullying, and the types of response to cyberbullying they endorse. The exploration of the presentation of self from the victim and victimizer perspectives offers readers a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

7. Exploring cyber-bullies' virtual presentation of self

7.1. Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I have explored how participant self-identity shapes what cyberbullying is and the virtual presentation of self. Whereas I have focused on the narratives of cyber-bullied participants and their virtual self-presentation in the previous chapter, using the same analogy, below I examine how cyber-bullies conduct their selves in virtual reality. I look at the concepts, such as masking, the projection of ideal selves through manner and appearance, and the operation of the back stage from cyber-bullies' perspectives drawing from the interview and visual data. Participants who assume the identity of a cyber-bully, just like their counterparts who self-identify as cyber-bullied, use these concepts of the dramaturgical model to present their virtual and non-virtual selves in their everyday life. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model informs our understanding how the self is presented online and why young people who self-identify as bullies choose to engage in specific forms of virtual self-presentation. After analyzing these techniques employed by young people, this chapter concludes with a discussion on popular media and influencer culture. Analyzing the interview data I suggest that popular and social media may be used to facilitate cyberbullying. The increasing influencer culture on social media appears to be powerful in shaping young people's perception of reality and truth. This is an important point as this influencer culture can unintentionally facilitate the growth of cyberbullying, which leads to the next chapter on my discussions of what the findings of this and the previous chapters mean for our society and young people's lives.

7.2. Masking and inauthenticity online

A phenomenological analysis of interview data suggests that cyber-bullies, similar to their counterparts, use the masking technique to display their ideal selves to their public online

audience. Persson (2012) argues that when using online platforms, people lose their ability to control their thoughts and social norms. The author contends that performers should keep in their back stage unconsidered expressions and the processes involved in 'thinking out-loud'. These expressions and thinking processes should be masked on the front stage and not shared with the public audience. However, Persson (2012) argues that with the facilitation of digital communication, these unconsidered expressions constitute oversharing on social media, which does not uphold social norms. Echoing Persson's (2012) argument, cyber-bullied participants believe social media and online existence provide bullies with a chance to express their *"unfiltered selves"* (Fayi, see Chapter 4). While what Persson (2012) argues is true for participants who identify as cyber-bullied, the opposite is true for those, who choose to identify as bully. For instance, Michele does not engage in oversharing on social media. Oversharing and 'thinking out-loud' online are not what Michele chooses to display online. Similarly, Bob Boski explains that when people communicate online, they need to "*capture attention or say what you want in the briefest way.*" For Bob, there is no room in virtual communication to overshare. For Bob, "oversharing" online can be disadvantageous to carry on a conversation with others because it could create misunderstandings. Participants who identify as bullies use the masking technique to communicate with others in their virtual world. This suggests that online bullies can control their back stage unconsidered expressions. Online bullies do not choose to display back stage unconsidered expressions on their front stage when communicating online.

However, similar to bullied participants, the bullies also deliberately employ a masking technique. Responses such as "*[W]hen it comes to online, I definitely want to show people what they want to see…*" (Michele) or "*pretty opposite of how I really am in life*" (Michele) and *"I feel like with the power of the Internet nowadays, you have like the power to, you know, make it your own and present yourself any sort of way that you may want to, even if it's, like, drastically different from your real life"* (Jean It Jack) were frequently shared during interviews. Michele and Jean It Jack both identify as a bully and bullied. Both the bullies and the bullied choose to use a masking technique to portray a self-image that is appealing to their online audience. In order to appear well-liked to their front stage audience, Michele chooses to respond contrary to her reality. Assuming the inauthentic self (staging a self that does not correspond to Michele's reality), Michele engages in a masking technique that conceals her true emotions. This is well-illustrated by the example she shared with me. When Michele is bullied online, she conceals her real feelings and emotions from an online audience and treats the bully the same way as she was treated. It means that Michele would engage in online bullying and she would bully back the victimizer. This online behaviour, consequently, makes Michele identify as a cyber-bully. Michele's response to online bullying where she chooses to retaliate by bullying back is an example of front stage masking, where a performer has the ability to mask their authentic self, depending on their assessment of the situation. In this case, Michele decides to 'wear' the mask of a bully on the front stage and conceal her true emotions and feelings on her back stage. Therefore, just like bullied participants decide to show their ideal selves on their front stage by masking and concealing their true feelings and emotions (see the previous chapter for the discussion of the concealment of activities inconsistent with an ideal self-projection), bullies also choose to use a masking technique to conceal their true emotions and feelings.

Because bullies aim to conceal their true emotions and feelings, they favor in-person communication over virtual communication. It was evident that in-person communication not

only makes their conversation with others easier, but also enables them to assume their authentic self. For instance, even though Michele displays her inauthentic self virtually through the use of a masking technique, she also acknowledges that a more authentic and realistic self would be displayed whenever the interaction takes place in-person. Both cyber-bullies and the bullied display their authentic selves during in-person communication. With the virtual communication method, participants (regardless of their identity as a bully or not) tend to display their inauthentic selves:

> *Just because there's that face to face interaction. You're more yourself and I feel like other people are more themselves and there's really authentic communication. And so recently especially I've really gathered this appreciation for like in-person over social media.* (John)

> *'Cause like, when you are in person ... you can locate the other person's emotions. You can tell the emotions.* (Blue)

> *But the thing is, the face to face interactions, they can like explain and evenly keep the person and explain for them what I mean.* (Bob Bobski)

Participants agree that they benefit from what in-person interactions can offer in terms of reading emotional cues and body language and arriving at a mutual understanding. Participants agree that they display their authentic selves during physical interactions.

Therefore, the data suggest that masking and displaying an inauthentic self online is common for both the cyber-bullies and the cyber-bullied. Yet, the motivation to mask one's real authentic self differs between the bullied and the bullies. Participants who were frequently bullied mask their negative experiences associated with cyberbullying. Instead of projecting their authentically sad self on their front stage as a result of being bullied online, they learn to conceal these feelings and project their ideal selves. In contrast, those who frequently responded to cyberbullying by taking a defensive approach, usually ended up becoming bullies themselves. These people learn to mask their authentic identity to defend themselves and to communicate with others in the same manner they were treated online. This is the behaviour bullied participants display on their front stage. Bullies learn to keep their authentic selves in their private back stage, which is in contrast to Persson's (2012) findings. These participants take a defensive approach in response to their online victimization. In doing so, their sincere feeling towards others are kept in their back stage, but the focus on a defensive approach (i.e. bullying back) is revealed on their front stage. Moreover, bullies who choose to conceal their authentic self through masking prefer having in-person communication as opposed to communicating virtually. In-person non-virtual communication provides the chance to read emotions and body language and enables them explain themselves in situations where any misunderstandings arise.

7.3. Projection of ideal selves in front stage: manner and appearance
In addition to using a masking technique and projecting an inauthentic self, bullies engage in active management of their front stage through manner and appearance (Goffman, 1959). The presentation of self from bullies' perspectives is dependent on the manner and appearance of bullies on their front stage. While manner stands for given and direct expressions,

appearance denotes given off and indirect performance. Goffman (1959) suggests that in physical reality, manner and appearance oftentimes are in congruence with each other and serve the purpose of projecting the self that is compatible and desirable for the public audience. Interestingly, the same analogy applies in situations of virtual communication in the context of cyberbullying. Online bullies operate their front stage through appearance and manner that are congruent with each other. The operation of their 'front' stage saves cyber-bullies appearance and manner.

It is noteworthy that similar to those who experience online victimization, those who identify as online bullies also engage in the act of projecting their ideal selves. Their self-idealization is manifested by appearance. When participants switch their identity from being a cyber-bullied participant to a cyber-bully, they engage in the projection of their ideal selves using manner and appearance in their front stage. The following are the reasons why cyber-bullies choose to use manner and appearance for projecting an ideal self on their front stage.

First of all, participants who bullied others online indicated that they engaged in this behaviour to gain power or to improve their self-esteem by victimizing their peers. In other words, projecting an ideal self that looks confident is the reason they choose to bully others online. This, consequently, made them popular among high schoolers. According to Raj, cyberbullying occurs "*because when you're a teenager, most of the cyberbullying … happens… When you're young. When you're still involved in social status like public popularity.*" Appearing to be a bully for public popularity on a front stage is what online bullies aim to portray. In this given situation where cyber-bullies are expected to be confident in their front stage, they decide to save their status through cyberbullying. In a similar vein as Raj has analyzed, situating online trolling in a political context to analyze how trolling has been normalized in the digital era, Hannan (2018) argues that the new culture of online media shapes our society, politics, and legislation. The scholar states, "[i]n the mental universe of social media, truth is a popularity contest" (p. 220). Cyber-bullies achieve notoriety and maintain it by engaging in bullying behaviours while constructing *truth* for themselves (despite it being untrue, offensive, and derogatory). The notoriety achieved through cyberbullying is projected as a front stage appearance in their virtual world.

At another time, the same participant also raised the issue of gaining and maintaining self-confidence by saying that online bullies and traditional bullies target the victim who is incapable of defending themselves. This type of online transgression is common among young people, as engaging in cyberbullying is associated with gaining power. Raj states that they "look down" on the victim:

> It [bullying] shouldn't matter to you or what other people are saying, as long as you have that strong self-esteem. I think that's also what the bullies look. They look for someone with weak self-esteem that they've been through [or can pick on or prey on].

Gaining popularity by targeting their peers with low self-esteem is identified as a motive for online bullying. And this motivation manifests on the bully's virtual front stage, similar to Rafferty and Vander Ven's (2014) findings, where overpowering victims was one of the main motivations of online bullying. Digital technologies facilitate cyberbullying and online

victimization. With the assistance of digital technologies, online bullies construct and shape the practices of cyberbullying. Power relations among young people motivate them to display a virtual front-stage appearance that can cause digital harm.

Echoing Raj's point about cyber-bullies, Lindy shares below her insight about self-confidence and appearance.

> *I think a lot of people are putting whatever they're, that is, that they're carrying out into the world. Right? That's like, low self-esteem. Just like my. My daughter's bully there. You know, I. I really feel like it's starting at home, and, you know, maybe they feel, you know, a little bit powerless. And like I said, that computer screen offers anonymity, right? So it's just a way for people to maybe lash out at other people and, you know, maybe. Express that anger that they're feeling. You know, that started as a in childhood.*

Lindy focuses on the significance of the feelings of powerlessness and powerfulness when she describes the bully. Impolite online behaviour and the projection of anger represent the online bully's given off expressions in virtual reality. Moreover, Lindy shares another example where her younger relative experiences cyberbullying on Snapchat (a mainstream social media platform). This example serves to show how bullies use given expressions to present their virtual manners. Cyber-bullies create online group chats on Snapchat, post and share offensive content on group chats therein, then send invitations to the victim. A popular social media platform is used to facilitate online bullying in a group setting by targeting Lindy's relative. In this example, the cyber-bully's given expression consists of the behaviours of creating, posting, and inviting others into their group chats. This given expression, thus, stands for a manner that the bully projects on their front stage. Similar to everyday self-presentation, Goffman's concept of front stage dramaturgy, manner, and appearance is applicable in the context of cyberbullying.

Secondly, aside from gaining and maintaining power manifested through manner and appearance, bullies benefit from the entertainment value cyberbullying offers. By 'roasting' their peers and strangers on social media pages, online bullies justify their actions because they attach more value to the entertainment aspect associated with cyberbullying. The degree of entertainment interacts with the maintenance of power because the virtual appearance of a cyber-bully demands frequent posting and commenting online that the public audience would also find entertaining (even if the content is morally offensive). In a front stage dramaturgical sense, the appearance and status of a bully projected online are reinforced through posts and comments that are considered to be funny. This finding aligns with Rafferty and Vander Ven's (2014) study where they identified the motivations for cyberbullying being entertainment and power struggles. This finding adds another layer for identifying the motivation for why youths engage in cyberbullying aside from other motivations, such as online transgression providing them with thrill, affection, and seduction (Goldsmith & Wall, 2022; Yar, 2012; Katz, 1988). These motivations manifest through their public appearance (e.g. targeting their peers online for entertainment).

Moreover, participants argued that the aspect of entertainment associated with cyberbullying helps relieve the feeling of boredom. Using appearance and manner in their virtual front stage, bullies get to do something else that is entertaining and 'fun':

But I didn't like targeting anyone specifically. It was just a period of my life when I was growing [in my free time] (Bob Bobski)

They're putting down someone else, so they could feel big about themselves. I feel like it comes from people like does come from boredom too. People who are bored. So people are like they have nothing to do with their lives. So they try to entertain themselves by like finding a way to like, you know, make it seem like they're like this big guy and they get like fight people. (Jean It Jack)

Coherent with Agnew's (1992) general strain theory (as cited in Holt & Bossler, 2016), these interviews exemplify how participants' feelings of boredom can be addressed by "*putting down someone else*" (Jean It Jack). As described in Chapter 2, the literature on cyberbullying transgression suggest that consequential strains, such as the failure to achieve positively valued goals, loss of positive-valued stimuli, and presentation of negative stimuli, lead youths to be involved in criminal activities, including illicit activities online. Adding to this body of literature, the participants I interviewed generally agree that victimizers act out of boredom and loneliness they often experience in their physical reality (like self-identified cyber-victims experience loneliness). Online platforms become the space for teens to engage in actions such as online bullying, ridiculing, and shaming. From the virtual dramaturgical perspective, the back stage feeling of boredom and loneliness is a consequential strain participants experience. However, this feeling is projected on the front stage in the form of entertainment. It also helps the bully to maintain their virtual appearance of a "*big [powerful] guy .... getting to fight people*" (Jean It Jack). The entertainment value of cyberbullying manifests through the projection of power in the virtual front stage, which makes the bully to appear as a powerful teen.

Thirdly, among the 14 participants I interviewed, one stated that regardless of entertainment and power relations (or the feeling of powerlessness) that cyberbullying offer, young people should learn to negotiate with others when communicating online. Bob Bobski believes that cyberbullying could limit freedom of speech and *"the democratic spirit of the world."* Despite experiencing traditional and online bullying victimization himself, the participant interprets cyberbullying as a phenomenon that might be helpful for young people to learn to communicate better, as the interview excerpt demonstrates below:

Bob Bobski: *I think there might be some value in cyberbullying.*

Bilguundari: *Okay, what is it?*

Bob Bobski: *But not in the bullying itself. But I'm like, I'm trying to kind of blame the victim a little bit, where we must learn how to interact with people and not like. Really. Try to discuss without feeling offended and. And they think that's like a problem in our Internet age, also the age we grew up in, which was like, very comfortable.*

Bilguundari: *Yeah.*

Bob Bobski: *Where it's hard to take the negative things of the world into yourself. You can like, but then negativity should exist and like will exist that it's like trying to get rid of cyberbullying or like that kind of efforts ultimately hurt.*

Bilguundari: *The victim more?*

Bob Bobski: *No, democracy itself, where you are. You can take, the, like, the things that you perceive as negative. And then ultimately you can't talk to your fellow citizens because like they might say some things that they think that are right. But you feel offended by it and that kind of breaks apart the democratic spirit of the world.*

This participant's view about cyberbullying offers a new addition to the existing literature. Bob Bobski's reasons for justifying "*the democratic spirit of the world*" is different than what the previous literature on virtual media communications found. For example, Lumsden (2019) found that some online activist groups do not believe in causing harm to victims and they negate the possible consequences of digital violence. Bob's thoughts on cyberbullying differ from what Lumsden suggests. Bob believes that digital violence (including cyberbullying) is harmful to the victim, but in contrast to Lumsden (2019), he places emphasis on having discussions and arriving at mutual agreement, instead of using online platforms to continuously shame the victim. Bob also believes that jumping to make conclusions without having discussions will limit one's ability to freely express themselves online. But at the same time, he struggles to find a way that will enable him to have discussions online without being interpreted as offensive. Perhaps Figure 1 (in Chapter 1) points toward the lack of the possibility to hold meaningful discussions online, as the virtual cyberspace that Bob describes "*traps the person in the black box*" and access to "*the Internet makes it so inconvenient [for people] to go out and interact with [each other]*" as Bob described Figure 1.

Experiencing what it is like to be both bullied and a bully himself, Bob sees some value in this phenomenon: instead of proliferating online confrontations, young people need to learn to build negotiation skills. The interpretative (hermeneutic) phenomenological analysis helps us understand Bob's input about cyberbullying. At face value, the participant communicates his intention of "*blaming the victim*" when talking about cyberbullying and its value for entertainment and power relations. However, most importantly, the underlying meaning of the expression "*blaming the victim*" connects to Bob's critical reflections regarding growing up with the Internet in the digital age. The digital age makes the younger generation feel indifferent about their peers and limits the development of better communication skills. In a dramaturgical sense, Bob suggests back stage feelings should not be conflicted with the performer's front stage appearance. Those who often engage in cyberbullying misbehaviour lack impression management (separation of front and back stages of performance) while being online. Consequently, back stage feelings stand out on the front stage in the form of given off expressions or appearance (Kilvington, 2021; Persson, 2012). This is possible because online space offers a virtual reality where a toxic form of online disinhibition (Suler, 2004; Udris, 2014) kept in the back stage is projected on the cyber-bully's front stage. As Bob suggests, with improved levels of impression management, both bullies and bullies can avoid online conflicts.

7.4. Online bullies and the operation of their back stage

In addition to Bob's critical reflection, other interviewees elaborate on what the virtual environment offers for bullies with respect to back stage impression management and team membership. Participants spoke of the projection of anger, the feeling of regret, as well as team membership, in which back stage performance plays a central role. This enables the readers to understand my participants' subjective ways of interpreting virtual self-presentation in the context of cyberbullying.

Contemplating the cause of online bullying, Lindy takes a sympathetic approach and offers a non-judgmental explanation. Instead of seeking mistakes in the younger generation, she blames technology that facilitates online bullying and the environment teens grew up in. Analyzing why cyberbullying occurs among the younger generation, Lindy steps back from directly blaming the victimizer, but attributes their online behaviour to their social environment and access to technology. More specifically, Lindy identifies the projection of anger being the source of an online transgression, such as cyberbullying. For example, *"express[ing] that anger that they're feeling… that started in childhood"* is what Lindy describes as the underlying cause of online bullying for young people. Lindy's explanation is similar to Marciline's (see Chapter 6), where the participant attributes the cause of online bullying to the bully themselves when Marciline says *"No, it's not necessarily about me. It's probably actually about something else."*

These examples illustrate the lack of regulation of the back and front stages of dramaturgical model (Goffman, 1959). Personal problems or strains that young people experience at home and school become the reason for causing digital harm to their peers. The strain or the anger experienced in childhood are supposed to be kept in back stage area. However, the back stage anger experienced in the victimizer's social environment (whether it is home, or school; parents or teachers) is projected in the form of conflict onto the performer's front stage (Agnew, 1992; Persson, 2012; Kilvington, 2021). In this context, the lack of impression management, again, helps us understand cyberbullying. Put otherwise, virtual interaction blurs the line between front and back stages, whereby a performer's self-control is lost on the front stage and back stage anger is projected to the front (Kilvington, 2021).

The lack of the separation of the front and back stages of virtual communication was associated with online bullying during pandemic times. Several participants demonstrated their interpretation of cyberbullying during the time of the global pandemic. According to Fayi, social media replaced in-person interactions and, by extension, social media has become the virtual space where bullies would portray themselves with angst and project their anger onto the victims of cyberbullying. Fayi states:

> *Everyone's in lockdown just on social media all at once. With all these, you know, emotions that are hitting the walls left, right and center, things are just going to spill out. People are going to be irritated, People are going to be angry. And it's not necessarily angry at the person.*

Like Lindy, Fayi's offers another sympathetic perspective about cyber-bullies. Given the context of the global lockdown, she gives an emphasis to the fact that people were generally distressed and people were *"not necessarily angry at the person [the bullied victim]."* The social drawback

of lockdowns impacted people's ability of keeping their back stage anger and feelings on the back stage. The failure to regulate their back and front stages, consequently, increased online bullying and hate. In a similar vein, Marciline also says that at the time of the lockdown, people became more *"tense"* and that she *"got picked a lot more."* Participants noted the increase in cyberbullying during this time, and they attributed online bullies' behaviour to the pandemic lockdown causing distress on them. This suggests that online bullies experienced difficulty managing their back stage feeling, such as anger, by projecting it onto their front stage. The context of the global event have an impact on young people's online behaviour, and the COVID-19 event influenced young people and the way they manage their back and front stages of everyday virtual living.

At the same time as participants like Lindy, Fayi, and Marciline help a sympathetic approach about cyber-bullies' behaviours, online bullies themselves were remorseful about their online actions. Despite their lack of regulation of anger and impression management, cyber-bullies feel guilty about their action. The following conversation I had with Bob Bobski explicitly describes his thought process with respect to identifying as a cyber-bully:

> It was just a period of my life when I was growing. I wanted to be like edgy. And looking back, I sincerely regret it. I guess. I know that if I was in the reverse position. I know what will happen to me. Which is like, I'm gonna be devastated and quiet because of it.

Situating himself in the victim's position prevents Bob from bullying others again. Indeed, Bob is not alone in openly sharing what makes up the experience of being a cyber-bully and his decision to stop, as Raj feels likewise:

> I only did it, I did it once. I made a comment. I was so immature… but I feel like an asshole for many years to come. So I'm sure cyberbully, they must feel bad (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Raj's representation of cyberbullying

Raj drew a portrait of his classmate who he once bullied. This drawing carries emotions in relation to assuming two different identities of a bully and bullied. Knowing what being bullied feels like, Raj regrets about the moment when he offended his classmate and says:

Regardless of what I said to her. She's doing good for herself… I feel regret, but I think I've done my part by telling her I'm sorry for what I did. I can't live with that. And on my heart forever.

This portrait serves as a reminder for the participant that bullying involves hurtful emotions for the victim and feelings of regret for the bully. The participant has experiences of being a bully and bully, and Figure 8 is his representation of the two identities. With this visual presentation, Raj 'thinks out loud' (Lauterbach, 2018) and the visual helps him to describe his inner feelings associated with cyberbullying identities that he had mentioned earlier during the interview session (Copes et al., 2018; Clark, 2010; Smith et al., 2019; Smith, 2004). Thinking out loud, Raj stated that he is in a *"healing process"* after experiencing a *"traumatic event"* that involved him being impersonated online. Regardless of his previous experience of cyber-victimization with irreversible consequences, Raj chose to focus on drawing a portrait of his victim. Raj's choice of portraying his victim conveys an extra layer of meaning. The portrait of Raj's victim overrides his own feelings of being a cyber-victim. With Figure 8, Raj prioritizes his victim's emotions and the harm he caused to his victim, rather than choosing to portray his victimization. Raj's visual presentation signifies his guilt associated with cyberbullying, feelings of regret and remorse, as well as the consequences of cyberbullying. These feelings are held in Raj's back stage and just like other participants' visual presentations, back stage emotions and feelings are displayed through the visual content. And similar to Bob, the feeling of regret prevents Raj from getting engaged in cyberbullying again.

Thus, these participants' feelings of guilt have resulted in regret. They take an empathetic approach towards their victims and they understand what harms they caused to their victims. Furthermore, for Bob, cyberbullying, which is a result of *"teenage angst,"* was connected to his self-exploration when he was a teen:

> *One of the reasons why I describe it as my teenage angst is the fact that I wanted to find who I am really, like finding my own authenticity. And then, you know, you make yourself kinda a part of it is just trying on other characters and want to just to see, but not like just to see, but like I believed that it [an online bully] was me. But in the end, it didn't turn out to be me.*

With this description of self-exploration, my participant touches upon multiple themes. Bob shares his experience of trying to be a different version of himself (or assuming a "decentralized, multiplicious, flexible …" identity online as suggested by Turkle, 1995, p. 264) while 'existing', 'being', and living a virtual life (described by Figure 1 in Chapter 4). Bob's feelings associated with guilt and regret would be kept within his back stage area. Because of his choice to disengage from future cyberbullying transgressions, Bob is able to regulate his back stage area while keeping it private from the public audience. This is an example of successful impression management, where Bob is authentic and true to himself and his beliefs. In this specific example, Bob's decision to disengage from cyberbullying contrasts with the proposition that bullies project their anger from the back stage to the front stage (as noted above and found by Kilvington, 2021). Just as the argument on projection of anger or the blurring of the back and front stages (Kilvington, 2021) is instrumental to understanding virtual self-presentation, equally important is the argument that online bullies empathize with victims through which their back stage operation is determined. This is a contribution to the literature on theatrical dramaturgy in the context of cyberbullying that deserves further exploration to look at the dynamics of online bullies' behaviours.

7.5. Back stage team membership

In addition to cyber-bullies self-reflecting about their online behaviours, they also share about back stage team membership. Back stage impression management where team membership is created plays a central role in the virtual presentation of the self. Goffman (1959) writes that in team settings, in the absence of a public audience, team members show each other their true and authentic selves. Despite team members displaying their authentic true selves to each other, Goffman notes that respecting boundaries even amongst team members is important. In contrast to Goffman's observations, my interview data suggest that there are no boundaries in group settings when teams are created online and operate in their back stage. While respecting boundaries in a team setting can prevail on the back stage among team members in physical reality, respecting boundaries on the virtual back stage seems to be limited. This is evident from the examples participants shared with respect to cyberbullying endorsement behaviour. Specifically, the creation of group chats and inviting the bullied to the virtual group chat sessions, publicly leaving offensive comments on social media platforms, and creating so-called 'roasting' pages among high school students on social media are examples pertaining to forming online team membership and endorsing one another's online transgression. This creates a group of bullies who lack regulation of their online behaviour through back stage impression management in team settings.

It is important to note that participants' intent makes a difference even when operating in group settings and forming team memberships. Back stage impression management in a team setting is operated differently when participants make a clear distinction between intentionally bullying and sharing in-group jokes that might be interpreted offensively by outsiders (out-group members). For example, the intention of deliberately targeting their peers and spreading rumours about them in online public group chats was counted as cyberbullying transgression. Given the anonymity and the possibility of avoiding responsibility in the virtual world, group members endorse each other's online transgression by violating an impression management rule operational among team members. Put otherwise, when team members intentionally engage in cyberbullying (for example, by creating 'roasting' public pages online), they do not respect boundaries within their team settings.

This is in contrast to instances when team members respect boundaries in their virtual settings like they respect boundaries when operating in non-virtual physical reality. Sharing in-group jokes in a team setting in the back stage private area in the absence of an audience is an example of back stage impression management. In contrast with intentional cyberbullying, the participants I interviewed stressed the importance of setting boundaries when conducting their virtual selves. Within the virtual boundaries, 'running jokes' or verbal expressions understood by in-group members were frequently shared online. My participants commonly engaged in impression management that respects boundaries with the intent to *"make someone else's life better [by sharing an in-group joke with no harm]"* (Marceline). John illustrates how he upholds back stage impression management within his in-group friendship circle:

> *Some might take me and my best friend's interaction as something that's mean. But we know we're joking. So we know that it's not meaningful. I also know that I would never say that to someone else because I don't know where our boundaries are and I don't know how they would take it. So for me, being online and having that screen and not*

being face to face, I just thought it was always a rule of mine that I would never ever be mean, or be joking around, or make fun of someone online. Because whether you're joking or not, they don't know that and they don't know what your boundaries are.

Being cognizant of possible implications of online communication, John explains where and how boundaries are placed among his friends and with strangers online. A joke might get interpreted as an offence without knowing what the boundaries and limitations are in virtual settings. Jokes shared with friends or in a team setting occur on virtual back stage where the external audience does not have access to this virtual back stage. The formation of team membership and respecting their boundaries in the back stage prevents John and his friends from bullying non-team members online.

Aside from the formation of virtual team membership, the use of language on back stage enhances communication among team members. When asked to compare in-person communication with online form, Lindy tells that she would *"[l]augh more, swear more, and joke around more"* when she is having virtual conversations with her team members. The in-group jokes Lindy shares are not interpreted as offensive by her back stage team members, but it would otherwise be interpreted as offensive by people outside of her team. Goffman (1959) writes that sloppy language is shared among team members on back stage dramaturgy in physical reality. Similarly, group members share 'running jokes' that are sloppy and careless in everyday virtual reality. Thus, when team members set boundaries and respect their boundaries virtually, like they do in non-virtual physical reality, they can avoid situations where an out-group member may find their online communication to be offensive. This finding contributes to the conceptualization of back stage team membership in the context of cyberbullying.

7.6. Cultural influence on front stage and normalization

Whereas 'running jokes' shared within virtual in-groups are kept on back stage, some kinds of offensive jokes or other content (in different visual and verbal forms) are broadcasted to the larger public through social media for entertainment (Yar, 2012), economic (Ibrahim, 2018; Ruiz-Gomez et al., 2022), and even political (Hannan, 2018) purposes. This is noted by the growing influencer culture shaping how people interact, think, and perceive reality (Abidin, 2015; 2016). Such an influence-glorified culture can perpetuate and reinforce cyberbullying for young adults and even provoke online transgression and crime in the physical world (Goldsmith & Wall, 2022; Cohen-Almagor, 2018). Popular influencers' motivations are to project the image of a mythically 'authentic' virtual self (Hurley, 2019). In this new influencer culture, online bullying and hate are introduced to young people and reinforced upon them (Cohen-Almagor, 2018). The consequence of the influencer culture is the exposure of young people to novel ideas and practices, including cyberbullying and online hate because my participants indicated that the younger generation have become de-sensitive to digital violence. Two examples below illustrate how influencers and popular culture shape adolescents' behaviour online.

Bob Bobski shared his experience of being *"inspired"* by what he used to watch on YouTube when he was a teen. An influencer known under the pseudonym Filthy Frank was a popular figure among young people when Bob was a teenager. As I have noted earlier, Bob's motivation to engage in cyberbullying was related to his self-exploration and a cure to his

boredom, which he described as *"teenage angst"*. In addition to these factors, Filthy Frank's YouTube content produced and shared online had an influence on Bob:

> **Bob Bobski:** *He used to go by the pseudonym of Filthy Frank, where he would be almost brutally honest. He calls it like equal prejudice, like everyone deserves hate equally. And, you know, at the time it was cool because I thought that was, like, brutal honesty…*

> **Bilguundari:** *Oh, interesting. Without him, do you think you would ever do this?*

> **Bob Bobski:** *Maybe. It was more about the part of life I was living. I mean, it was definitely inspired by, like, him, but not caused. You know, it's just like adding a little bit there.*

Even though Bob associates his previous active involvement in cyberbullying with his self-exploration (by stating *"it was more about the part of life I was living"*), his actions were justified by what Filthy Frank and Bob called *"brutal honesty",* where people were victimized by online bullying. The so-called brutally honest actions deem that *"everyone deserve[d] hate equally [online]"*. While popular figures, like the YouTuber Filthy Frank, have the intent to commodify their online content through entertainment, their unthoughtful online behaviour creates a perception for adolescents that not having boundaries or not respecting boundaries, as well as expressing themselves in a *"brutally honest"* language involving conflicts, hate, and bullying are normal and do not cause harm for victims. Technology and affordability in the digital age facilitate cyberbullying. The visibility of influencers also shapes what young people do online.

In fact, Abidin (2015) contends that growing up under the influence of 'microcelebrities' on social media is a common experience for the younger generation, which my participant John supports through his example on the prevalence of cyberbullying and its cultural implications:
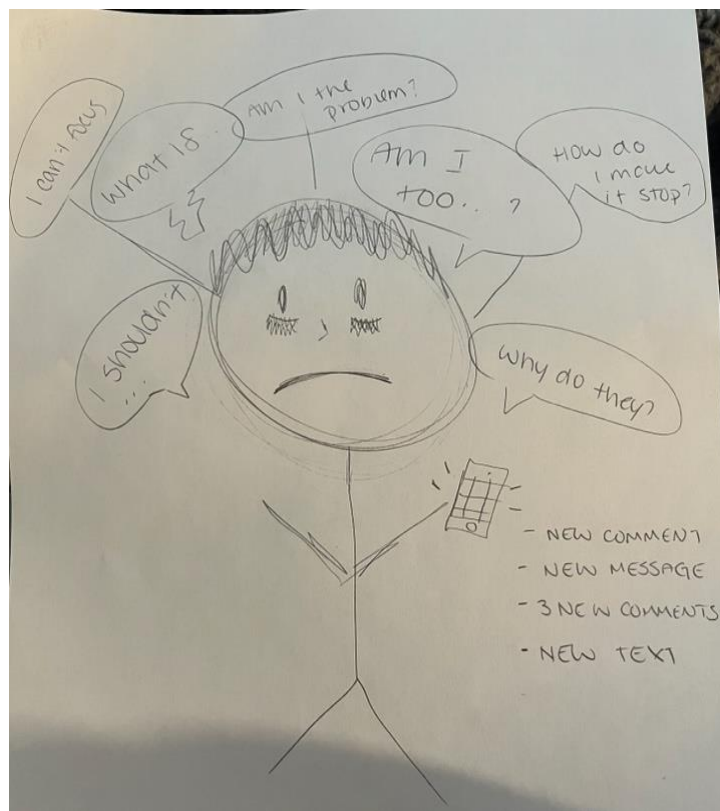
I feel like and I could be wrong, but I feel like maybe even mass media, whether it be movies, TV shows… They always speak against bullying. But in their movies or in these TV shows about teenagers, about high schoolers, there's always an aspect of bullying. And it's usually online now because they're trying to speak to their audience, which I understand. But I feel like, you know, especially the young kids are watching these shows. They are growing up thinking that that's normal and that's their image of the world and that's their representation of what's happening. And to me, mass media is a big just representation of the world for people… But I just feel like if kids see cyber bullying and all these high school movies and TV shows, they're going to think that "Oh, well, that's what just happened. That's normal." So I don't know. I feel like I don't know. That's my personal opinion, right?

Through this interview script, John contends with the idea of whether TV shows perpetuate cyberbullying or they help fight against online bullying. If young people are introduced to cyberbullying, the mainstream media becomes a part of the culture reinforcing online transgression among young people. As John says, although TV shows aim at reducing and showing the effects of cyberbullying, this effort desensitizes young people's perception of online communication and normalizes cyberbullying. John suggests that mainstream media introduce

teens to the concept of online bullying and reinforces it, despite having the intention to prevent or stop cyberbullying from happening.

Even though Bob and John were not brought up in the same geo-political and socio-cultural climate, growing up in the Internet age is what they share in common. Sharing similar views about the new influencer culture addresses how online culture and the presentation of self therein can be powerful in guiding young people's behaviours online. It is impactful for our society because it can normalize online transgression (Cohen-Almagor, 2018), or at the same time as Abidin illustrates (2019), influencers can develop narratives about cyberbullying, whereby influencers call for digital harm awareness and coping with their victimization strategies.

The discussion of normalization in the context of cyberbullying was repeated when John shared a drawing that associates his experience with the phenomenon of cyberbullying. John's visual representation of cyberbullying focuses on the negative effects of the phenomenon (Figure 9). Similar to what participants note in Chapter 5, these consequences represent John overthinking, being confused with the situation, and blaming himself for being himself online. A particular emphasis is placed on *"the frown and the bags under the eyes,"* which signifies the consequence online bullying has on physical health. However, with his observation of the role of the mainstream media shaping young people's virtual self-presentation, John suggests that changing publicly-shared stereotypical attitudes against racial and sexual minorities may help prevent online bullying from occurring. When asked about what could have prevented the persona on the drawing from appearing the way it appears, John said the following:

Figure 9: John's representation of cyberbullying

I think, you know, this might be unrealistic, but I think the best way to do it is to just normalize all these things that are being made fun of. Right? Like the only reason they they can make fun of it is because it's not normalized. And that's my opinion. I think lots of minority groups are targeted and whatnot because, you know, they're not normalized in general society and that's a shame because it opens them up to be targeted. But, you know, once we start normalizing, you know, diversity and these varieties of the different kinds of people, then it'll be harder for people to find something to target.

John believes that the frequency of online victimization will be decreased among youths when people learn to accept individual differences. Since guilt and shaming are associated with deviance, accepting and normalizing *"these things that are being made fun of"* is necessary for John. The participant proposes a change in the mainstream culture with his visual representation of cyberbullying that would have an influence on virtual self-presentation and virtual communication among young people.

7.7. Conclusion

Cyberbullying and one's engagement in this online misconduct can have different motivations and reasons. Drawing from verbal and interview and visual data, I have analyzed this phenomenon from participants' perspectives who identify as both online bullies and bullied. In doing so, I have applied Goffman's (1959) concepts of masking and inauthenticity, the projection of an ideal self with the preservation of status and manner, as well as back stage operations in the context of virtual cyberbullying in this chapter. Online bullies' motivations and intentions play a significant role in shaping bullies' virtual self-presentation and their decision to engage in cyberbullying. This chapter focused on the reasons why bullies engage in cyberbullying and how their motivations manifest in their virtual reality in the form of front stage appearance and back stage impression management. As we have seen throughout this thesis, the analysis of the collected visual data enriches the verbal data and better presents my participants' thought processes while eliciting distinct emotions (Harper, 2002; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Bagnoli, 2009). Indeed, Raj's visual presentation of cyberbullying (Figure 8) unpacks secondary layers of meanings that convey his emotions associated with regret and remorse of being a bully. Furthermore, I examined the role that mainstream culture and influencers play in facilitating and proliferating cyberbullying among young people. With these findings, the next chapter offers a discussion of what these findings mean and the implications of this phenomenon in our daily virtual and non-virtual lives.

8. Discussion

It changes how you see the world. It changes who you are as a person. I was very angry, very lonely, a lot of my life. Very sad. I didn't I completely lost interest in making friends at all, but I no longer was social… (Marciline)

Similar to Marciline's interpretation of the effects of cyberbullying, participants acknowledge that cyberbullying causes sadness, anger, loneliness, and changes in behaviour, to name a few. Throughout this thesis, I have illustrated how both the cyber-bully and cyber-bullied participants employ front and back stage dramaturgy, which shows their changes in behaviour and personality. Drawing from interviews and participant-generated visual data, in this thesis I have examined virtual self-presentation in the context of cyberbullying. The research questions I have sought to address are "How do young adults present their virtual and non-virtual selves in the context of cyberbullying?" and "How do they cope with the consequences of cyber-interaction in the digital age?"

I have applied Goffman's (1959) presentation of self as a conceptual framework to situate cyberbullying in the context of online victimization and online transgression. I further examined how adults with past experiences of cyberbullying present their virtual and non-virtual selves and

cope with the consequences of cyberbullying. Using a phenomenological framework for inquiry, I sought to interpret and understand how participants with lived experiences of online bullying define cyberbullying. The data suggest that one's identification as a cyber-bully or cyber-bullied impacts their definition and characterization of cyberbullying. The virtual and non-virtual presentation of self depends on the participant's choices of identifying as victims or victimizers. For instance, previous chapters depicted how and why one chooses to use a masking technique during their front stage performance depending on their identification as bully or bullied. Participants employ back stage team membership strategies alike. Back stage team membership in a virtual and non-virtual setting plays a significant role for participants to cope with the negative consequences of cyberbullying. Drawing on my findings discussed previously, in this chapter I offer a discussion of what these findings could mean in our technology-driven digital society.

8.1. The experience of cyberbullying: self-identity and the presentation of self

The definition and characterization of cyberbullying from my participants' subjective views guided my thesis. Guided by the application of IPA and phenomenology, 'stepping into' my participants' inner world to understand their perspectives was central to my data analysis. This approach is based on Heidegger's method of interpreting one's *being* and *existence* in the virtual world. This approach of interpreting participants' inner world, being, and existence has helped me to conduct a phenomenological examination from a sociological perspective by applying Goffman's (1959) model of dramaturgy in the context of virtual reality and cyberbullying. The interview data revealed that regardless of participants' self-identity as a bully or a bullied, they assume a virtual self. The use of innovative visual techniques, such as sketching and drawing, facilitated the discussion of the introspective virtual self that participants assume. It was found that similar to physical reality, the self (or Dasein) in virtual reality is able to make sense of the virtual world. The self interacts and communicates like we do in our everyday physical life. The self also becomes conscious and understands its online existence. Regardless of their identity as a bully or bully, participants agree that they can assume their conscious and ethical selves when *being* online. Put otherwise, young adults try to be their authentic selves and behave in a virtual environment as they would in their physical reality (Horrigan-Kelly et al., 2016; Persson, 2012).

However, the experience of cyberbullying changes how they communicate in their interactive cyberspace. With this experience, Dasein's online interactive environment changes and their experience of *being* or *existing* online also changes. Cyberbullying experience shapes the way they interact with others as well as the way they present themselves online. The presentation of self is a concept that explores how the self assumes different roles and behaviours depending on social circumstances. In the context of my thesis, I have found that the experience of cyberbullying impacts the way young people present their virtual self and their online and offline behaviours.

Participants' self-identity as a bully or bullied has an impact on how they define and characterize cyberbullying and the way they present themselves. Depending on Dasein's level of engagement with cyberbullying, young adults defined cyberbullying in multiple ways. They use different descriptive words, including online conflict, online harm, online victimization, and online drama, to talk about their experiences. It was the context of online conflict that

determined participants' subjective identities of being a bully or bullied. More specifically, the context of cyberbullying determined the level of seriousness of online bullying, anonymity, targeting, and intent behind cyberbullying. These contexts shaped my participants' subjective identity as a bully and bullied. Through these contexts, my participants defined and characterized what cyberbullying is based on their subjective lived experiences.

Kowalski and colleagues (2012) and Bonanno and Hymel (2013) found a correlation between traditional physical and cyberbullying rates. Echoing this finding, my study qualitatively demonstrates that there is no sole identity of a bully or bullied since participants equally engage in bullying activities while experiencing cyberbullying. Participants identified different reasons and motivations for engaging in online bullying. The most frequent reason they provided was retaliation or bullying back in their self-defence. Others who were frequently bullied by their peers at school (experiencing traditional bullying) chose to bully their peers using social media platforms. There is no sole and pure victim and victimizer. The identity of a victimizer and the victim is fluid and is dependent on the context of the online confrontation and how participants interpret it. The interpretations participants make are largely dependent on the context of bullying. It was also found that the consequences participants felt as a result of being bullied online determined the seriousness of their perception of victimization and the way they dealt with their victimization.

Given that cyberbullying produces negative consequences, participants must find ways to cope with the consequences of online bullying in their physical reality. Cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization for producing negative effects on victims (Tsitsika et al., 2015; Hay et al. 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). The negative effects of cyberbullying are also experienced by victims of other forms of online transgression (Ngo et al., 2020; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009; Ranney et al., 2019; Ballard & Welch, 2015). I have also found that the content and context of cyberbullying can disproportionately target minority groups and at the same time make the victims engage in cyberbullying if they choose to retaliate or bully back. The effects of cyberbullying are not, therefore, one-dimensional. Technology-facilitated cyberbullying and its context and content, therefore, shapes the lived experiences of criminality, digital harm, and online victimization of young adults, as Powell and colleagues (2018) and Stratton and colleagues (2017) suggest. The existing literature already identified the consequences of online bullying in the victims' physical reality. In addition to the previous findings, my thesis explores how participants cope with these consequences in their physical reality. It also adds another layer of understanding about online victimization by exploring how one's virtual presentation of the self changes as a result of experiencing online bullying.

Similar to previous findings, my participants agreed that cyberbullying produces harmful effects in their lives, including internalization, blaming of the victim, and self-harm (Broll et al., 2018; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). These negative consequences present cyberbullying victimization as a form of online victimization. Similar to online victimization, the victims of cyberbullying are targeted and discriminated against for breaching normative gender roles and their race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Technology facilitates online violence, such as cyberbullying, against minority groups and these groups widening the social inequality gap in the virtual setting. Social sciences scholars have pointed to the importance of research in advancing digital criminology (Stratton et al., 2017) to explore the real consequences of online

victimization in the victims' physical world. The interview and visual data explicitly show that my participants' experiences of online victimization were partly due to their socio-economic standing, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Online victimization arises from the differences in social norms and relations and cultural practices.

Moreover, victims of cyberbullying who are disproportionately targeted also do not have access to formal support services, such as counselling and therapy. The data suggest that without access to formal support services, the victims of cyberbullying learn to cope with their experience of online victimization independently. This can exacerbate their feelings of loneliness – the feeling that participants often associated with cyberbullying victimization and coping. The data suggest that some participants have access to informal support, such as support from family members and friends. When seeking informal support, the victims of cyberbullying face additional challenges, such as shame, guilt, and internalization which can further victimize young adults and young people. The study of digital criminology should look into ways to better support victims of cyberbullying, who are disproportionately targeted and lack the formal support to cope with their experiences. My findings suggest that better parental support to help young people improve their self-esteem, having guidance and active listening support through counselling and therapy, and organizing victim-centered groups for developing a sense of agency are some ways that participants identified as effective coping techniques.

8.2. The virtual presentation of self: experiences of cyberbullying victims

The consequences and experience of online bullying in the victims' non-virtual or physical world can be damaging. These experiences make people more vigilant in their physical reality (Rivituso, 2014). The experience of online bullying and victimization of cyberbullying can also shape the victims' virtual presentation of self. The interview data suggest that people who have been victimized by online bullying project and display their ideal selves. The projection of the ideal self closely connects with participants' cyber-victimization and with their coping strategies. The projection of an ideal self has been studied in the context of online aggression and transgression (Goldsmith & Wall, 2022; Yar, 2012) and in the context of influencer culture (Abidin, 2015; 2016; Hurley, 2019; Ibrahim, 2018). For example, Goldsmith and Wall (2022) argue that affordability (or access and availability of the Internet, as well as anonymity thereby) in the digital age opens up opportunities for adolescents to engage in online transgressions. Yar (2012) argues that the proliferation of self-organized and self-distributed misbehaviour online invites young people to engage in online transgression. Moreover, Cohen-Almagor (2018) presents the case that physical aggression happening in physical reality has its roots in online hate. These authors look into the way digital media and online communication affect young people's behaviour. Adding to these previous findings, my thesis has explored how the technology can also facilitate coping and shape the lived experience of online victimization.

Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis my thesis adds to the literature on self-idealization. My findings suggest that digital media and affordability (or access and availability of the Internet, as well as anonymity thereby) can facilitate coping strategies for victims of online bullying. Through the projection of their ideal self and masking strategies that are 'afforded' by digital communication, victims of cyberbullying produce a self-image of a non-victim (or a regular Internet user). The production of a new self-image was evident when participants did not openly acknowledge and accept being a victim of online bullying.

Participants described cyberbullying as online conflict and online drama (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2009; Ranney et al., 2019) and used terms 'survivor'[2] of bullying. They avoided the use of labelling, such as victims of online bullying. Instead of being viewed as a victim of online bullying or choosing to express themselves as victims of cyberbullying, in their front stage, participants actively engage in projecting their ideal selves as a virtual coping mechanism. They also become more vigilant in their virtual front stages, similar to their behaviour in their physical or non-virtual reality (Rivituso, 2014). As a result, their engagement on social media significantly decreases or they find different ways of presenting themselves to their public and private audiences through social media (for example, by managing their social media accounts and giving access to public and private audiences). Thus, participants who identify as victims of cyberbullying employ front stage dramaturgy to conceal their identity of being an online victim or experiencing cyber-victimization. In this way, victims of cyberbullying cope with their victimization virtually by concealing their experience of online victimization through the projection of their ideal selves.

Moreover, victims of cyberbullying learn to engage in active impression management of the back and front stages of their virtual presentation of self. My participants engaged in a few different ways of coping strategies, including concealment of their feelings in their back stage area, forming back stage membership with others who have similar experiences of online victimization, and developing a sense of agency that would motivate the victims of cyberbullying to overcome their negative experiences. Team membership at the back stage area plays a significant role for those who identify as victims of cyberbullying. For example, my participants noted that forming a back stage group membership with others who have similar experiences of online victimization was helpful for them to cope with their experience. This type of online group membership or team membership was helpful for my participants. They gained a sense of justice by forming online groups with others who have also been victimized online. Seeking justice online, these young people would fight against the bully while providing each other emotional support (Sundén & Paasonen, 2018; Maarof et al., 2012). The existing literature on cyberbullying mainly focuses on the negative consequences of online bullying happening in physical reality. Gaining insights about the virtual presentation of the self as an approach to overcoming negative experiences associated with online bullying enriches the literature on cyberbullying and adds online victimization perspectives to develop new insights to the study of digital criminology.

8.3. The virtual presentation of self: experiences of cyberbullying aggressors

Cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon. If there are victims of online bullying, then victimizers play a central role in leaving an impression on the victim. As it is central to my findings and to this thesis, the identity of being a bullied (victim) or a bully (victimizer) is not a simple and singular category because those who were cyber-bullied often engage in cyberbullying behaviour in their defence. Cyber-bullies, similar to the cyber-bullied, present themselves virtually in their front and back stages. In contrast to cyber-victims, the cyber-bully uses different sets of strategies to present themselves virtually. Online bullies engage in the ideal virtual presentation of self but their motivation for this behaviour differs from the victim's

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[2] The term 'survivor' is used by Marciline in Chapter 6 to describe their coping strategy. The participant avoided using the term 'victim' because, in the participant's viewpoint, 'victim' denotes the state of helplessness and hopelessness.

motivation. Whereas victims project their ideal self as a way of coping with their online victimization, bullies project their ideal selves to gain and maintain front stage appearance and manner among their peers. Front stage appearance and manner are interconnected concepts, where appearance denotes social status and manner denotes the characteristics signifying one's social status. This finding is similar to what scholars previously found with respect to young people engaging in online transgressions for entertainment. Several scholars (Rafferty & Vander Ven; 2014; Goldsmith & Wall, 2022; Yar, 2012; Rivituso, 2014) argue that college students engage in anti-social behaviour and digital violence for entertainment and popularity. Technological advancements facilitate anti-social behaviour among adolescents. The findings of my study suggest that young people who extensively engage in cyberbullying misconduct target their victims for entertainment and gain popularity among their peers. These motivations of cyber-bullies are analyzed in a dramaturgical sense using the concept of the presentation of self, where the concepts of appearance and manner illuminate our understanding of why adolescents and young adults engage in cyberbullying and how they engage in the virtual presentation of self.

The existing literature focusing on the entertainment value and deviance broadly connects to what Katz (1988) describes as seductive and emotionally rewarding. The author contends that the subjective feelings of thrill, seductiveness, and emotional reward associated with criminal activities lure youth into social deviance. Using the same analogy, Goldsmith and Wall (2022), for example, argue that online media communications invite youth to get involved in online deviance. Online media communication invites young people to try and explore new, immoral, and illegal activities and proliferates their deviant behaviours (Cohen-Almagor, 2018; Yar, 2012). In the context of this study, participants noted that online bullies target their victims to feel the thrill of 'picking on' their peers, misbehaving, or as Raj put it *"[b]ecause they're hidden, their true nature comes out. So people can be very, very evil.*" Online communication in the digital age facilitates cyberbullying, and online bullies gain power and experience entertaining and emotionally rewarding moments when they are engaged in this type of online misconduct. Thus, online bullies project their ideal selves on their public and virtual front stage where cyberbullying manifests and occurs repeatedly conveying feelings of thrill and entertainment.

Those participants who assume front stage appearance and manner also actively engage in back stage impression management and back stage group membership activities like those participants who identify as victims of cyberbullying. Online communication and the virtual presentation of self in a group setting help participants to make sense of the context of online communication since not everything that is deemed to be offensive is interpreted to be offensive by participants. This process of making sense of online content is especially true within an in-group setting. Some 'running jokes' that are shared online among team members are not interpreted as offensive because these team members establish boundaries amongst themselves and the insider jokes are not shared with public audiences. Back stage team members engage in impression management to prevent public audiences from entering their back stage area.

However, when offensive language or in-group language is shared with the public audience, communication revealed on the front stage is interpreted as cyberbullying aggression. For example, when influencers on social media decide to bring forward the language used with their back stage team members to their front stage, it impacts the perception of reality of their public audience. The back stage language shared by social media influencers desensitizes their

audience and makes offensive content to be considered normal (Lumsden, 2019; Kilvington, 2021; Megele & Longfield, 2022). With this practice, technology-facilitated online communication platforms are now able to spread bullying and hatred to public audiences when popular figures and influencers share their back stage language with their audiences publicly (see section 7.6 for an example). Online communication normalizes offensive content and influences young people's interpretation of normalcy. Online communication has become a tool that invites them to produce and endorse offensive content. Online communication enables social harm and normalizes young people's engagement in cyberbullying.

8.4. Cyberbullying victimization and aggression in the digital age

After analyzing the collected data and identifying how young people engage in front stage ideal self-image projection and back stage impression management, it became clear that both bullies and the bullied deem their online practices to be normal. What is even more concerning is the tendency related to the normalization and desensitizing of offensive contents online. These contents carry serious consequences on participants who identified as cyber-bullies because it could instigate and perpetuate online hate and bullying in young people. I have previously discussed the negative consequences of online bullying on cyber-victims, but the consequence of widespread public online bullying on aggressors is yet to be discussed. In particular, the participants I interviewed believed that engagement in cyberbullying was a central part of their introspective self (Saner & Geelen, 2013) and self-exploration. The participants I interviewed believed that they could try out multiple online selves, including the self of the cyber-bully because online communication platforms provide the opportunity to assume multiple selves at the same time (Turkle, 1995; Robinson 2007; Ionescu, 2013; Marmura, 2013; Fox & Ahn, 2013). Because of this possibility, from the cyber-bully's perspective, online bullying seemed to be a normal practice. Under the influence of social media popular content creators, cyberbullies are convinced that their online behaviour is socially acceptable. They also believed that they could choose between their multiple online selves to present a self that only comments and speaks in a "*brutally honest*" (Bob Bobski) manner. This manner of online speech usually consisted of offensive content that participants regretted about later. Thus, the digital age and online communication in digital age normalize cyberbullying and even provide a justification for engaging in this behaviour. In non-virtual or physical reality, what is deemed offensive would have been kept in the performer's back stage or shared with the performer's team members only. However, digital communication and social media influencers' choices normalize digital harm causing negative psychological and physical consequences in physical reality.

When bullies engage in verbal online transgressions, some manage to desist and understand the consequences of the digital harm that they cause to their victims. Regretting about their behaviour was helpful for bullies to decrease their digital footprint and the frequency of their online transgression. Those participants who cyber-bullied their peers and understood the consequences of their online transgression were able to change their behaviour and the way they present themselves online. Put otherwise, bullies desist from engaging in cyberbullying when they empathize with the victims of their online bullying have to endure. This realization seemed to be helpful for cyber-bullies to make considerate and thoughtful choices online. Only with introspective self-exploration and self-reflections participants were able to feel and understand the consequences of their behaviour when social issues such as cyberbullying have been normalized in the current digital age. Based on this finding, I conclude that the normalization of

cyberbullying is a direct result of information communications technology on young people who are largely influenced by social and popular media influencers. Social media influencers normalize cyberbullying misconduct and shape young people's virtual self-presentation when their back stage private language is brought forward to their virtual front stage and shared with public audiences including young people. Scholarly work on digital criminology should look into ways of exploring the consequences of online bullying on bullies and the ways they desist from engaging in online bullying.

Moreover, some participants agreed that online bullying has increasingly been promoted on traditional media platforms, offering another explanation for the rise of online misconduct. Despite the traditional media's framing of bullying as immoral and wrong, popular TV shows end up normalizing cyberbullying among young people. Online bullying portrayed on TV screens does not prevent young people from engaging in this behaviour. The interview data suggest that the representation and depiction of cyberbullying create a perception that cyberbullying is part of everyday life. Previous literature on the representation of social issues in popular media and the perception of reality suggests that popular media graphic representation can shape the public audience's perception of reality. The representation of violence or watching crime programming, for example, can shape viewers' perception of criminal justice, their attitudes toward the justice system, and their adherence to the dominant ideologies (Kort-Butler & Hartshorn, 2011; Eschholz et al., 2004; Weitzer, & Kubrin, 2004). Similarly, a participant relayed his observation about the representation of online bullying in popular media. Constant showing of cyberbullying on popular media and TV shows normalizes online bullying among youth, creates a perception that bullying is part of daily life, and even reinforces online bullying among adolescents. Thus, both traditional popular media and online influencer culture may be connected to the normalization of cyberbullying as these two ways of representation and communication are powerful in shaping people's perceptions of reality and their behaviours, including their virtual behaviour and virtual presentation of self.

8.5. Needs and responses to cyberbullying

Given that cyberbullying can be considered a normal and everyday experience facilitated by the extensive use of social media and traditional media platforms, again, those who experience the negative effects of cyberbullying must find ways to cope with their online victimization. Because online bullying has become normalized, young people must find ways to cope with the experiences of cyberbullying. Online bullying victimization can produce digital harm and social inequalities due to the lack of emotional and affective support offered to the victims of online bullying. The use of the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was helpful to arrive at this important conclusion. I used IPA to interpret participants' introspective self and feelings while they (my participants) were trying to make sense of their coping strategies based on their previous experiences. I have discussed above that forming back stage membership was an effective way to cope and feel empowered. Back stage team members support each other and they keep each other accountable (i.e. do not let each other feel despondent about the situation).

In addition to this strategy, my participants agreed that forming positive and meaningful goals and having hope for the future motivated them to overcome online victimization. Participants acknowledged that online bullying was always "*at the hands of the bully*" (AP).

They also acknowledged that being hopeless, feeling anxious about the situation, and not having meaningful goals for the future did not help them to overcome the negative effects of cyberbullying. Setting meaningful goals and achieving these goals – for example, dedicating their free time spent online to preparing for exams – diverted their attention and focus from negative life events to something that would benefit the victims. This coping strategy often involved an introspective self-reflection process (Saner & Geelen, 2013) through which my participants learned to cognitively suppress their emotions, feelings, and thoughts associated with online victimization. This is a coping strategy that participants use at their non-virtual physical back stage. In their virtual front and back stage, this strategy is associated with the participants' reduced digital footprint as they dedicate less time to online communication. Participants identified that this way of coping seemed to be the most effective, despite it requiring a tremendous amount of emotional labour and cognitive effort from participants. They also preferred this coping method over seeking external help and informal support. Coping with the negative experiences on their own (or individually) enabled participants to be optimistic and hopeful about their future.

The positive mindset and hopefulness are associated with the performer's physical (or non-virtual) back stage. At the time of the interview, participants engaged in self-reflection which enabled them to understand that being hopeful and establishing meaningful goals was the most effective approach to coping with cyberbullying victimization. I have previously discussed that seeking informal support had the unforeseen consequence of further victimizing the victim. Again, in the presence of informal support, some participants felt judged, which made them feel negative about themselves, self-blame and internalize the effects of cyberbullying. These people need a non-judgmental listener and guide. Participants highlighted the importance of having a counsellor or therapist who would offer non-judgemental emotional support. In the absence of this support and to avoid potential further victimization, participants chose to cope with their experience of cyber-victimization on their own by setting positive life goals and having hope for the future. This important finding on coping with the effects of online victimization is similar to what Maarof and colleagues (2012) suggest studying victimization and coping in the context of domestic violence. Coping with online victimization is found to be similar to coping with other types of non-virtual or physical victimization. Therefore, the purpose of my thesis is to advocate for creating spaces that would offer emotional support to young people who experience cyberbullying and other forms of online victimization. The visual data suggest that these young people, regardless of their identity as a victim or a victimizer, are lonesome. The visual representations of the experience of cyberbullying suggest that participants' engagement in cyberbullying makes them feel even lonelier. This was also evident at the end of some interviews. Several participants expressed that they felt good about being heard and their experiences shared with me because they had nobody to share these experiences with (indication of loneliness). Therefore, not having the needed formal emotional support may linger the negative effects of online bullying in participants' virtual and non-virtual realities.

Questioning the presentation of self in virtual and non-virtual realities, it became clear that the lack of emotional and affective support services makes cyberbullying experience difficult. My participants had to find ways of informal support services or cope with their victimization on their own. While cyberbullying targets minority communities disproportionately, these people also do not receive or have equal access to mental health support

to cope with their victimization. Equal access to mental health services and mental well-being not only will help participants to cope with the negative consequences of cyberbullying, but on a broader level, access to mental health services is a human right. Young people who repeatedly endure psychological digital harm should have access to formal support services for the betterment of their mental well-being and their future in general, given that cyberbullying is treated as a common experience among young people. Academic and advocacy work on digital harm exploring the effects of cyberbullying and other forms of online victimization should look into ways for how conflicts occurring virtually are reconciled.

Based on my findings, I propose that access to formal support services should be available in schools. Having a counsellor or therapist will help young people to desist from engaging in online deviance and cope with their negative experiences. The interview data indicate that the intervention by teachers and school principals was not effective. For example, a reactive and punitive approach, such as a suspension for a day, was not the best way to address conflicts among young people. A collective and proactive response based on a victim-centered restorative principle may be more helpful for adolescents who often are targets of digital harm. Previous research suggest that this type of response is based on creating positive relationships among youths and creating fostering and trusting environment with adults, including parents and school administration (Corrigan & Robertson, 2015; Das et al., 2019; Broll, 2016). When young people experience the harms of digital violence, adult figure (parents and teachers) support may be more helpful for victims to cope with their stresses, rather than punishing the online perpetrator. Furthermore, this type of victim-centered response also is helpful for bullies as they learn to empathize with the victims and desist from their engagement in cyberbullying, according to Raj and Bob Bobski's experiences (in Chapter 7).

Victims of cyberbullying and bullies themselves do not choose to report to authorities and often do not share about their online victimization. Not only are they afraid of being blamed and ashamed, but they also do not trust the adults surrounding them. Participants felt ignored, the conflict unsolved, and their needs were not met after reporting their victimization to their school administration (Faucher et al., 2014). Fostering positive relationships and creating welcoming environments might be as helpful as existing approaches to responding to online and digital harm. Moreover, young people are aware that reactive responses do not refrain their peers from getting engaged in cyberbullying again. They are also aware of potential legal hurdles where their experiences of victimization are not taken seriously by authorities. The definition of digital harm, the establishment of its consequences, and presenting proof have been identified to be challenges of reporting cyberbullying misconduct, similar to what the existing literature on cyberbullying reporting identifies (Todd, 2008; Henry, 2013; Coburn et al., 2015). Having these challenges with reporting and trusting adults, young people from minority communities are often disproportionately exposed to cyberbullying, experience psychologically harmful effects of it, and learn to cope with their victimization on their own while not having access to formal support services.

Aside from victimization and needs, for some participants, online bullying was a continuation of their pre-existing struggles and conflicts (Carlson & Frazer, 2021). Online communication methods exacerbate pre-existing and long-standing conflicts. The pre-existing conflicts now happening in virtual reality are shaped by social norms and normative relations

exposing young people, who already were marginalized in physical reality, to cyberbullying and cyberbullying victimization. Cyberbullying victimization being a form of online victimization presents challenges and deepens the feeling of loneliness in participants. Online victimization also makes participants feel voiceless, as was represented by Marciline's visual description of a seamless, yet, profoundly sad visual art (Chapter 5). Without help from adults or their peers, Marciline learned to present themselves both virtually and non-virtually and project the front stage image of an ordinary young person with no experience of online victimization.

8.6. Conclusion

Goffman's (1959) sociological analysis of self-presentation informs about cyber-victimizers' (or aggressors') and cyber-victims' experiences. The dramaturgical model of self-presentation guided my research to understand why bullies engage in cyberbullying and how they present themselves online. In addition to using Goffman's approach to studying online transgression, the phenomenological framework of inquiry situates cyber-bully's engagement in online aggression and the virtual presentation of their selves as a product of social situations (where human experiences are the result of social structures and interactions). Social situations, such as previous experiences of online and physical bullying, lead some participants engage in cyberbullying transgression and present themselves assuming the identity of the bully. Previous experiences associated with bullying shape the virtual front stage presentation of self.

Furthermore, Goffman's (1959) conceptual framework on the presentation of self unfolds the subjective introspection of the private back stage by allowing researchers to understand what challenges cyberbullying presents when it often is overlooked as a social issue deserving attention, including its coping strategies. Exploring some effective ways of coping through IPA, it became evident that participants need access to formal support, especially in the digital age where cyberbullying is deemed to be a normal and unavoidable experience for young people. Not only are young people exposed to online victimization, but they also are targeted for reasons, over which they do not have control. In addition to experiencing online bullying and ridicule, these young people do not have access to formal emotional and affective support services, which worsens the existing negative experiences associated with online bullying. More advocacy-based practical work is needed to create access to mental health, emotional, and affective support. In the fast-growing digital world, the creation of this space may create a sense of justice for victims of online bullying. In this sense, this thesis research guided by a sociological concept of the presentation of self is important for enriching the scholarship on online bullying and victimization and for raising more awareness on improving the mental well-being of young people. This is the broader contribution social sciences can offer to the growing field of digital criminology and digital justice, which are discussed in the next chapter on contributions and research quality.

9.   Recommendations and limitations

9.1. Introduction

With the discussion of my findings, below I offer my notes on recommendations and limitations. This research is not without limitations and shortcomings. In addition to limitations, this chapter will first focus on recommendations that I find to be practical, followed by recommendations for future research. This thesis project does not only focus on the application

of Goffman's presentation of self to virtual reality, but also focuses on the understanding of how young people manage their emotions associated with online victimization and how young people get involved in cyberbullying. The recommendations I present below complement the existing recommendations about cyberbullying and prevention strategies.

9.2. Practical recommendations

Considering that cyberbullying aggression involves youth and adolescents in Manitoba, where middle- and high-school girls are twice as likely as their male counterparts to be victimized through online communication (Salmon et al., 2018), there is a need for better parental supervision. Nine participants I interviewed attended high school in Manitoba, representing racial and ethnic minorities and the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Although young people cited the age gap stopping them from having meaningful conversations, previous research has repetitively encouraged parental participation for reducing cyberbullying behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2018; Broll & Reynold, 2021; Broll, 2016). Echoing these findings, most of the participants I interviewed stated that parental involvement is necessary for coping with their online victimization, as they help youth improve their self-esteem or navigate through their experience in a positive way. In some cases, spending quality time with parents and having meaningful conversations with them helped young people to manage the feeling of loneliness and boredom. Better parental supervision and a non-judgmental and positive child-parent relationship could help young people to overcome the effects of cyberbullying occurring in their lives. Chapters 6 and 8 have focused on the distinction between informal parental / family support and non-judgmental support. Parents should be aware of their children's exposure to online conflicts (which is deemed normal nowadays) and should be able to offer non-judgmental support to help their children improve their self-esteem. Parents should also be aware that judgemental remarks, suggestive of blaming their children could further put their children at risk of online victimization.

As much as parents should be involved in monitoring their children's online activities and providing support, school districts could work more proactively towards raising awareness about what cyberbullying is, its effects and consequences, as well as offering formal support. As my participants relayed, understanding the possible consequences may help young people to desist from engaging in this behaviour. Feelings of regret and remorse stopped young bullies use online platforms to shame their peers and strangers. There is no simple and single solution for preventing this online transgression. Instead, adult intervention and formal support services may be effective to address this type of victimization. In addition to parental supervision and involvement, school districts can increase the number of school counsellors to support students with their non-academic and social growth.

As it was central to Chapters 5, 6, and 8, participants of my study, regardless of their chosen identity as a cyber-bully or bullied, were typically lonesome. The experience of online bullying worsened their pre-existing feeling of loneliness. Participants usually struggle to cope with online victimization. Participants' experience of online form of victimization is not addressed because cyberbullying is considered to be an everyday common experience (Megele & Longfield, 2022) and young people are expected to work with their emotions and find ways to reconcile with their feelings of online victimization without having support from others. Cyberbullying victimization exacerbates the feeling of loneliness. While loneliness is a common

form of post-cyberbullying effect, more serious consequences include suicide attempts and suicidal ideation. When young people experience cyber-victimization in addition to experiencing traditional bullying and family conflicts, this set of negative experiences can lead to suicide ideations and self-harm. Cyberbullying and its effects should be taken into consideration when we think of supporting or helping those who have been affected by this form of digital harm in the digital age as communication and technology have already become instrumental in people's lives and our society (Cupples, 2008; Powell et al., 2018). Cyberbullying and its effects, even if they may seem minor (like loneliness and sadness), should not be ignored because these covert forms of victimization lead to more serious consequences when they go unnoticed and unaddressed.

Scholarship on cyberbullying prevention in the digital age recommends that parents, the educational and law enforcement systems need to cooperate to reach a unified goal of preventing cyberbullying. For example, Broll and Huey (2015) suggest that developing and continuing partnerships with School Resource Officers SROs and patrol officers are helpful methods to reduce cyberbullying offending because the justice representatives can effectively respond to cyberbullying aggression and victimizations while working on-campus. Several research projects conducted with school administrators, parents, and law enforcement bodies in Canada supported receiving help from SROs to combat traditional and online forms of bullying (Abela, & Donlevy, 2020; Broll & Howells, 2019). But, as Jones and colleagues (2021) argued elsewhere, the success and effectiveness of the adoption of a particular policy are dependent on the context of the place where the policy is being transferred to. The previously suggested recommendations may not address the situation of cyberbullying in local settings, given the current debate about the effectiveness of reliance on SROs (or school police officers) and the justice system in schools (Brohman, 2021; Ennab, 2022). My findings suggest that policy transferability with respect to having and improving the partnerships with SROs and school administration may be unsuccessful, especially when Indigenous and Black students in the Winnipeg downtown area and North End consider the presence of school police officers as harmful (Ennab, 2022). The participants I interviewed did not choose to report their victimization to SROs or police, but chose to report to their teachers and principals, which they found unhelpful. As a result, my participants recommended having more counsellors and their ability to access mental health professionals in their schools. Local school districts could increase the number of counsellors to help young people cope with their online victimization.

9.3. Future research

The concept of the presentation of self offers an understanding of the dynamics of cyberbullying trends among teens. This concept can be explored in the Winnipeg context to examine how youths in local school districts cope with and manage the consequences of cyberbullying. Based on the findings of this thesis, future research could examine whether reliance on SROs is needed when responding to cyberbullying in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Relatedly, future research could also explore the ways how back stage team membership is formed and what roles it can play in facilitating programs for prevention and response to cyberbullying. This type of research could be useful for developing effective strategies to respond to cyberbullying and prevent it from happening. This type of research will be helpful for both the victims and the victimizers who are frequently engaged in this behaviour.

Another type of future research design could be based on identifying similarities and differences. Comparative research across different provinces might help understand the context-depending dynamics across different provinces, including the prevalence of cyberbullying, response, and coping strategies, since responses to cyberbullying can vary across provinces. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry can be helpful to establish similarities and differences when assessing effective ways of responding to and preventing online bullying. This is particularly relevant in the Canadian context. Whereas previous research conducted in Ontario and Alberta found authority figures, such as teachers, parents, and SROs, should cooperate for the prevention of cyberbullying (Abela & Donlevy, 2020; Broll & Howells, 2019; Broll & Huey, 2015), the results of my thesis suggest that parental support and intervention are the most effective prevention strategy, rather than the sole reliance on SROs. In addition to parental intervention, my participants favoured having formal counselling over reporting to school administration, teachers, SROs, and the police. Since the participants of this study favoured adult intervention as a way of helping young adults to cope with victimization, future research can focus on how students perceive the effectiveness of potential parental intervention and school sanctioning. These kinds of studies will help us understand what sort of authority figure (parent vs. school) should exercise control over youth to prevent them from engaging in cyberbullying offending and victimization.

Moreover, due to online transgression and cyberbullying becoming a globally-concerning phenomenon, research could look at different dynamics cross-culturally while accounting for the differences between literacy level, socio-economic status and family income, and cultural differences. This can help identify cross-cultural similarities and differences that will help us understand whether the prevalence of cyberbullying is associated with the personal characteristics of participants and their upbringing or the environmental and social factors, such as the level of literacy, political and socio-cultural systems across different countries. This insight on future research stems from the interviews I completed with students with international backgrounds since there exists a stark difference in culture affecting the coping strategies of cyberbullying. This type of comparative study can have practical implications for fighting against the spread of online disinformation and facilitating digital literacy and ethics in ICT.

9.4. Limitations

Although I sought to answer my research questions by offering an in-depth analysis of participants' lived experiences, there are several limitations pertaining to the sample demographics and data collection strategies. These limitations relate to the accuracy of participants' narratives, how the issue of cyberbullying is currently addressed in schools, the non-random sampling strategies used, and the use of visual data collection methods.

Participant narratives were based on their previous lived experiences, as opposed to ongoing or current experiences. The literature on the accuracy of human memory suggests that it is fallible and reconstructive (for example, see Howe & Knott, 2015; Patihis et al., 2013). While some participants recalled very recent experiences (within a year or two), some recalled their experiences from five to six years ago (one participant's experience of traditional bullying dated back to early 2000s and her narrative of cyberbullying closely tied to her previous experience of traditional bullying). Depending on other types of lived experiences, participants' narratives might have been biased or exaggerated in terms of reporting their interpretation of the past. This

is a limitation of the study, but it does not invalidate my findings regarding the presentation of self and future recommendations.

Moreover, my research data lacks information about current responses to cyberbullying at local school divisions. One of my recommendations includes having greater support for young people experiencing online victimization. Based on my findings, school counsellors or therapists can offer this type of victim-centered support to young people and help them cope with their victimization. However, the school divisions in Winnipeg could already be offering emotional support services to young people, making this practical recommendation irrelevant. Winnipeg school divisions could be implementing a victim-centered approach currently to respond to cyberbullying victimization, which was not offered to my participants at the time of their online victimization. Local school district counsellors could also be working towards improving students' mental health and overall well-being concerning cyberbullying victimization and other forms of online victimization. Conversely, local schools might be using a harder approach that impacts cyberbullying report rates. A hardline approach to cyberbullying may also involve reliance on law enforcement which is debatable in the context of Winnipeg school districts. This discrepancy in my recommendation is due to the lack of information collected about current responses to cyberbullying. I did not interview participants with ongoing experiences of cyberbullying as interviewing them could present significant distress and harm to the participant. Instead, I made my recommendations based on the participant's experiences of the past (i.e. how their school administration dealt with their cyberbullying victimization). Being cognizant of this limitation, it is still important in the context of my thesis to make this recommendation. Future research should look into how school districts currently respond to cyberbullying events to make reliable conclusions.

With respect to sampling, data collection, and data analysis strategies, one may question the strength of the selected strategies. My sample consists of 14 students who are attending university, and I used IPA to interpret their narratives. Discussing the use of small sample sizes and IPA, Pringle and colleagues (2011) note that in-depth analysis of small sample sizes can pose a challenge for empirical generalization. However, they state that the narratives gained from the small sample sizes can make conceptual contributions to the existing literature. The use of IPA that facilitated the interpretation of participants' lived experiences through two different data collection techniques has helped me to make conceptual and practical contributions.

I used purposive and snowball non-random sampling strategies to recruit participants who are current university students. These strategies are commonly used in qualitative research and the non-random sampling strategies are criticized for their lack of generalization to the general population (Heinrich et al., 2010). The use of purposive and snowball sampling accompanied by the direct recruitment method is a methodological limitation of my thesis as the study represents the experiences of those who are attending the university. Although this sampling and recruitment strategies helped me build rapport with potential participants prior to scheduling interviews, these sampling and recruitment methods also limited non-university students to participate in my study. However, the sample of students who participated in this study presented the general experiences that students or young people have. Given that youths experience cyberbullying the most, the purposive sample approach consisting of university students reflecting on their past experiences helped me answer the research questions.

Despite its numerous advantages, the use of creative visual methods might have become a limitation of the study. The integration of visual techniques as a data collection method can be deemed too subjective and not empirical. Although respondent-generated visuals "do not represent empirical truths or 'reality' (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004), the visuals provide a unique way for the participants to communicate about sensitive topics and negative lived experiences, such as difficulties associated with being a cyberbullying victim and feelings of remorse for bullying online. Another limitation related to the participants' unwillingness to engage in the visual data collection. For example, a participant hesitated to draw or offer any visual data during an in-person interview. Acknowledging their right to voluntarily participate, we ended the interview. However, the participant verbally explained what sketch she visualized had she decided to draw. This verbal description enriched the interview data. As a result, I collected and analyzed nine participant-generated visual data from 14 verbal interview data.

9.5. Conclusion

The above-mentioned are some limitations of my thesis that I am able to identify. The readers of my thesis should identify other limits and weaknesses associated with different parts of my thesis project. Even with the limits and weaknesses, I am hopeful this research work will be helpful for the readers to understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying, cyber-victimization, and online victimization through the phenomenological and everyday dramaturgical lenses as cyberbullying transgression and its effects have become a globally-known phenomenon deserving sociological investigation. I am also hopeful that the practical recommendations described above would be helpful to design future research and to build anti-cyberbullying programs as well as effective responses to the victims of online transgressions.

10. Conclusion: research quality and contributions

Throughout this thesis, I have signalled towards contributions this thesis may make to the academic and non-academic communities. While practical contributions based on participants' direct experiences were central in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the conceptual and methodological contributions I make through this thesis project. Moreover, I offer a note on the research quality that I believe is helpful to advance the research on cyberbullying in the digital age. This concluding chapter derives its criteria of quality research from Tracy's (2010) work on assessing the quality of qualitative research. Among the eight key markers of quality, in addition to the practical contributions (discussed previously), I focus on the criteria/marker for the worthy topic, rich rigor, credibility, and ethical research to conclude this thesis.

10.1. Worthy topic

A worthy research topic derives from "disciplinary priorities… and timely societal or personal events" (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). The topic of my thesis project is worthy and timely while the project design is rigorous. Based on the previous findings on the sociological investigation of online behaviour (Carlson & Frazer, 2021; Hayward, 2012; Smith 2019), my research topic deepens and refines the existing knowledge on the understanding of the concept of the presentation of self in virtual space. My thesis also demonstrates how young adults with lived experiences of cyberbullying victimization and aggression cope with the difficulties related to online interactions. The topic of this thesis has become a global phenomenon. Cyberbullying has become prevalent across the world, and studying this phenomenon has also become important,

timely, and interesting. There is little empirical research completed in the Canadian context on this timely topic. To date, researchers from western and eastern Canadian provinces have studied cyberbullying victimization, and yet, this topic has not been explored in the central Canadian context using the dramaturgical model of self-representation. Particularly, it was fascinating (for me as a novice researcher) to learn about one's chosen identity as the bully or bullied impacted their virtual and non-virtual presentation of self. Equally fascinating was to analyze how Goffman's concepts of front and back stage operation and impression management were used by both bullies and victims, but their motivations for employing these concepts differed. I hope the readers will also find my topic and some of the findings compelling. I also hope the readers will reflect on some of the findings and find them useful for learning more about young people's front and back stage operations in the virtual world.

10.2. Rich rigor

The research design of this thesis study is methodologically rigorous. The use of the phenomenological framework for inquiry accompanied by a visual component answers the research questions about how young people present themselves in their virtual and non-virtual settings and how they cope with the negative consequences arising from their lived experiences. Participation in this study empowered interviewees whose direct lived experiences have not been acknowledged. The phenomenological framework for inquiry and the literature on cyberbullying and cyber-victimization (for example, Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Broll & Howells, 2021; Salmon et al., 2018) were used to make sense of participants' narratives, adding new sets of findings into the existing literature of the virtual presentation of self (Aspling, 2011; Persson, 2012; Kilvington, 2021; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). The research design is innovative and effective, as the visual component helps to elicit sensitive emotions and memories. This approach encouraged participants to share their lived experiences with ease and enriched the verbal data. Prior to conducting this qualitative inquiry, I prepared a research proposal and justified my sampling method and the choice of the framework for inquiry. Being prepared to conduct rigorous research also meant having an interview schedule and semi-structured interview questions ready at the time of the interview (Chapter 3). After conducting interviews, I sought to complete a rigorous analysis of the collected verbal and visual data by checking transcription for accuracy, listening and re-listening to the interviews, and checking the notes I made during the interviews (Chapter 3). Carrying out this research and analyzing the collected data also helped me to develop my analytical skills. It helped me to immerse in rich data sets to present meaningful findings in systematic and logical ways. I used a bracketing strategy to interpret each participant's experience as a unique set of experiences, then compared and contrasted participant narratives in the data analysis stage. The level of preparedness, prior thoughts given before commencing the research study, analysis and reporting of data, and the use of the phenomenological inquiry with the dramaturgical model strengthen the quality of this study.

10.3. Credibility

Tracy (2010) describes credible reports be "those that readers feel trustworthy enough to act on and make decisions in line with" (p. 843). In line with this description, I am hopeful that the readers of my thesis will find the results of this study interesting, as well as practically sound (e.g. understand the younger generation's digital media use, their self-presentation strategies, online victimization and common challenges they face online, needs and supports young people require). This thesis offers a thick description of cyberbullying victimization and aggression. It

also offers how and why young people engage in this behaviour. Rather than "*telling* the reader what to think" (Tracy, 2010, p. 843), I sought to *display* and share my results based on the interpretations I made. The readers will hopefully agree and/or challenge my interpretations and make conclusions about the results of the study through my writing.

The credibility of the research is also demonstrated by data triangulation. Tracy (2010) writes "multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis allow different facets of problems to be explored, increases the scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re)interpretation" (p. 843). Using phenomenology from a philosophical stance and as a framework for inquiry guiding my research design enables me to refine and understand cyberbullying and its complexity (especially in the context of fluid identification of a victim and victimizer). The use of the two different data collection techniques offers in-depth and rich data that enables interpretation and re-interpretation of data. The visual data collection enriched the verbal data because the visual tasks evoked responses that participants had difficulties expressing. Sometimes participants brought forward new themes when completing the visual data production session of the interview.

Careful and quality research can also add to the credibility of a research project. While IPA can be a shortcoming for generalization (as mentioned previously), IPA as an approach for data analysis helped me to interpret participants' subjective experiences at the same time as they were trying to make sense of their experiences (double hermeneutic process) through their visual data. In addition, participants shared information about their families and significant others, which helped me understand strategies they use for conducting virtual self-presentation and contextualize their narratives by accounting for socio-cultural backgrounds. Engaging in the double hermeneutic process was key to conducting a quality and credible analysis that integrates both verbal and visual data analysis. The use of IPA also facilitated the bracketing process for me adding to the quality of the analysis and credibility of this research project. IPA helped me to treat each interview data as a new or separate data set with its own themes. I took notes and highlighted interview sections where a participant stressed the importance of points that they deemed to be critical and key to their experience. I also identified repeating themes within the interview, then compared each interview with the next. With this set of data analysis and data triangulation through the use of the phenomenological framework and data collection techniques, my thesis gains credibility to help the readers to act on and make conclusions.

10.4.   Significant contributions

Through this thesis, I sought to make conceptual, methodological, and practical contributions. While the practical contributions were previously discussed in the form of recommendations, below I describe the conceptual and methodological contributions I make. Conceptually, I have contributed to the literature on cyberbullying in the digital age by aiming to understand how the self operates in virtual reality. Without knowing how the self is presented to the public (according to the front stage) and interrogating their internal feelings (backstage of dramaturgy), it would be nearly impossible to form practical recommendations for healthy interaction online. Previous literature closely examines the virtual presentation of self on social media (Abidin, 2015; 2016; Aspling, 2011; Merunková & Šlerka, 2019), but my thesis adds the analysis of the virtual presentation of self in the context of cyberbullying. My thesis adds to the conceptualization of digital criminology within the framework of 'digital society' (Powell et al.,

2018; Stratton et al., 2017) and presents cyberbullying as a social phenomenon, lived experiences of which can shape young people's presentation of self, their understanding of online victimization, transgression, and justice. My thesis also conceptually contributes by illustrating how this phenomenon has increasingly become normalized among young people and targets minority communities, who do not have access to the needed emotional and affective support and produce social inequalities as a result of online transgression. The results of this thesis encourage readers and future researchers to make conceptual contributions by exploring how young people respond to cyberbullying victimization and identifying their needs.

Furthermore, I have identified that there is no binary identity of a pure cyberbullying victim and a cyberbullying victimizer. I have demonstrated that depending on the chosen identity, young people's presentation of virtual and non-virtual selves can change. Participants choose to construct their online identity of a bully or bullied and present their virtual selves with respect to their chosen identities. By conducting a phenomenological inquiry to make sense of the virtual presentation of self, I make a conceptual contribution that is illustrated through Goffman's (1959) conceptual framework of the presentation of self. Whereas victims project their ideal self as a way of coping with their online victimization, bullies project their ideal selves to gain and maintain front stage appearance and manner among their peers. Both cyber-bullies and cyber-bullied engage in impression management (separation of the front and back stages) and the formation of back stage team membership. Depending on how they situate themselves in the context of online bullying, their motivations with respect to impression management and back stage team formation differ. These findings are the conceptual contributions I make to advance the research on cyberbullying using the concept of the presentation of self.

My findings also reveal that cyberbullying victimization is a form of online victimization. Enriching the existing literature on the effects of cyberbullying, I find that cyberbullying victimization originates from the existing socio-cultural differences. Cyberbullying victimization is inter-generational for minority groups and they are targeted online more often. Cyberbullying victimization and online victimization are contextual, and my findings show, echoing Carlson and Frazer (2021), that instead of solely focusing on the individualistic lens and treating cyberbullying as a phenomenon happening between individuals, contextual and situational factors form the experience of cyberbullying while disproportionately exposing participants to online victimization. My findings also revealed that those who are disproportionately targeted online do not have access to formal support. The use of phenomenology as a philosophical stance demonstrated that bullies and the bullied equally experience feelings of loneliness and boredom which became the reasons they engage in cyberbullying aggression and victimization. With the different sets of experiences, participants chose to display and give different performances in their virtual setting.

In addition to conceptual contributions, I have also made a methodological contribution by integrating visual data collection techniques into my interviews. Participants chose to share images and sketches with me to reflect on their experiences. The use of visual methods is not a completely novel methodological approach, but it resulted in credible results and calls for action. The use of IPA enabled me to explore participants' lived experiences and report on their viewpoints. Bringing together verbal and visual data through IPA enabled me to immerse in the

rich data set and situate participants' narratives while accounting for participant backgrounds. By doing this, I have combined the phenomenological framework for inquiry with Goffman's concept of studying social interactions, which enabled me to conduct a sociological analysis of the human experience online.

Lastly, I have made a contribution to collecting and presenting findings in an ethical way. Practicing ethics in everyday life was essential in planning my research project, data collection, and reporting data. By reporting and analyzing data, I removed all identifiers and unique experiences that participants shared with me. Instead, responses were generalized and situated in a broader context. Not only did it provide anonymity to the participants, but it also benefitted them because their experiences were acknowledged.

It was important to be cognizant of who this study has excluded (i.e. children and youth with similar experiences) and what kind of questions or ideas are left out due to concept-driven questions (such as personal life, trauma, and other types of victimizations participants have experienced in their lives) (Nicholls, 2009). During the data collection process, I focused on building rapport with participants to make their interview experiences positive. As a result, after answering interview questions, some participants asked me back questions, such as "how do you define cyberbullying" or "have you been cyberbullied?" Having conversations about the study, sharing my personal thoughts, and answering participant questions about the context of the study, in my opinion, resulted in my participants developing a sense of trust. I also believe that practicing ethical data collection was possible through the presentation of a sincere self as a researcher. I was not judgmental about participants' responses by being an active listener. It seemed to me that practicing ethical data collection helped my participants feel comfortable and vocalize their experiences and needs easily. Careful listening and asking follow-up questions helped me practice everyday ethics. Making participants feel comfortable and respected, and treating participants as research partners with equal power and position was important to me (Jackson, 2021).

To conclude, this thesis explores how young people respond to online bullying victimization using Goffman's (1959) concept of the presentation of self. Similar to a staged dramaturgy, each actor (or a performer) is expected to play a role on the stage. On the public front stage, performers display their ideal and desired selves. People leave their personal beliefs and inner feelings at their back stage. The presentation of a self-image is shaped by societal norms, social values, and cultural traditions. I have applied the concept of the presentation of self to virtual reality in the context of cyberbullying and added to the literature of digital criminology.

I used verbal and participant-generated visual data collection techniques to make a phenomenological inquiry into participants' lived experiences of cyberbullying and their virtual and social presentation of self. The results of this study indicate that there is no binary identity of cyberbullying perpetrator and victim. Young people choose to identify as one or the other based on the context of their cyberbullying experience. Because there is no sole identity of a victim and victimizer, participants chose to enact a virtual self that corresponds to their self-identity. Thus, depending on the context of their experience, participants presented dual identities and the nature of their self-identification shaped their virtual presentation of self.

Given this complexity of online bullying identity, scholarly work on digital criminology should look into ways of exploring the consequences of online bullying on bullies and the bullied. This type of inquiry begins with a qualitative work that situates participants' experiences and narratives central and identifies the role of technology in the digital age in shaping young people's experience of cyberbullying, online victimization, coping strategies, and the presentation of self. This type of social inquiry helps understand "how [people] sense of cyberspace…" (Hayward, 2012, p. 455) to advance the literature on digital communication and criminology while finding ways to respond to online victimization and preventing online aggression.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions & Schedule

*Before we start the interview, I would like to ask you **three pre-screening questions** that will be helpful for you to determine whether it is safe for you to participate in the study. Please take some time to reflect on these questions. These questions are:*
Are there any reasons that participating in this study might make you feel distressed? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.
Are you working under significant stress? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.
Will participating in this study put you in danger if anyone else finds out? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.
If an answer 'YES' to any of the questions is given, it will result in exclusion.

Part I

[insert the participant's nickname/pseudonym]

Thanks again for agreeing to talk to me. The interview consists of several questions about your experience in an online environment.

If it's okay, I'll ask you some demographic questions to start with.

How old are you?

What are your pronouns?

How do you self-identify in terms of your gender?

What is your race?

I'll move on to some more specific questions about your experience with cyberbullying and online harassment.

Let's start with a very general point. Could you introduce yourself, please, using your nickname?

Do you ever feel like you are a different person online and find it difficult to be yourself online?

Have you ever treated somebody differently online than you would in the real world? And how does it feel like?

Have you ever said something online to anybody that you regretted after? And how does it feel like?

What are the immediate emotional reactions to online comments, like physical and emotional?

Think about a negative encounter online. Generally, how does it feel like to be involved with this negative interaction? If I have not had experienced it, what would you tell me about this?

How do you define cyberbullying?

Did this online interaction occur in a private chat between you and someone else, or in group settings, or was it a public post where you experienced cyberbullying and harassment?

Can you tell me a little bit about how the negative interactions made you feel back then, and whether these feelings have changed over time?

Can you tell me at what point the regular online interaction escalated to something more serious?

Do you know the reason why that escalation occurred?
[note: does the participant know why they were cyberbullied or started cyberbullying]

When did you stop responding to these online interactions?

How did the negative interactions change who you are or what you do online?

Did you feel as if you were someone else in the virtual space, compared to who you are in your physical reality?

Do you feel like covid-19 had an impact on cyberbullying interactions? I assume you had started being online more often when the pandemic and lockdown have begun.

Thanks. Now let's move on to some other questions.

What do "private" and "public" mean to you when you are using SM or staying online?

What is the difference between the 'private' and 'public' in SM and in offline physical reality?

How do you control what is private and public on SM or during virtual interactions?

Do you post as often as you did before? Do you still have negative interactions?

What considerations do you make when posting online?

Do you often think about how these posts can present who you are?

Let's talk about your significant others.

Who did you share your experience with?

How has the experience of cyberbullying changed your relationships with your close friends and loved ones?

If it's alright, can you please share with me how your experience with cyberbullying affected your significant others and loved ones? How did this make them feel like?

FOR victims: Can you let me know if you have tried to report to the authorities about your victimization? Could you elaborate on what supports you were able to receive from them?

Did you receive support from anywhere else like student groups, community, and non-profits or other organizations like counselling at the university or secondary school?

What would you say about class discussions on anti-bullying initiatives?

What do you think needs to be done in order to support those who are involved in cyberbullying behaviors?

It might be irrelevant to you, but based on your experience, did you feel like your involvement in cyberbullying was deemed a normal everyday practice? By who? Why?

Part II

Let's now move on to the second part of our interview. I would like to remind you that your participation is voluntary. At any time during the course of the study, you may stop, take a pause, or withdraw without facing any consequences. You may also skip questions if they make you feel uncomfortable. Before we start, we may take a break or if it works better, we may schedule another interview some other time.

Option 1: Participants sharing pictures

Could you describe the picture to me? What is depicted in the picture?

How does this picture make you feel reflecting back on the event of cyberbullying?

Why is this picture meaningful for you? What sorts of help and support does this picture represent? What emotions do you recall? What was your motivation?

What were the consequences of being engaged in cyberbullying?

What could have been done differently or what could have prevented this from happening?

Option 2: Participants choosing to draw

Could you please draw a cartoon of someone who has experiences similar to yours? Feel free to include describing words.

Who is presented in this drawing? What emotions are they feeling?

How does this drawing make you feel like?

What does the future look like?

What were the consequences of being engaged in cyberbullying?

What could have been done differently or what could have prevented this from happening?

Conclusion
This is the end of our interview. Thank you so much for participating in this study. Your responses are crucial. If you have any questions, please let me know. You can reach out to me at any time – please see the consent form for contact info. Thanks again.

Appendix B

RECRUITMENT POSTER

Project title: *The presentation of self in an online environment:*
Experiences of cyberbullying victims and perpetrators

If you have ever experienced online bullying...
and you are a student at the UWinnipeg,

I would like to invite you to be a part of my thesis project that explores human interaction in an online environment in the context of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a common experience faced by youth. If you experienced bullying online in the past, including childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, I would like to hear about your experiences.

This project aims to understand how people behave while interacting in the virtual world. This study will identify the root causes of youths' behavior online which will be equally important for participants and policymakers. The findings of this project may also be shared with others through the researcher's thesis defense and participation in conferences. The findings will be reflected in the short video form and be shared with the public beyond scholarly community.

If you are interested, I am open to schedule interview time with you. You can be interviewed either in-person or via Zoom. The interview will consist of two sessions: an interview and a visual component (together taking 45 mins to 1.5 hrs long). These sessions can be scheduled separately (i.e., different days and times) or at once. Your participation will be compensated ($30 in cash form). Please note that this research will be conducted in adherence with the University of Winnipeg's COVID-19 protocols. Confidentiality will be maintained in this research study.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me directly at b.enkhtugs@uwinnipeg.ca or 431-557-3289. If there are concerns that I am unable to address, please contact the Ethics Program Officer at The University of Winnipeg at 204-786-9058 or by e-mail at ethics@uwinnipeg.ca.

Thank you for your interest and time. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Bilguundari (Dari) Enkhtugs

Appendix C

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG

Recruiting PARTICIPANTS

For the study titled

Presentation of Self Online: Experiences of Cyberbullying

Contact
Dari Enkhtugs
(grad student, Criminal Justice)

📞 431-557-3289

✉ b.enkhtugs@uwinnipeg.ca

OR SCAN BELOW

SCAN ME

Criminal Justice (CJ) at the University of Winnipeg focuses on the study of social responses to lawbreaking and transgression. CJ is an interdisciplinary social science degree that provides students with a strong grounding in critical thinking, writing, and research skills.

In addition to working in the Criminal Justice field, students pursue a Master's degree in CJ. Dari is one of the CJ students who is working on her Master's thesis project that explores an important issue of online deviance in the context of bullying. Her project aims to understand human behaviour online, the effects as well as needs of those who are engaged in online bullying.

About the Project

Cyberbullying is a common experience faced by youth young adults. While it can have negative consequences, not much is known in the Canadian context.

This study aims at understanding how people present their on-line and off-line selves, and will identify the needs of those who are affected by and instigate cyberbullying.

The findings of this project may be shared with others through the researcher's thesis, defence and participation in conferences. They will also be reflected in a short video form and be shared with the public beyond scholarly community.

If you have ever experienced online bullying and/or hate... & you are a student at the UWinnipeg

I would like to interview you and listen and learn about your experience(s).

The interview will consist of two sessions: open-ended questions and a visual component, together taking 45 mins to 2 hrs long. These sessions can be scheduled separately (i.e., different days and times) or at once.

This research will be conducted in adherence with the University of Winnipeg's COVID-19 protocols.

Confidentiality will be maintained in this research study.

Interested?

Here are the next steps:

✓ Schedule an in-person or Zoom Interview

✓ Send your availability via phone or email

✓ Receive an honorarium ($30) for your participation

This research is funded by the Graduate Master's Scholarship by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Appendix D

Participant Consent Form (WRITTEN Consent)

Project title: *The presentation of self in an online environment:*
Experiences of cyberbullying victims and perpetrators

Invitation and study description: I appreciate your interest in getting involved with this project. Your participation is key to the study, and I would like to start with the study description. This study is conducted as part of the thesis work by Bilguundari Enkhtugs – the primary investigator (PI) and a graduate student in the Criminal Justice (CJ) Program, The University of Winnipeg - under the supervision of Drs. Walby and Maier (CJ).

This project explores human interaction in an online environment in the context of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is a common experience faced by university students. If you have had experience with being a victim of cyberbullying and online harassment or hate causing you discomfort, distress, and any other negative consequences, or if you have cyberbullied someone in the past, the PI would like to hear about your experiences. This project focuses on identifying how victims of cyberbullying seek support and finding out about cyberbullying perpetrators' motives and emotions associated with cyberbullying behavior. Therefore, this study aims to understand how people behave while interacting in the virtual world. Previous studies evaluated anti-bullying programs and looked at the post-effects of cyberbullying. This study will identify the root causes of youths' behavior online, which will be equally important for participants and policymakers.

Pre-screening questions:
Before you are given information on the interview structure, there are three pre-screening questions that will be helpful for you to determine whether it is safe for you to participate in the study. Please take some time to reflect on these questions. These questions are:

Are there any reasons that participating in this study might make you feel distressed? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.

Are you working under significant stress? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.

Will participating in this study put you in danger if anyone else finds out? Please indicate with 'yes' or 'no'.

If an answer 'YES' to any of the questions is given, it will result in exclusion.

Interview structure: This interview will consist of two sessions: an interview and a visual component. After being asked some questions, I will ask you either to share a photo or to engage in a drawing activity. If you choose to share a picture with the PI, the picture will pertain to a physical space that will present how you cope with stress and emotions. You can also share a logo of the medium that mediated cyberbullying interaction. If you choose to engage in a drawing activity, you will be asked to sketch a cartoon or process of someone trying to cope with the effects of cyberbullying. You can also be asked to sketch a cartoon/picture that presents someone's expressions, motives, and emotions in relation to cyberbullying actions. The visual materials produced by you will be used toward preparing a short video that presents the findings of the study. Direct quotes and visual information you share may be used.

Outcomes of the study: This work will be used to fulfill the research requirement for defending the PI's thesis in MA program. The findings may also be shared with others through presentations. Finally, the findings will be reflected in the short video form beyond scholarly community. This raises awareness on the issue of cyberbullying and lets your experiences be heard and acknowledged.

Location of the study: You may choose to participate in the study in a quiet on-campus space, on an off-campus space nearby the UWinnipeg campus, or through Zoom. If you choose the latter communication method, the PI will provide you with a password-protected unique Zoom link and Zoom meeting number. If you choose to be interviewed on campus space, please note that we must follow the current public health guide mandated by the Province of Manitoba and the University of Winnipeg.

Risks and benefits: By being a part of the study, you may feel uncomfortable (i.e. anxiousness, grief, shame, guilt, and nervousness). You may reach out to NGOs and on-campus counselling services if you feel uncomfortable after the interview. You can contact Mood Disorders Association of Manitoba (MDAM) peer support line at 204-786-0987 or 1-800-263-1460; Mental Health Crisis Service at 306-525-5333 or 306-569-2724; Manitoba Suicide Prevention & Support Line at 877-435-7170, and on-campus counselling at 204-988-7611. You have the right to skip, take a pause, or stop the interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable sharing your experiences. Just like any other activities on-campus, there is a risk for contracting COVID-19 virus during our face-to-face interactions. In order to mitigate this risk, the PI will wear a mask, provide hand sanitizers, wipe down surfaces, sanitize research equipment (pens, pencils, and other drawing materials), and keep social distancing. The PI is fully vaccinated. Should the researcher feel unwell, the interview will be rescheduled for another date or to take place over Zoom. The researcher is responsible for letting the participant know if they had been exposed to COVID-19 thorough the researcher's interaction. Your participation in this study indicates that you have acknowledged the risks of participating, and you have given free consent.

This study will benefit cyber victims as they can openly talk about their feelings with an active listener. Similarly, cyber perpetrators will also benefit from participating because this will be an opportunity for them to reflect on their past. Participants' feelings and experiences will be acknowledged.

Voluntariness: Your decision whether to participate or not will not influence your academic standing in any way. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from

the study at any time without explanation or consequence. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to take pause, stop, re-schedule, or completely withdraw from the study at any stage of the study, including during this interview, after the interview is complete, and at the time of writing. It will take around 4-5 months to analyze, interpret, and write your data. Please feel free to notify the PI if you choose to withdraw within this timeframe. However, please note that once the final thesis is published and associated with findings presentations made, including the thesis defense, a conference presentation, and short video production, it will not be possible to withdraw from the study.

Anonymity and confidentiality: To ensure confidentiality, only pseudonyms will be used in writing. At the start of the interview, the PI will ask you to choose a pseudonym/nickname, so that others do not identify you. However, please note that some readers may be able to identify you by the description of the experiences you provide. The PI will generalize and contextualize your experience to represent a broader meaning. For example, places or locations, your religion and beliefs, and occupation outside of campus will be anonymized and generalized. The possibility of being identified remains open. There is also a risk of being identified because the participant pool of the study is small, as it consists of university students only. I kindly ask you not to share about your participation in this research with your classmates, friends, and family to further ensure anonymity and confidentiality is retained. Your pseudonym will be used throughout the interview. With your permission, this interview will be recorded. Interview transcriptions will contain your nickname only. The recording will be permanently deleted after the transcription, whereas the transcription of the interview will be encrypted and stored for 7 years at The University of Winnipeg.
I also ask you to erase all email communication from your e-mailbox to safeguard confidentiality. At the time of presenting results (in thesis writing, presentations, and short video production), all visual materials will be blurred to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Time involvement and compensation: The expected interview commitment time is between 45 mins to 1.5 hrs. You will receive $30 for your commitment. You will receive the incentive at the time of the interview in cash form if you choose the in-person interview method. If you choose to be interviewed through Zoom, we will schedule a compensation drop-off and pick-up date/time (also given in cash form). The participant of the study will receive a printed copy of this consent form (together with the compensation).

Contact information: If you have any follow-up questions or concerns after your interview, you can contact the PI (myself) out at my cellphone 431-557-3289 or via e-mail at b.enkhtugs@uwinnipeg.ca.
If there are concerns that the investigator (myself) is unable to address, please contact the Ethics Program Officer at The University of Winnipeg at 204-786-9058 or by e-mail at ethics@uwinnipeg.ca.

Consent questions:

Do you agree to be interviewed? If you agree, please indicate with 'yes'.

Do you agree to be audio recorded? If you agree, please indicate with 'yes'.

Do you agree to the sharing of visual materials produced by you to be included in the final short video presenting the results of this study? If you agree, please indicate with 'yes'.

Do you agree to the use of direct quotations from your interview to be used in publications and other forms of knowledge dissemination arising from this research? If you agree, indicate with 'yes'.

Please feel free to ask any questions again, and feel free to reach out to me or the Ethics Officer – contact info provided above.

Participant Pseudonym:

_____

Participant Signature:

_____

Date:

_____