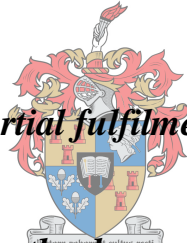


**TERTIARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE  
IMPACT OF CYBERBULLYING ON THEIR  
IDENTITY**

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the role cyberbullying plays in the psychological well-being of people. While cyberbullying is a well-researched topic internationally and nationally, few studies have researched the effects cyberbullying may have on identity development. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions tertiary students hold about cyberbullying, and the impact that it may have on identity development within a South African context.

The recent upsurge of the digital age in South Africa has not only paved the way in which people communicate and interact socially, but also plays a pivotal role in the development of a person's identity. Adolescents and emerging adults utilize instant messaging, text messaging, cellular phones, emails, and social-media platforms to communicate with people, to gain knowledge and keep up to date with what is happening in society and the world. Social-media platforms, in particular, have been identified as the most favorable means of communication because it provides instant and constant connectivity. These new channels of communication and instant connection can often be regarded as advantageous. However, it also has the power to abuse and incur psychological and emotional upset, which in turn can make people vulnerable. These experiences can be recognized as cyberbullying.

A social constructivist framework grounded this study and was used to shed light on the findings. The focus of using this lens was to present the participants meaning-making and illustrate how participants' realities and identities may be shaped through their experiences of either being cyberbullied or witnessing it first-hand.

In using a qualitative approach, participants were selected by means of purposeful and snowball sampling. The criteria that needed to be met, stipulated that the participants had to be post-graduate university students. Data was collected by means of individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group session. Seven participants participated in the individual semi-structured interviews and three participants participated in the focus group session. The data that was gathered, was analyzed through a thematic analysis where seven main themes emerged. These themes included narratives around cyberbullying, bullying, social-media platforms, the role of support the role of the bystander/witness, identity development in the different life phases and intervention and prevention strategies.

The research findings suggested that cyberbullying is a common problem that emerging adults experience and witness. The participants conveyed several factors that, in their opinions, maintain cyberbullying and also highlighted its perceived effects. Furthermore, the participants shared their understanding of how perceived effects of cyberbullying may impact identity development. In addition to this, participants suggested a few strategies on how to deal with cyberbullying more effectively.

*Key words: Cyberbullying; social-media platforms; emerging adults; identity; identity development*

## OPSOMMING

Daar is tans 'n groeiende belangstelling in die rol wat kuberboeliery in die sielkundige welstand van mense speel. Terwyl kuberboeliery internasionaal en nasionaal 'n goedgevorsde onderwerp is, is daar min navorsing oor die invloed wat kuberboeliery op die ontwikkeling van identiteit kan hê. Die doel van hierdie studie was om die persepsies wat tersiêre studente van kuberboeliery het en die impak wat dit op identiteitsontwikkeling binne 'n Suid-Afrikaanse konteks kan hê, te verken.

Die onlangse opkoms van die digitale era in Suid-Afrika het nie net die manier waarop mense kommunikeer en sosiaal verkeer vergemaklik nie, maar speel ook 'n sentrale rol in die ontwikkeling van 'n persoon se identiteit. Adolesseente en groeiende volwassenes maak gebruik van kitsboodskappe, teksboodskappe, selfone, eposse en sosiale-media om met andere te kommunikeer, kennis in te win en op hoogte te bly met wat in die samelewing en wêreld gebeur. Sosiale media is spesifiek geïdentifiseer as die gewildste kommunikasiemiddel omdat dit vinnige en voortdurende koppeling bewerkstellig. Hierdie nuwe kommunikasiekanale en vinnige koppelings word dikwels as voordelig beskou. Dit het egter ook die mag om sielkundige en emosionele onrus te veroorsaak en misbruik te word, en dit laat mense weerloos. Sulke ervarings staan bekend as kuberboeliery.

Hierdie studie is gegrond op 'n sosiale konstruktivistiese raamwerk en is aangewend om lig te werp op die bevindings. Die fokus deur hierdie spesifieke lens was om die sin wat deelnemers maak uit hulle ervarings te verwoord en om te illustreer hoe die deelnemers se realiteite en identiteite gevorm kan word deur hulle ervarings van óf kuberboeliery óf deur direkte ooggetuieis daarvan.

Deur 'n kwalitatiewe benadering te volg is deelnemers uitgesoek deur middel van doelgerigte en sneeubalsteekproefneming. Die kriteria waaraan voldoen moes word, het bepaal dat die deelnemers nagraadse universiteitstudente moes wees. Data is versamel deur middel van individuele semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en 'n fokusgroepsessie. Sewe studente het deelgeneem aan die individuele semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude en drie aan die fokusgroepsessie. Die data wat ingesamel is, is deur middel van 'n tematiese analise ontleed waar sewe hooftemas uitgestaan het. Hierdie temas het mededelings van kuberboeliery,

boeliery, sosiale media, die rol van ondersteuning, die rol van die toekyker/getuie en identiteitsontwikkeling in die verskillende fases ingesluit.

Die bevindings het bewys dat kuberboeliery 'n algemene probleem is wat deur opkomende volwassenes ondervind word en waarvan hulle getuies is. Die deelnemers het 'n paar faktore genoem wat volgens hulle menings kuberboeliery laat voortbestaan en het ook hulle waargenome invloede daarvan beklemtoon. Verder het die deelnemers hulle begrip van hoe waargenome invloede van kuberboeliery identiteitsontwikkeling kan beïnvloed, uitgespreek. Die deelnemers het ook 'n paar strategieë voorgestel van hoe om kuberboeliery meer effektief te hanteer.

*Sleutelwoorde: kuberboeliery, sosiale media, opkomende volwassenes, identiteit, identiteitsontwikkeling*

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## **Chapter 1**

# **CONTEXT AND RATIONALE OF STUDY**

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The World Wide Web and social-media platforms have become an integral part of everyday life and have greatly influenced interpersonal communication and engagement. Research has found South Africans to be among the highest users of mobile technology and mobile social networking on the continent (We Are Social, 2017; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012).

Many young adults have unlimited access to the internet via their mobile phones, computers, laptops and tablets (Smit, 2015). Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, text messages and WhatsApp are among the most commonly used social-media platforms globally (Chaffey, 2016; We Are Social, 2017). These platforms enable the sharing of images, messages and comments and the expression of views, feelings or any other information related to oneself or others (Berne, Frisén & Kling, 2014). Over time, these online communities have become more integrated and prevalent in society. The limited monitoring of what is posted and shared via the internet means that these social-media platforms are sometimes used to engage in acts of anti-social behaviour (Bannon, McGlynn, McKenzie & Quayle, 2015; Househ, Borycki & Kushniruk, 2014).

### **1.2 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT**

In recent times there has been an increase in the number of reported bullying activities. Bullying is considered to be amongst the most commonly occurring disruptive acts. Disruptive acts are characterized by hostility and deliberate animosity and are considered to be anti-social acts. Bullying can be defined as a form of intimidation or domination towards someone who is perceived as being weaker or inferior to the bully (Venter, 2013). It is generally accompanied by some form of coercion or force and is aimed at asserting dominance or superiority over another (Venter, 2013). This can take place in a number of ways. Common forms of bullying discussed in the literature include physical bullying that usually involves hitting, kicking and pushing; verbal bullying, such as name calling, swearing and mocking and emotional bullying (Venter, 2013). There is a number of different outcomes associated with bullying, some of which may include, but are not limited to, physical and social isolation, anxiety and self-harm,

and in more serious cases, suicide attempts and suicide completion (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012, as cited in Gahagan, Vaterlaus & Frost, 2016; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014).

While technology and the internet have introduced new variations of conventional bullying, the escalation in cyberbullying has been noted with increasing concern. Cyberbullying is considered to be a complex phenomenon that cannot be limited to a single definition, as occurrences of cyberbullying vary across culture, gender and context (Gahagan et al., 2016; Kokkinos, Antoniadou & Markos, 2014; Smit, 2015; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). According to Akbulut and Eristi (2011), cyberbullying can, however, be categorised as harassment that involves recurring offensive messages, cyberstalking such as threats of harm or intimidation, humiliation and denigration (harmful, false, cruel statements) via digital technology. Recent research and legislation have defined cyberbullying as an aggressive act or aggressive behaviour done online with the intention to wilfully and repeatedly inflict harm using cyberspace via computers, cellphones and other electronic devices (Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Smit, 2015).

Cyberbullying has the potential to be crueller than traditional bullying because people who use social-media platforms to carry out acts of adverse behaviour can remain anonymous and often they may not even know or be known to their victims. Recent research suggests that the perpetrators rarely consider the effect that their actions may have on others (Diamanduros et al., 2008, as cited in Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014; Kokkinos et al., 2014). Interestingly, the literature also suggests that the anonymity and distance afforded by technology may result in people engaging in more aggressive forms of bullying than they would use in traditional, face-to-face bullying (Bauman, 2011, as cited in Smit, 2015; Donegan, 2012; Kokkinos et al., 2014; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder & Lattanner, 2014). While traditional bullying and cyberbullying may differ subtly, an extensive review of the literature points to three primary features they have in common, including acts of aggression, power imbalance (where the perpetrator has the power over the victim) and the repetitive nature of the bullying behaviour (Francisco, Ferreira, Martins, & Veiga Simão, 2015; Kowalski et al., 2014).

In addition, there are similarities in how the victims of both forms of bullying respond to these experiences. Some of the typical responses include psychological, emotional and physical harm (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). The experience of being bullied has been found to affect interpersonal relationships, cause depression, lead to substance abuse, increase anxiety and decrease performance in academic and occupational activity (Kokkinos et al., 2014; Kowalski

et al., 2014). Some victims may also experience rejection in their peer groups that may result in social isolation, loneliness and suicide ideation (Antoniadou et al., 2014; Cowie, 2013). All of the aforementioned have the potential to influence an individual's identity development, self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Identity development has also been influenced significantly by advances in technology over the last few years (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). The phase of life in which significant shifts in identity development occurs, is referred to in the current literature as emerging adulthood. Emerging adults are considered to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (Arnett, 2000; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Shwartz, Cote & Arnett, 2005). Schwartz et al. (2013) describe this phase of life as a time when individuals attend explicitly to issues related to identity and are given the freedom to focus on their own self-development. It is, therefore, considered to be a transitioning time of life during which childhood and adolescence are left behind, but during which young people have not yet fully engaged with the responsibilities of adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2005). This stage of life is marked by opportunities for identity exploration (Arnett, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2005). In some cultures or contexts, this is generally the time when emerging adults attend college or university (Arnett, 2000).

According to the literature, identity is closely linked to the social cues we receive about ourselves from the social contexts in which we function (Craig & Dunn, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Individuals' social identities then refer to how they identify with a specific social group and develop their self-image from the social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging to (Bernabé, Lisbona, Palací & Martín-Aragón, 2016; Cheng & Guo, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Erikson's (1965, 1968, 1982) psychosocial theory is considered to be one of the most influential theories of human development. In this theory he identifies eight stages of psychosocial development through which an individual must progress. Each of these stages relates to people's emerging emotional needs in interaction with social relationships and includes various forms of conflict that the individual must overcome (Bannon et al., 2015; Craig & Dunn, 2007). These stages include: trust vs mistrust; autonomy vs shame; initiative vs guilt; industry vs inferiority; identity vs role confusion; intimacy vs isolation; generativity vs stagnation and integrity vs despair.

The fifth stage of his theory is important for this study because it usually takes place from adolescence to early adulthood. Navigating through this stage successfully is considered to be

critical for identity development (Marttinen, Dietrich, & Salmela-Aro, 2016; Schwartz et al., 2013). The significant challenge in this stage is for individuals to come to terms with who they are and what their places in this world are. If the individual does not successfully navigate the challenge and it remains unresolved, it can result in a range of consequences, which can include, but is not limited to, emotional, intellectual and interpersonal problems (Bannon et al., 2015).

### **1.3 MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH**

Recognising that traditional bullying can disrupt all aspects of a person's life, society has moved beyond regarding it as a natural part of growing up and has started to consider the lasting psychosocial harm that it may cause (Akbulut & Eristi, 2011; Popovac & Leoschut, 2012).

My interest in this particular area of research was stimulated by my own experiences of being bullied during adolescence. In addition, as an educator I have witnessed bullying and, more specifically, cyberbullying and its effects on victims.

A significant difference between traditional forms of bullying and cyberbullying is that the former usually stops once the school or work day has ended and is therefore confined to a particular space and time. However, increasing use of and access to technology mean that bullying is no longer confined to a particular space and time; it now has the potential to continue at home and at any time during and after school or work (Cowie, 2013; Faucher, Jackson & Cassidy, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2014). This intrusion and the stigma associated with cyberbullying often result in students not seeking help. Research evidence suggests that experiencing cyberbullying or cyber violence may affect the social, emotional and academic functioning of individuals within a learning environment negatively (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). An exploratory literature review revealed that, while there is a large body of research on the long-term effects of traditional forms of bullying on both the victim and the perpetrator, there is a limited body of qualitative knowledge on the long- and short-term effects of cyberbullying on both the victim and the perpetrator (Minor, Smith & Brashen, 2013; Nilan, Burgess, Hobbs, Threadgold, & Alexander, 2015). This study aimed to add to the limited body of qualitative knowledge on cyberbullying in the South African educational context.

### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION**

Incident report rates indicate that cyberbullying among university students is a reality that occurs across cultures and in various countries (Gahagan et al., 2016). University students are



mainly emerging adults and are at a stage in their development where they tend to seek identity validation from friends and strangers. According to recent research, social media now play a significant role in this validation process. Donegan (2012) is of the view that a new generation is coming of age online, and therefore the World Wide Web has the potential to influence how emerging adults form or alter their identities.

A great deal of international research identifies cyberbullying as a critical challenge in the lives of emerging adults today (Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). This type of behaviour results in negative consequences for both the recipient and the perpetrator. Therefore, this study sought to explore the limited body of knowledge related to the prevalence and experiences of cyberbullying among emerging adults at a tertiary institution in a South African context. The study was guided by the following main research question:

**How do experiences of cyberbullying influence the process of identity development among emerging adults?**

To fully explore the research question, the following sub-questions were formulated:

- What do the participants understand by cyberbullying?
- To what kinds of cyberbullying have the participants been exposed?
- How have the participants' experiences with cyberbullying affected them?

## **1.5 RESEARCH FOCUS**

The study was conducted at a tertiary institution in the Western Cape. The research focused on postgraduate students who were doing a Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) at the time of the study. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to select the research participants for this study. Purposive sampling was used because it enabled the researcher to select a sufficient number of participants who would be able to provide enough in-depth information about the phenomenon under study (Cohen & Manion, 2011; Schwab & Syed, 2015). It also allowed the researcher to delineate the characteristics of particular subgroups of interest. The criteria for inclusion in this study were that the participants had to be postgraduate students (between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five) at an academic tertiary institution who had experienced cyberbullying or have witnessed cyberbullying. Snowball sampling was adopted

after I experienced challenges in accessing this vulnerable population (this will be further discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3).

## **1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The participants were emerging adults between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five who were studying at the University at the time of the study. The institution was selected as a research site because of the diverse nature of the members of the student body and its potential to provide access to diverse experiences and responses from various socio-cultural groups. The study did not aim to represent a specific culture or racial group; instead, it aimed to understand the perceptions tertiary students may have about the impact of cyberbullying.

The specific age category was selected because it falls within the phase of life related to identity development. In addition, being registered as a postgraduate student implied that the participants may have experienced both the best and the worst of being university students and would be able to provide rich data for the study. Being a university student also meant that I was able to gather data at times that were convenient for them (during free periods or lunch breaks).

Some of the challenges that I experienced amid the research process included issues related to a lack of knowledge about cyberbullying; unwillingness or fear of sharing their experiences with classmates; respecting the rights of clients to withdraw from the study; protecting the privacy of the participants and obtaining continuous consent from them. Although this study did not aim to explore prevention strategies, it did, however, emerge in conversation during the individual interviews and the focus group session.

## **1.7 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **1.7.1 Paradigm**

A paradigm is central to the research design and represents a frame of reference used to view the world (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A paradigm directs the study and guides the researcher's approach in order to answer the research questions better. This study was conducted within a social constructivist paradigm that emphasises understanding of the complex world of lived experiences through the lenses of those who live it (Babbie & Mouton, 2013). This world view holds that one's beliefs, values, customs and that make up one's social

realities are all constructed by the members of a community as they interact with one another (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Tuli, 2010). This suggests that knowledge is socially constructed and contexts, such as race, gender, culture, class, age and society influence the interpretations and meaning-making processes of people (Gorman et al., 2005).

In social constructivism people are viewed as part of multiple realities, and researchers are interested in individuals' subjective experiences (Gorman et al., 2005). By interacting with people in this way, we seek to understand the phenomenon under study from their perspectives and regard them as the experts of their own lives.

This study used a qualitative research approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) consider qualitative research to be an umbrella concept that covers several forms of investigation. Qualitative research seeks to investigate social phenomena from the participants' points of view with minimal disruption of the natural setting (Creswell, 2014). During this qualitative research process I focused on learning about the meaning that participants attach to cyberbullying and explored their views on the impact cyberbullying may have on social identity (Creswell, 2014). Using qualitative research also enabled me to create a space that afforded the participants the freedom to express their unique experiences, share their meaning-making of these experiences and explore the different ways in which their perspectives have been or are socially constructed.

The qualitative research design selected for this study was participatory action research (PAR) that was based on the co-operation and collaboration between the researcher and participants (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Macdonald, 2012). It emphasises collective enquiry and creates a platform where participants can be involved in the process and gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under study (Macdonald, 2012). This design process provided me with an opportunity to gain greater insight into the meaning-making processes of the participants.

### **1.7.2 Recruitment of participants**

Initial recruitment techniques included an introductory presentation to the PGCE class. This introduction informed the class about the reason, inspiration and planned data gathering instruments of the study. It additionally educated them about how I planned to guarantee privacy and anonymity. Remaining cognizant of the sensitive nature of the phenomena under study, a short survey was handed out to the class (see Addendum A). This survey provided an indication of the potential participants' knowledge and possible encounters of cyberbullying and required of them to indicate their individual interest in participating in the study. Once I

had identified the potential participants, I invited them to participate in the individual semi-structured interviews (see Addendum B). The participants who took part in the individual interviews were asked to specify whether they would like to be part of the focus group session. Because of the nature of the study it was important to remind the potential participants that their participation in this study was completely voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time and that they were under no obligation to participate in the focus group discussion.

### **1.7.3 Data-generation strategies**

In qualitative research the researcher is said to be the key instrument for data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2002). By using this approach I aimed to gather information by using multiple data collection methods such as interviews, focus group discussions, observations and field notes recorded in my research journal (Creswell, 2014). According to the literature, using more than one method of data collection enhances the validity of the findings (Anney, 2014; Merriam, 2002).

Cohen and Manion (2011) consider it useful to triangulate focus group discussions with other traditional forms of data collection methods such as interviewing, questionnaires and observations. The individual semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion provided me with an opportunity to gather rich qualitative data from different perspectives (see Addendums C and D). In addition to the above, I kept field notes in the form of a reflexive journal during the research process (see Addendum J).

#### ***1.7.3.1 Semi-structured individual interviews***

In order to obtain diverse perspectives and fully explore the research questions, individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were selected as data-collection tools for this study.

Interviewing is a data-collection tool that complemented the social constructivist paradigm and is considered to be the primary source of gathering data for qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwab & Syed, 2015). As one of the most commonly used qualitative data collection techniques, it views participants as key informants in the process of understanding their experiences with the phenomenon under study. A set of open-ended questions enabled me to understand individual attitudes and values and also guided me in capturing the complex experiences of the participants (see Addendum C) (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, as cited

in Whiting, 2008; Gill, Butler & Pistrong, 2016; Schwab & Syed, 2015). It also allowed for the opportunity to deal with any difficulties or questions that the participants may have misunderstood. Themes emerging from the thematic content analysis of the transcripts guided the research questions for the focus group discussion.

### ***1.7.3.2 Focus group discussion***

A focus group discussion is generally a form of qualitative research where opinions are raised, statements are challenged or perceptions are explored through a discussion between members of a group and the researcher. This interaction has the potential to generate rich data of the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Kumar, 2011). Using a focus group created an opportunity to interact directly with the participants and provided a space to observe how participants related to one another. It also allowed for observation of non-verbal cues such as gestures, smiles and frowns in a social setting. In addition, using a focus group afforded the participants an opportunity to clarify their responses from the individual interviews. The focus group session was guided by questions based on the themes that emerged during the individual interviews.

When conducting a focus group a number of six to ten people is usually favourable, with the intention of having all participants actively involved in the group discussion (Bryman, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Kumar, 2011). However, due to the nature of the study and challenges with retaining participants, there were only three participants in the focus group. The data generated in the process provided an opportunity to explore the participants' meaning-making processes. In addition, discussing such a sensitive topic could potentially lead to the development of a support network (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It was not the intention of this research project to create a support network.

In order to carry out a full analysis of the data, the individual semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussion were recorded, as recommended by Willig (2008). To ensure that the participants felt at ease during the focus group session, I presented them with the choice of being video-recorded or only audio-recorded. According to Whiting (2008), recording interviews during data collection may contribute to a more relaxed atmosphere, as it allows the researcher to engage with the participants. It also affords the researcher the opportunity to concentrate on what the participants are saying without being distracted by rigorous note taking (Whiting, 2008).

#### **1.7.4 Data analysis**

An iterative data analysis process was used. An iterative data analysis implies that the researcher will continuously process and analyse the data before reaching final conclusions. The individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussion were transcribed verbatim, after which a thematic analysis was done to identify themes and patterns of responses. According to Braun and Clarke (2006:10), a thematic analysis can be considered to be a constructionist method in that “it examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within a society”.

The aim was to capture something significant about the generated data in relation to the overall research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic coding was used to analyse the transcripts of the individual semi-structured interviews, and the themes that emerged from these informed the basis of exploration in the focus group discussion (Schwab & Syed, 2015). The iterative data analysis approach also provided me with an opportunity to refine the research questions and guided me in considering whether or not to alter the proposed data generation strategies (Creswell, 2014; Schwab & Syed, 2015).

### **1.8 ENSURING TRUSTWORTHINESS**

In qualitative research the various approaches used to enhance the quality of a study are broadly placed under the heading of “trustworthiness” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Triangulation methods are commonly used to achieve credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative studies and involve gathering data from multiple sources through multiple methods (Anney, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Schwab & Syed, 2015). This study aimed to gather data from participants using, individual semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, member checks, observations and field notes.

Field notes assisted with the audit trail and helped to establish the confirmability of the study. All the research decisions, documents and activities showing how the data was collected were also recorded in a research journal.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews provided the researcher with opportunities to engage in member checks. Tracy (2010) states that member checks allow the researcher the space to reflect on gathered data and provide opportunities for the participants and the researcher to reflect on interpretation or meaning making. It also creates space for additional

data generation. The aim in this regard was not to gain the absolute truth, but rather to explore the meaning-making processes of the participants.

## **1.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Marshall and Rossman (2011) maintain that to demonstrate that the study is well thought through, it should be implemented with an ethical mindfulness. I was fully aware that this study would involve vulnerable human participants, therefore, having a firm ethical stance was crucial to the research process. The research policy of the University specifies that research involving human participants must be approved by a research ethics committee before the research study commences (Senate Research Ethics Committee, 2013). Hence, ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of this University was obtained. Once permission had been obtained, an application for permission to conduct the study at the tertiary institution commenced (see Addendum E).

I understand that ethical consideration is an ongoing process and that it is not separate to the research process. I concur with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) who note that there are multiple overlapping principles that guide ethical practice. Good ethical research practice should be grounded in the moral principles of beneficence, respect for persons and justice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Every effort should be made to ensure that participants are protected from harm as a result of participating in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, 2010). Because of the sensitive nature of the research done for the current study, I ensured that participants had access to psychological support services should they require or desire it (see Addendum G).

In addition to the above principles, a fourth principle, namely, respect for communities, was considered, as this study took place at a department in a tertiary institution in a South African educational context. Effort was made to respect the values and interests of the department and institution involved in the study.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, what was expected of them during the study and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any given point (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Tracy, 2010). Such information is important for potential participants who have to make informed decisions about whether or not they would like to be part of the study prior to the

commencement of the research. Participants should also be informed of the potential risks and benefits of the study and how confidentiality will be maintained (Fletcher, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Once the participants had indicated their willingness to be part of the study, they were asked to complete a consent form (see Addendum H).

Following procedural ethics, Tracy (2010) states that researchers must protect their participants from ‘undue exposure’ by securing all personal data. Being cognizant of the fact that this study would involve vulnerable human participants, I maintained a firm ethical stance throughout the research process and implemented strict confidential principles. All names of people and places were disguised by pseudonyms and any identifying details were altered to ensure the anonymity and privacy of the participants and institution involved. The raw data obtained from the participants was saved on external hard drives with an encrypted password. Hard copies were stored in a safe place to which only I had access. The participants were, however, informed of their rights in accessing the transcripts, analyses of the interviews (which related to them) and the final thesis.

## **1.10 CHAPTER DIVISION**

Chapter 1 provided an introduction to the research study by explaining the motivation and background for the study and gave an overview of what the study entailed. This chapter also included the research focus and provided a brief overview of the research paradigm, the research design and methodology used for the study.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth literature review of bullying, cyberbullying and identity development, particularly among emerging adults. This chapter also reflects on recent studies on cyberbullying and emerging adults and explores how cyberbullying can potentially impact identity development.

Chapter 3 addresses the research paradigm, research approach, research design and methodology for the study. In Chapter I also discussed the mechanisms I used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The ethical considerations, practices and dilemmas that I encountered are discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 addresses the research findings. The findings are presented by means of direct quotations, categories and themes that emerged during the data analysis process.



Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research study. An integrative discussion of the findings and interpretations of the participants' experiences is presented in this chapter. I also reflect on the strengths and limitations of the study and finally I make recommendations for future research.

## 1.11 KEY TERMS

The terms and how they were understood in this study are the following:

**Bullying:** When a person is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions from one or more other persons, and he/she has difficulty defending him/herself

**Cyberbullying:** A repeated, aggressive act or behaviour inflicted through the use of computers, cellphones and other electronic devices

**Emerging adults:** Considered to be between the ages of 18 and 25; during this phase, individuals attend explicitly to issues related to identity and are given the freedom to focus on their own self-development

**Tertiary (students):** For the purpose of this thesis, the term, 'tertiary', was used to describe university (students).

**Social-media platform:** A blanket term used for a number of websites that allow users to contact and communicate with people via the internet

**Identity:** It is related to one's self-image and a sense of how one fits into the world.

**Identity development:** Refers to the process of developing an identity and is based on the interaction between the individual and others as well as on the interactions between the individual and his/her context. The meaning they ascribe to those interactions form part of their identities.

## Chapter 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

In order to understand students' perceptions of cyberbullying and its impact on identity development, it is important to get a comprehensive picture of what the existing literature says about cyberbullying and identity development among emerging adults. The literature reviewed for this study focused on bullying, cyberbullying, social media, gender, identity and identity development. It also explored intervention and prevention strategies regarding cyberbullying. I looked at both national and international research studies. I was mindful that the literature I reviewed would relate to my specific research focus.

In my exploration of literature, I discovered that, whilst there is a large volume of research on the psychological effects of bullying and identity development, there is a dearth of information around cyberbullying and the impact it may have on identity development among emerging adults in South Africa. This may be because cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon that has escalated in the last two decades, and the impact it has had on youth and emerging adults has only recently become the focus of research and intervention programmes.

### 2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND THE INTERNET

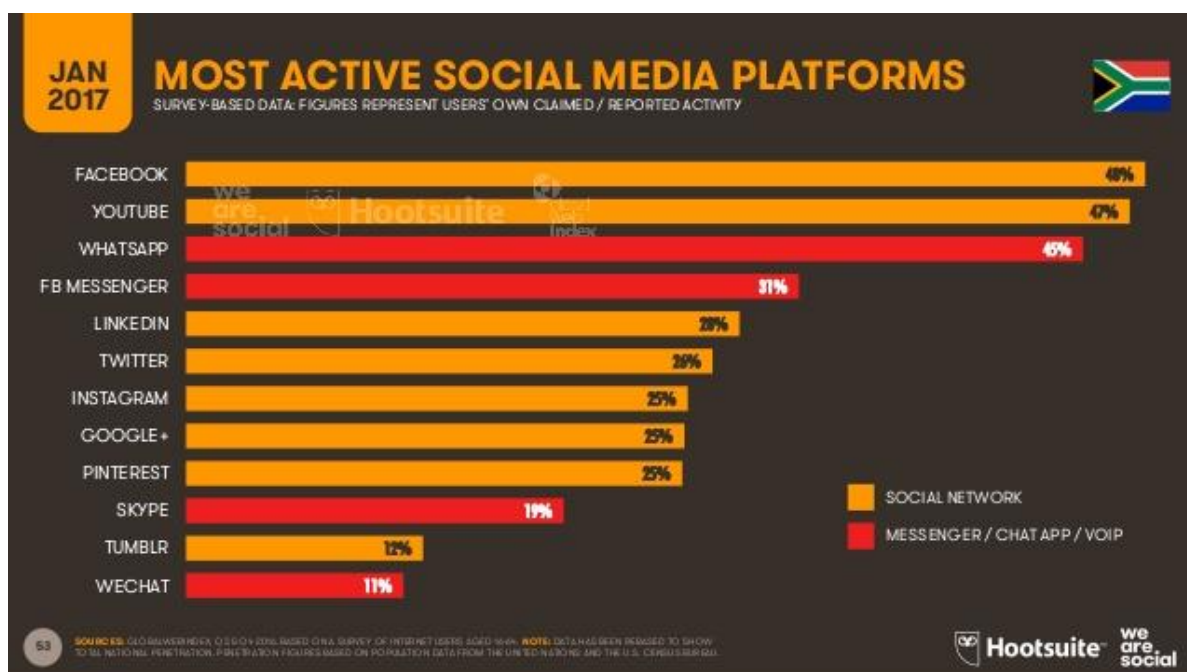
In the last few years advancements in technology have significantly influenced the way in which we interact and communicate with one another and about one another (Badenhorst, 2011; British Psychological Society, 2013; Brochado, Soares, & Fraga, 2016). Technology and social-media platforms have become increasingly significant factors in the educational, occupational and social aspects of learners and students (Campbell, Kimpton, Leong, Orel, & Wozencroft, 2015). In the past decade or two there have been substantial research efforts to investigate and explore the impact that social media may have on students' and learners' psychological and emotional well-being (Kimmons & Veletsianos, 2014; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005; Walther, 2007).

The growing influence of technology on every aspect of life lies in its ability to convey information to a vast audience in a matter of seconds (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). As this study

seeks to consider the influence of social media on the psycho-social well-being of emerging adults, it will focus primarily on the social-media platforms that enable this instant connectivity. Examples of these platforms that are popular among emerging adults include Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat. These social-media platforms' popularity is ascribed to the fact that they allow quick access to knowledge, facilitate open communication cost effectively and enable quicker connections with the world (Foody, Samara, & Carlbring, 2015).

Despite being generally advantageous, this ready access to the internet has also brought with it concerns about the potential it has for enabling the violation of people's rights, their safety and dignity (Foody et al., 2015). The literature identifies some key areas of concern, viz. the possibility for hackers to commit fraud, such as money scams and identity theft; the amount of time people spend on these platforms; the potential it has to become addictive; compromising people's privacy and safety and cyberbullying.

According to a study conducted by *We are Social* in 2016, more than half of the world's population uses the internet. Furthermore, the findings of the 2017, *We are Social* survey, indicated that Africa has one hundred and seventy million social-media users and it is estimated that South Africa currently has fifteen million social-media users. Below is a table reflecting South Africa's most active social-media platforms.



**Figure 1.1: Active Social-Media Platforms in South Africa (We Are Social, 2017)**

## 2.4 DEFINING CYBERBULLYING

It is evident from the literature that cyberbullying is multi-faceted and difficult to define. There are various definitions of cyberbullying; this could potentially allude to the complex nature of the phenomenon and its recent emergence in the public domain. For example, cyber-harassment, online harassment and electronic bullying are all terms that have been used interchangeably to describe cyberbullying (Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Brochado et al., 2016; Foody et al., 2015). The definitions used in recent research reports refer to cyberbullying as an aggressive act, or behaviour, done online with the intention to willfully, and repeatedly, inflict harm using cyberspace via computers, cellphones and other electronic devices (Brochado et al., 2016; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Smit, 2015). A more generalised definition used by Tokunaga (2010:278), describes cyberbullying as “any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others”.

In attempting to explain this complex concept, Langos (2012) describes cyberbullying as having two subsets:

- 1) Cyberbullying that can involve direct communication with the victim and the victim only; this include acts such as sending threatening messages directly to the victim; and
- 2) Cyberbullying that can involve indirect communication with the victim by posting or sharing information about the victim on a social platform where it can be reached by thousands of people (Palermi, Servidio, Bartolo, & Costabile, 2017; Watts, Wagner, Velasquez, & Behrens, 2017).

In addition to the above subsets, the literature points to the fact that there are several different forms of cyberbullying. The examples cited in the literature include overt harassment, involving repeatedly sending offensive electronic messages, cyberstalking that relates to the perpetrator sending threats of harm or intimidation making the recipient fear for his/her safety. Other methods of cyberbullying include social exclusion, humiliation, and denigration by means of social-media posts, which the person experiences as embarrassing or hurtful. Easy access to mobile technology such as cellphones, laptops, tablets and ipads, exacerbates the extent to which many victims are subjected to cyberbullying (Akbulut & Eristi, 2011; Cappadocia, 2013; Watts et al., 2017). These electronic devices provide the user with access to e-mail, Internet chat rooms, instant messaging programs, social-media platforms, blogs and websites at any

time or from any place. A study on cyberbullying among college students, conducted by McDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010), found that 25% of the participants reported that they had been bullied or harassed via social-media platforms. Another study that did research with adult Malaysians between the ages of seventeen and thirty, found that social-media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube were amongst the most commonly used platforms to engage in cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015).

Cyberbullying is becoming an increasingly prolific phenomenon that is associated with negative psychological, physical and social-health outcomes for people of all ages (Brochado et al., 2016; Foody et al., 2015). Examples of these negative outcomes cited in the literature include low self-esteem, anger, stress and depression. In addition to the aforementioned, victims of cyberbullying may also become less trusting of people and may even avoid situations and places related to the incident (Allan, Cross, & Patterson, 2017; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2014). In an academic space, the influence of cyberbullying can be noticed in students who avoid attending classes and this may, in turn, result in poor academic performance. Hinduja and Patchin (2014) also found that cyberbullying is increasingly associated with suicidal ideations and suicide attempts. According to Carr (2006), suicide ideation is described as thinking about self-harm and possibly engaging in acts of self-harm without killing oneself. A suicide attempt refers to the act of using potentially lethal methods such as hanging, self-poisoning and so forth to kill oneself, but without succeeding (Carr, 2006).

Research has shown that university students are potentially more vulnerable and at higher risk than any other developmental age of being subjected to cyberbullying, as they are among the highest users of the internet and other forms of technology (Benson, Kota, Moreno, & Schoohs, 2014). This view is supported by Allan et al. (2017) who suggest that adolescents and young adults are more vulnerable and susceptible to cyberbullying because they are more reluctant to seek help from adults. The literature suggests that this may be because young people often feel that adults do not understand the significant role that social media and technology play in all aspects of their lives (Bartolo et al., 2017; Brewer & Kerslake, 2015; Foody, Samara, & Carlbring, 2015).

The prevalence of cyberbullying has become highly publicised in South Africa in recent years. A study conducted by The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) in 2009 found that almost half (46.8%) of the respondents aged between 12 and 24 had experienced some form of cyberbullying. In 2016 various radio stations and social-media platforms were flooded with

images and recordings of two bullying incidences that extended to cyberbullying. The recordings involved a learner being brutally beaten up by a physically larger learner. In addition to being bullied, the video was uploaded to various platforms and, within minutes, it went viral, thus, further humiliating the victim and causing more damage to her psychological and emotional well-being.

## **2.5 BULLYING**

It is important to note that bullying has been a significant challenge even prior to the digital age. There are daily reports in the media about incidents of bullying and its effect on young people (De Wet, 2007).

Bullying is generally a conscious, repetitive act of intimidation or domination towards someone. Bullying can happen at any developmental stage throughout one's life from childhood to adolescence and even to adulthood (Benson et al., 2014; Misawa, 2015). There are many different types of bullying. Some of the most common forms of bullying are physical bullying, verbal (e.g. name-calling), emotional and sexual bullying (Chan & Wong, 2016). Bullying is also further differentiated into covert (indirect) bullying such as gossiping, spreading rumours and deliberately excluding people from social groups) and overt (direct) forms of bullying including hitting, kicking and teasing.

In the same study conducted by McDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) there appears to be gender differences in the type of bullying reported. Males were found to often report physical bullying behaviour, whilst females often spoke of engaging in verbal bullying behaviour such as rumours or sexual comments.

Research has found that people who are subjected to traditional bullying may experience problems associated with health, emotional well-being and academic work and may also report feelings of depression and low self-esteem (Giumetti et al., 2014). The degree to which they experience aforementioned is, however, linked to the frequency and severity of the bullying experience. Furthermore, the long-term impact that bullying may have on an individual is dependent on how the individual responds to the bullying behaviour (Waasdorp, Pas, O'Brennan, & Bradshaw, 2011). According to the literature, the coping strategies used by the individual when confronted with bullying may prolong or minimize the impact that the bullying may have on the individual (Francisco et al., 2015; Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Some of the most

commonly used strategies include fighting back, seeking help or ignoring the bully. Very little information is available about which of these strategies are most effective in mitigating the risk.

Furthermore, it is evident in the literature that bullying that is usually regarded as an isolated act, does not only affect the victim, but can also influence the broader environment of the victim, viz. their families, learning environment, work place and the broader community (Bowes et al., 2009).

## **2.6 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BULLYING AND CYBERBULLYING**

Traditional bullying and cyberbullying have many similar characteristics, one of which is relying on a power imbalance to intimidate the victim. In traditional bullying the bully is generally thought of as someone who is physically bigger and stronger, whereas with cyberbullying this is rarely the case. With cyberbullying the bully can be anyone that has the will, skills and access to technology. In traditional bullying a victim can easily identify his/her bully or perpetrator and in some cases even confront the bully. The anonymity of cyberbullying often makes it difficult for victims to identify their bullies (George & Odgers, 2015).

The anonymity afforded by technology and online sites represents bigger space for adverse behaviour to take place. Assuming different identities and creating fake accounts are just two examples of how perpetrators can misuse anonymity to their advantage. This sense of anonymity and inability to see the effects of the damage they inflict may further prompt bullies to engage in riskier and crueller behaviour than during face-to-face interactions.

In addition to being anonymous, engaging in cyberbullying has no boundaries and provides the perpetrator with a bigger audience, enabling him/her to reach anyone, any place or any time of day. It, thus, inhibits the ability of the victim to address the source or timing of these acts of aggression. Misawa (2014:7) emphasizes the infinite access into people's lives and states that "educational settings are no exception in terms of how bullying affects its members and environments". This indicates that cyberbullying can follow anyone into environments outside school, to the comfort of their homes and even to university, creating no escape for the victim. This unlimited access and large audience could cause further humiliation and serious, psychological effects in comparison to the psychological effects of traditional bullying. The perpetrator may thus never know the effect that his/her action may have on the victim. This

may further contribute to a lack of concern for consequences (Brochado et al., 2016; Cappadocia, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2014; Patterson et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2017).

## **2.7 GENDER DIFFERENCES**

It is evident in the literature that extensive research has been conducted in studying bullying and gender differences. However, research that has focused on cyberbullying and gender differences has revealed mixed results (Brochado et al., 2016; Nilan, Burgess, Hobbs, Threadgold, & Alexander, 2015). Studies that have explored gender differences in cyberbullying found that females are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying than males (Balakrishnan, 2015; Chadwick, 2014; Notar, Padgett, & Roden, 2013). These findings were supported in a study conducted by Cappadocia et al. (2013) who researched the prevalence, stability and risk factors associated with cyberbullying and cybervictimization. Additional research has indicated that females are more likely to engage in covert (indirect) forms of cyberbullying, for example spreading rumours, blackmailing, exclusion and other behaviours that manipulate friendship (Chadwick, 2014; Hutzell & Payne, 2012; Navarro, Yubero, & Larrañaga, 2015). It has been reported that males, on the other hand, seem to engage in overt (direct) forms of behaviour that involve retaliation such as posting hurtful pictures or videos (Chadwick, 2014; Navarro et al., 2015; Orel, Campbell, Wozencroft, Leong, & Kimpton, 2015).

A study conducted by Orel et al. (2015) found that males are less likely to use help-seeking strategies such as telling an adult, getting advice from a peer and so forth, in trying to cope with cyberbullying than females. Females tend to engage in help-seeking strategies because they believe that using these strategies would be more effective for reducing or stopping the cyberbullying.

It is evident in the literature that males and females differ in the methods they use to cyberbully and in the strategies they use to cope with cyberbullying. Although not a focus of this study, it was important to discuss gender differences in order to demonstrate how my research critically engaged with prior studies. Despite the controversy regarding the breadth of gender categories there were differences in how males and females experienced cyberbullying. It was evident in the literature that cyberbullying is experienced and executed by both males and females.



## 2.8 THE BYSTANDER

During my exploration of the literature it became apparent that people may adopt three different roles in an incident related to bullying and cyberbullying: the bully, the victim or the bystander. While the bully is usually regarded as the oppressor, and the victim as the recipient of the bullying, the bystander also tends to play an important role in these interactions. *The Bystander Effect* is the expression used when individuals, who witness an incident, do not offer help to the victim especially when other people are present (Darley & Latané, 1968).

The bystander can either exacerbate or minimize the bullying act through the various ways in which he/she responds to the bullying (Allan et al., 2017). In a traditional bullying incident, the bystander adopts either a passive or an active stance. The passive bystander would typically avoid direct interaction in the bullying incident while an active bystander may actively cheer on the perpetrator or become physically involved in the incident (Gini & Pozzoli 2012).

A bystander in a cyberbullying incident may take on a different role by affording the bully the power without intent, through watching the post (video), sharing the post, commenting on the post and by not intervening in the incident. This suggests that, even though one does not engage in any of the aforementioned acts, you may be regarded as condoning the cyberbullying act. Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder and Lattanner (2014) support this view in saying that the increased option for the bystander to hide behind a screen usually makes it more likely, that at some point, the bystander may provide power to the bully by silently observing, sharing, or commenting on the bullying act. The literature suggests that this may be related to the fear of becoming the perpetrator's next target (Allan et al., 2017; Giumetti et al., 2014).

In addition, a study conducted by Allan, Patterson and Cross (2017) investigated bystanders' experiences, perceptions and responses to cyberbullying. The findings of their study suggest that most students ignore incidents of cyberbullying; some may intervene depending on whether or not the victim is known to them and others indicated that it depended on the context of the situation.

It is evident in the literature that the bystander plays a significant role in either encouraging the anti-social act or attempting to minimize it or to stop it. Furthermore, the bystander's response may contribute to the meaning the victim ascribes to the incident and this may, in turn, influence his/her identity.

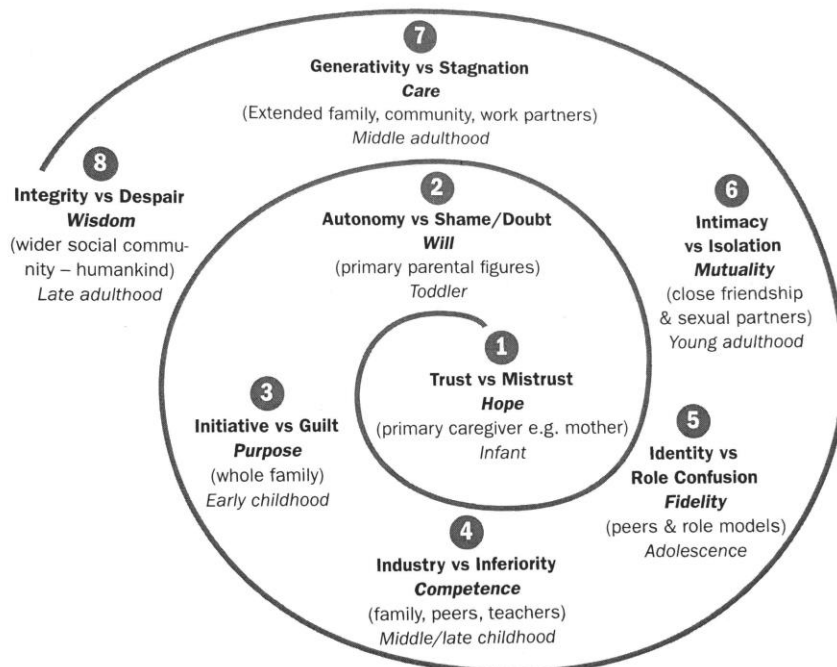
## 2.9 IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT ACROSS THE DEVELOPMENTAL PHASES OF LIFE

### 2.9.1 A theoretical perspective of identity and the life phases

*“At birth the baby leaves the chemical exchange of the womb for the social exchange system of his society, where his gradually increasing capacities meet the opportunities and limitations of his culture” (Erikson, 1968:92).*

There are a number of theories about human development and more specifically about the transitional periods of children developing into adults. “One of the most influential theories of life-span development is the psychosocial theory of Erik Erikson” (Donald, Lazarus, & Moolla, 2014). In this theory he identifies eight stages of psychosocial development through which an individual must progress. Each of these stages relate to people’s emerging emotional needs in interaction with social relationships and/or social contexts (Bannon et al., 2015; Craig & Dunn, 2007). Each stage arises in chronological order alongside the different developmental periods of an individual (Marcia, 2009).

The figure below displays Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development. An explanation of each stage will follow:



*Figure 1.2: The spiral of psychosocial development (Donald et al., 2014)*

**First year (of life)** – trust versus mistrust: Here the infant must learn to trust his/her primary caregiver to meet his/her needs. If the infant overcomes this crisis successfully, he/she will move into the next stage with a sense of hope.

**Second year (toddler)** – autonomy versus shame and doubt: In this stage the infant has to learn to control his/her own behaviour. If the crisis is not overcome at this stage, the infant will experience shame and doubt about him/herself.

**Third to sixth year (early childhood)** – initiative versus guilt: In this stage the child explores his/her world and begins to learn social lessons to become an independent being. If this crisis is successfully met, it will create sense of purpose for the child.

**Seventh year to puberty (School Age)** – industry versus inferiority: In this stage a child has to learn to be competent by taking on tasks that will help develop skills for later on in life. Some of these tasks could be forming relationships or doing chores in the home.

**Adolescence** – identity versus role confusion: In this stage the child begins to explore who he/she is and how he/she fits into the world. Peer groups become extremely important at this stage as a child begins to develop a sense of identity in relation to his/her peer group. Interpersonal relationships and social context play a key role in identity development (Davis, 2013).

**Early adulthood** – intimacy versus role confusion: The challenge here is to find and maintain close relationships with others, especially with someone he/she could possibly share his/her life with. If this crisis is not successfully met, he/she will experience isolation and loneliness.

**Adulthood** – generativity versus stagnation: At this stage of development the adult must be productive in work, community and society. This enables the adult to refine his/her sense of self and avoid stagnation.

**Mature age** – integrity versus despair: This is the final stage of life where adults experience meaning in their lives (Donald et al., 2014; Erikson, 1968).

According to Erikson (1968), one's identity and personality depends on the sequential development of each stage in the proper order. He looked at the entire developmental span of an individual, but for this study I would like to focus on what he refers to as identity. Identity is referred to here as "a sense of who one is, based upon who one has been and who one can imagine oneself as becoming" (Marcia, 2009:671). A more comprehensive definition of identity is given below:

*Identities are the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past -- what*

*used to be true of one, the present -- what is true of one now, or the future -- the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become* (Oyserman, Elmore, & Smith, 2012:69).

As described in the extract, a person may also hold multiple identities such as mother, teacher, daughter and so forth. Each one of these has its own meaning and expectation for the individual assuming the identity. Furthermore, identity is related to one's values and how true we stay to those values. Often a coherent and stable sense of identity is characterised by high levels of self-esteem and a clear purpose, whereas a non-integrated sense of identity is characterised by higher levels of anxiety and insecurities (Hatano, Sugimura, & Crocetti, 2016).

Although identity is initiated in adolescence, it is a life long journey that extends to emerging adulthood (Carlsson, Wängqvist, & Frisén, 2015; Donald et al., 2014).

## **2.9.2 Identity development**

Developing an identity is a significant part of being human and is closely tied to the personal goals individuals set for themselves across their lifespan. Researchers are of the view that identity development is a process of experiences and that it is a process characterised by the meaning the individual assigns to the interactions between the individual and his/her context (Carter, 2013; Oyserman et al., 2012; Sugimura et al., 2015). Identity and identity development have been researched and explored by many renowned theorists such as James Marcia and Erik Erikson. Marcia (1984) who based his work on Erik Erikson's (1968) theory of identity believed that the construction of a healthy sense of identity is based on exploration (Marcia, 1984; Sharon, 2016). The identity status model is a model developed by James Marcia and is commonly used in identity development studies. It is based on the idea that one's sense of identity is determined by the choices and commitments made during the course of one's life. It is based on two processes involved in identity development, namely, 1) exploration: the extent to which individuals engage in the search for different values, beliefs and goals, and 2) commitment that entails making a firm choice to a set of beliefs, values or goals (Carlsson et al., 2015; Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010; Marcia, 1984; Marcia, 2009).

The four identity statuses that Marcia (1984) defined and proposed are as follows:

- **Identity diffusion:** Individuals classified as "diffuse" have not made any commitments and have not yet begun to actively explore themselves and their worlds.

- **Identity foreclosure:** These individuals have made firm commitments to identities similar to those made earlier in their lives. However, they have not undergone any form of exploration and have not experienced any form of ‘crisis’ in order to build on their present sense of identity.
- **Identity moratorium:** Individuals in this status are experiencing what Erikson (1968) called an identity crisis. Here individuals are actively exploring and questioning life. However, they have not settled into any serious commitments as yet.
- **Identity achievement:** Individuals who find themselves in this status have undergone a period of exploration and are committed to particular goals, beliefs and values. These individuals have been actively involved in the construction of their identities (Carlsson et al., 2015; Luyckx, Lens, Smits, & Goossens, 2010; Marcia, 1984, 2009; Sugimura et al., 2015).

It is important to understand that, as people become aware of the influences on them, they critically engage with and seek feedback from the situations they may find themselves in, to either substantiate or confute their perceptions about themselves and who they are. Additionally, social-media platforms may serve as other means through which individuals may present themselves or seek validation from others. This period of development corresponds with the developmental ages of adolescence and emerging adulthood.

### *2.9.2.1 Adolescence*

The developmental phase of adolescence is considered to be the period between twelve and nineteen years. It is characterized by experiences of physical, emotional and psychological changes. Furthermore, adolescents are often identified as children who are still living with a/their parent(s); are usually attending high school and are in the midst of experiencing puberty (Arnett, 2000; George & Odgers, 2015). Other developmental tasks faced by adolescents during this phase of life may include (mainly in Western societies):

- Successful transitions from childhood to adolescence;
- Attaining the necessary skills in order to be successful in higher education, work or adulthood;
- Becoming self-sufficient and socially responsible and

- Learning to develop relationships with persons of the same or opposite sex (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2002; George & Odgers, 2015).

In addition to the aforementioned, identity development forms part of the developmental tasks experienced by adolescents. According to Erikson (1968), adolescents begin to discover more about themselves and how they fit into the world. Previous research has indicated that identity is closely related to the social cues received about the self from the social contexts in which one functions (Craig & Dunn, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). Thus, individuals' social identities refer to how they identify with a specific social group and develop their self-image from the social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging to (Bernabé et al., 2016; Cheng & Guo, 2015; Hornsey, 2008). Subsequently, adolescents may constantly engage with intra- and interforces and experiences that in turn may influence who they become (Donald et al., 2014; Erikson, 1968; Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2016).

Whilst adolescents negotiate and renegotiate their values, beliefs, morals and worldviews, they may also move away from family and focus their time and affection on friends (Feldman, 2006 cited in Johnson 2011). Research has indicated that friendships and relationships play significant roles in adolescents' social development (Conger, Felmlee, & Flynn, 2017; Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2016). Cappadocia, Craig and Pepler (2013) support this view and are of the opinion that adolescents tend to place high value on peer relations and on being socially accepted. Because of the importance that is placed on relationships and acceptance, they may disclose personal information to their peers rather than to their family members. Thus, the bonds that are formed during this time have the potential to influence the adolescent's academic, social and emotional functioning and are influential when the young person is trying to construct an identity (Conger et al., 2017; Schwartz, 2016).

The introduction of the digital age has opened up additional channels for adolescents to form relationships and to discover more about themselves (Davis, 2013). These channels include engaging on social-media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, text messages and WhatsApp. George and Odgers (2015) concur with this view that adolescents spend more of their time connecting with others, constructing their identities and searching for knowledge using the internet and various social-media platforms than they do through face-to-face interactions. If the adolescent is unable to form strong relationships with peers, it can result in a state of alienation. Alienation here refers to a state of vulnerability that may lead to increased levels of hopelessness, helplessness and a negative self-concept. Furthermore, the

amount of unlimited and unsupervised access teenagers have when using social-media platforms increases their vulnerability of becoming victims and/or perpetrators of aggressive acts.

A study conducted by O'Moore and Minton (2009) who investigated the quality of friendships among adolescents, found that 66.3% of the adolescent participants who experienced bullying or cyberbullying would prefer to report an incident of bullying or cyberbullying to a friend, and only 14.3% mentioned that they would seek assistance from an adult. It is therefore evident that friendships play an important and valuable role in protecting the adolescent from emotional and psychological damage as well as in forming a coherent sense of identity.

Adolescence is the time of discovery and searching for meaning. It is also a time in which young people are confronted with pressures from their internal and external worlds. Identity development is initiated in adolescence, and the way in which adolescents engage and respond to the pressures may influence who they become as emerging adults (Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2016; Parker, 2014).

### **2.9.2.2 *Emerging adulthood***

Although the development of one's identity is said to be initiated in adolescence, Erikson (1968) is of the view that identity development is a lifelong process; a fluid process that occurs throughout one's life. He further alluded to the challenges and experiences that an individual may constantly be confronted with while trying to form a coherent sense of identity (Carlsson et al., 2015). In order to successfully proceed through this developmental phase, individuals may find themselves either reconstructing their identities or changing them completely in order to incorporate the new experiences (Carlsson et al., 2015).

In a country such as South Africa recent socio-economic and demographic changes may have influenced and delayed the transition into adulthood (Sugimura et al., 2015). Thus, more young people find themselves living with their parents for a longer period of time, the number of years spent studying has increased, and decisions related to starting a family and a professional career are more often postponed (Schwartz et al., 2016). These individuals are known to have passed adolescence and have not yet taken on the responsibilities of adulthood. Current literature refers to individuals going through this *in-between* phase of their lives as *emerging adults*. Emerging adults are identified as being between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (Arnett, 2000). According to the literature, identity exploration is a central characteristic in this phase of life

(Arnett, 2000). This phase fits into Marcia's (1984) moratorium period, as these emerging adults are exploring major life roles without making any serious commitments (Aleni Sestito et al., 2015; Arnett, 2000).

Arnett (2000:219) describes this phase as a period where exploration of the self and possible life decisions is central. He further explained that this is "the period of life that offers the most opportunities for identity exploration in the areas of love, work and worldviews". It is suggested in the literature that, when considering love and relationships, an emerging adult may seek deeper levels of intimacy rather than surface level feelings. Emerging adults may also seek jobs that are focused on preparing themselves for more permanent adult work roles. They may begin to look for occupations that will help sustain an independent life (Arnett, 2000; Schwab & Syed, 2015; Schwartz, 2016).

During this time of exploration many emerging adults may also find themselves belonging to higher education institutions. Being exposed to such environments may encourage them to question their own worldviews, and some may even adopt new worldviews (Schwartz, 2016). As previously mentioned, higher education institutions facilitate and encourage students to find their place in the world and to form ideas of who they want to be. Research has indicated that emerging adults who define themselves as students are motivated to seek out activities and situations where they can confirm their understanding and meaning making of what it is to be a student, thus contributing to defining who they are. Some of these activities include attending lectures, engaging in risky behaviour, experiencing the pressures of tests and exams and so forth.

However, if the emerging adult's experience as a student is negative, it may influence how he/she defines him/herself as an adult. Past research has demonstrated how different environments influence and shape subjective definitions of the self (Carter, 2013; Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Carter (2013: 205) is of the opinion that "identities are embedded in greater social structures that exist in one's environment".

In addition, being a university student often means having 'unlimited' access to the internet wherever he/she may find him/herself on campus. The internet can be regarded as a gateway to knowledge, social power and social relationships (Antoniadou et al., 2014). However, the 'unlimited' access means limited supervision and protection and may result in students being more at risk to engage with or to become a victim of an anti-social act such as cyberbullying.



It should therefore be noted that the decisions that are made and experiences that are overcome during this time, are significant for developmental outcomes later in life.

Through my exploration of the literature, I have come to understand that, whilst emerging adulthood is a critical period for identity exploration and development, it is a vulnerable phase of life. Additionally, because of the increasing use of the internet and the increased potential susceptibility of becoming a target of cyberbullying, it is imperative that intervention and prevention strategies be considered.

## **2.10 INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

Cyberbullying appears to be an escalating topic of concern, especially within South Africa. It is accompanied by many serious implications for the individual on his/her psychological and emotional well-being and on his/her identity development in adolescence and emerging adult phases of life. Change of a drastic nature needs to take place to decrease and manage the cyberbullying incidents happening in South Africa.

Many studies have highlighted the need for effective intervention and prevention strategies worldwide (Badenhorst, 2011; Benson et al., 2014; Francisco et al., 2015). It is evident in the literature that parents and educators should play active roles in prevention and intervention strategies in targeting cyberbullying, especially among the youth. This is due to the fact that internet services and technology are considered to be easily accessible for the majority of the youth and young adults at home and in educational settings. The type of adverse behaviours engaged in via these platforms are generally unfamiliar to adults, thus making it very difficult for adults to identify cyberbullying and to intervene timeously (Badenhorst, 2011; Bartolo et al., 2017). Examples of parenting strategies identified by the literature include educating and empowering parents and caregivers to understand technology. Further strategies also encourage open communication between child and parent in order to build a strong bond as well as strong resilient character in their children. Parents also need to be educated to be more empathetic and thoughtful towards their children and their needs (Badenhorst, 2011; Bartolo et al., 2017; Benson et al., 2014; Francisco et al., 2015).

With the above being said, it is important to note that intervention and prevention strategies should not only target individual factors related to cyberbullying, but instead, should address the universal factors as well (Beran, Bickham, Rinaldi, & Rich, 2012; Giumetti et al., 2014).

Badenhorst (2011) is of the opinion that intervention and prevention strategies should target the media, as they should be encouraged to participate in prevention efforts. Furthermore, Badenhorst (2011) mentioned that media can play an important role in raising awareness and educate people, especially the young, about cyberbullying and its consequences.

Additionally, education institutions should educate teachers and lecturers about the dangers around cyberbullying, implement awareness strategies about cyberbullying as part of the learning curriculum and have clear policies on how to deal with incidents (Watts, Wagner, Velasquez, & Behrens, 2017). It is further suggested that social-media companies take some responsibility and use their sites to discourage cyberbullying and in addition fund prevention programmes (Badenhorst, 2011).

## **2.11 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have attempted to describe the context that is significant for university students' development, provided insight into the role universities play in students' lives and how they facilitate the development of a coherent sense of identity. This chapter also focused on describing the developmental phases of adolescence and emerging adults. It further looked at identity and how identity is constructed during the different developmental phases of adolescence and emerging adulthood. It is evident in the research that identity is constructed by the meanings attached to experiences and external forces that have come into their lives.

This chapter further described how the digital age has brought with it a new challenge that adolescence, emerging adults and to a large extent everyone throughout one's life may face. There is evidence to show that cyberbullying can influence one's identity as described by one's personal and emotional well-being.

During my exploration of the literature many studies mentioned intervention and prevention strategies, and it was a theme that was discussed amongst the participants in the study. I therefore decided that possible intervention and prevention programmes should be reviewed, as it can stimulate future studies. In the next chapter the methods and approach that informed this study will be explained. Data collection instruments used and how the data analysis was implemented will also be discussed in Chapter 3.

## Chapter 3

# RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Research is defined as an investigation that draws upon different perspectives, methodologies and analysis techniques to generate knowledge and in-depth understanding of the phenomena under study (Rajeseekar, Philominathan, & Chinnathambi, 2014). In this study methodology refers to the research process used to help the researcher answer the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). While the purpose of this chapter is to provide insight into the design and methodological aspects of this study, I will also share the research paradigm, design and research methodology that informed my thinking in addressing the research focus. Thus, this study was guided by the following research question and sub-questions:

*How do experiences of cyberbullying influence the process of identity development among emerging adults?*

Sub-questions:

- What do the participants understand by cyberbullying?
- To what kinds of cyberbullying have the participants been exposed?
- How have the participants' experiences with cyberbullying affected them?

The motivation to explore such a complex topic was triggered by my own personal experiences of being bullied as an adolescent and furthermore, by my experience as an educator of witnessing cyberbullying in a learning environment. The first-hand exposure of witnessing cyberbullying made me aware of the serious damage and psychological and emotional effects that cyberbullying can have on an individual. In addition to my personal experience over the past few years there seems to be a growing trend in bullying and cyberbullying amongst adolescents within South Africa. Recognizing that there is an immense amount of literature on bullying and adolescence, my interest was steered into wondering about young adults and cyberbullying. Understanding that adolescence and young adulthood are critical stages for identity development, this further stimulated my interest into the possible influences that

cyberbullying may have on identity development among young adults, specifically university students.

### **3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM**

Whilst my motivation to conduct the study acted as a stimulus, it is important to understand the underlying assumptions I had about this particular topic and how this stance would influence the way in which I approached the research. Thus, an understanding of a research paradigm was an important consideration to the research investigation because it guided the research process and acted as a reference point from which I worked. As described by Guba (1990:17), a paradigm is “a basic set of beliefs that guide action ...”.

I identified the social constructivist paradigm as being best suited for this research study because it sought to gain insight into the participants’ perspectives of the phenomenon under study in its natural setting. By adopting a social constructivist view, I acknowledged that there are no essential realities or truths, but that multiple perceptions of individual realities exist. This aligns with my view that individuals conceptualize their own subjective meaning of the world by the manner in which they interact with the world. Working from a constructivist perspective, I sought to gain insight into the complexity of the participants’ lived experiences of the phenomenon under study and the external influences that affect it. I concur with researchers in this school of thought who are of the view that the morals and values that a person holds, and his/her understanding of the world influence the way in which the person may interpret his/her experiences and interactions with the world (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Furthermore, the research paradigm underpins the ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs and choices of qualitative research and drives the research process. In this instance, ontology that concerns the question, “What is reality?”, refers to my own understanding of ‘the nature of being’, and this assumption has in turn affected how I approached the phenomena under study. The ontology of this study is incorporated in my view that reality is socially constructed and that there is no objective truth. The reality depicted in this study relates to people’s subjective experiences of their social interactions with the external world. I specifically set out to explore individuals’ and groups’ perceptions and narratives of their experiences of cyberbullying (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006; Guba, 1990).

In qualitative research ontology and epistemology are closely related concepts. Epistemology is the relationship between what is known by the researcher and what can still be known. It is therefore concerned with questions such as “What do we know?” and “How do we know it?” (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Blanche et al., 2006). Through this study I attempted to gain insight into the participants’ versions of reality by exploring their experiences of cyberbullying in a university context. In attempting to understand the participants’ worldviews or interpretations of their subjective experiences, individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group session were conducted.

Thus, the paradigm from which I worked, reflected my own understanding of the world and guided my thinking, decisions and actions throughout the research process. Conscious that my perceptions and interpretations of reality may influence the research process, it was important for me to remain reflexive. The term reflexivity refers to the process of reflecting how my thought processes, beliefs and opinions may influence the research and how the research process itself may have affected me personally and professionally.

### **3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodological approach selected to conduct the study was guided by the social constructivist paradigm. The rationale of how the study was conducted and which instruments were used to collect the data was influenced by my interest in gaining in-depth insight into the lived experiences and meaning making of participants around the phenomenon under study (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2013; Fletcher, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

#### **3.3.1 Qualitative research**

Marshall and Rossman (2011:2) describe qualitative research as research that focuses on the “lived experiences of people.” Qualitative research was thus a sound fit for this sensitive topic because it respects its human participants, views the participants as the experts in their own lives and encourages ongoing reflection of how the research is conducted (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). According to Dickson-Swift, James and Liamputtong (2008:2) sensitive research is defined as “research that potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it.” Given the sensitive nature of the research focus of this study, I was conscious of remaining cognizant and responsive to any potential harm or discomfort the

participants may have experienced at various stages of the research (This will be discussed in greater detail in section 3.8).

In an attempt to address the research question, it was important to gain an insider perspective. Thus, using the Qualitative Approach allowed me to explore the personal experiences of the participants, describe their perceptions about the different components under investigation, and gather detailed information of the phenomena under study within a natural setting. One of the aims of conducting a study like this was to illuminate some of the issues that affect emerging adults as they navigate through life today. As a qualitative researcher, I was therefore interested in generating rich data that would afford me insight into how emerging adults interpret experiences of cyberbullying and how the meaning they attach to these experiences may have influenced the construction of their identities (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2002).

Another significant characteristic of qualitative research is that it acknowledges the researcher as the primary instrument in the data collection process. The implication of this according to Brinkmann and Kavale (2011) is that it acknowledges the researcher's role in accessing human experiences in ways that allowed me to describe the intimate experiences of people's lives. The interactive nature of qualitative research, therefore, creates a space that has the potential to elicit subjective understandings and experiences, particularly when doing research where little is known about the phenomena under study.

Whilst using qualitative research was the best fit for this study, I remained cognizant of the caution that qualitative researchers highlighted about using a qualitative approach. It is mentioned that qualitative research is time consuming, requires expertise and may involve fewer participants, which in turn means that the findings cannot be generalized to the larger population. However, they also point out that, despite these challenges, qualitative research has the potential to provide the researcher with rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' feelings, opinions and experiences (Cohen & Manion, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Gorman et al., 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

### **3.3.2 Research design**

Guided by the constructivist paradigm, this study adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design. The choice of the PAR design within a qualitative approach was intended to be

used to bridge the gap between the research questions and the implementation of the research itself (Blanche et al., 2006). PAR compliments the social constructivist thinking and qualitative approach I adopted, as it is embedded in the meaning-making process of the participants lived experiences and seeks to encourage and empower the participants to take action and speak up so that their voices may be heard (Gorman et al., 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Through this process I intended to encourage participants to empower themselves through sharing their own knowledge as well as through the knowledge gained from others' experiences (Kemmis & Mctaggart, 2007). Thus, my role as the researcher in this study was to open a space to facilitate the sharing of experiences and collective critical reflection. In this role I would honour the participants as the experts in their lives rather than adopt an authoritative 'expert' persona. By using PAR, I hoped to engage with people who seemed to have limited power over a particular issue and sought to create a sense of awareness of the phenomenon under study (Chabot, Shoveller, Spencer, & Johnson, 2012). PAR was therefore a good fit for the study because it focused on the empowerment of marginalized or vulnerable groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

In addition, PAR values experiential knowledge and creates a platform where participants can share their experiences, be involved in the research process and can be viewed as the experts in the phenomena under study (Fletcher, MacPhee, & Dickson, 2015; Macdonald, 2012). It also created a space for people to gain support from others facing similar experiences and promoted a sense of community.

The literature describes PAR as a collaborative process where critical reflection and social learning take place (Kemmis & Mctaggart, 2007). PAR is thus a collaborative process (Kemmis & Mctaggart, 2007). Through this process, I was able to identify the research focus and primary concerns of the participants; collaborate with the community of interest to discuss the phenomenon under study by conducting semi-structured individual interviews and a focus group session and reflect on the action and its outcomes and thereafter revisit the research plan. According to the literature this process may not always be in this sequential order; in reality, stages may overlap and plans may change due to learning from experience. As a result, this process was more fluid and open in nature (Reardon, 1998).

### **3.4 RESEARCH CONTEXT**

Understanding that the university context is fluid and forever changing, I considered it important to describe it as it provides insight into the world of the participants and may contribute to the trustworthiness of the study.

The context of this study was a university in the Western Cape. This particular institution, a historically white Afrikaans university, was selected as a research site because of the current diverse nature of its student body. This diversity, therefore, afforded me access to emerging adults from various socio-cultural backgrounds who had a vast range of experiences that enabled rich contributions to the study.

### **3.5 POPULATION**

Using a qualitative lens in attempting to answer the research question meant that the methodological aim of this study was not to generalize the findings, but rather to provide rich data and in-depth knowledge about the way in which cyberbullying may influence identity formation among emerging adults.

Therefore, a suitable population needed to be selected. I decided on registered postgraduate PGCE students who were enrolled in the Life Orientation module. The participants would be between eighteen and twenty-five years of age and were students who may have experienced the best and the worst of being at university and would therefore be able to provide rich data for the study.

Since the topic was of a sensitive nature, I anticipated that the participants would belong to a population referred to in the literature as vulnerable or hidden population. This group is considered to be socially vulnerable and are described as hard to reach or access because of the discrimination they may have been exposed to and/or the isolation they experience from the community and society in which they live. Because of the sensitive nature of the research topic and the possible psychological stress that cyberbullying victims or witnesses may have experienced, I expected that potential participants may be reticent and that there might be varying degrees of willingness to participate in the different stages of the research (Dickson-Swift, James & Liamputtong, 2008; Liamputtong, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).



### 3.5.1 Sampling of the participants

In qualitative research the optimal sample depends on the richness of the data provided by the participants, the research question proposed and the purpose of the research itself. According to the literature, the aim of sampling is, therefore, to identify and understand how complex a phenomenon is experienced by different people and which participants would be able to contribute rich data to the study (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013).

I decided to use Purposive Sampling to select the research participants, as I was of the view that it would enable me to select a suitable number of participants who would be willing to participate in the study. Purposive Sampling is thus a sampling method used to obtain a sample based on the characteristics of a population and the potential value that they could add to the study (Cohen & Manion, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Using this type of sampling method meant that I would be able to obtain shared, rich descriptions of the participants' experiences (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013; Cohen & Manion, 2011; Creswell, 2008; Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015; Elo et al., 2014; Fletcher, 2015; Patten & Bruce, 2000; Schwab & Syed, 2015).

Initial recruitment methods included a presentation to the PGCE class. This presentation informed the class about the purpose, motivation and intended data collection instruments of the study. It also informed them about how I intended to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Mindful of the sensitive nature of the study an invitation in the form of a short survey was handed out to the entire class towards the end of the presentation (see Addendum A). The survey invitation provided an indication of the potential participants' knowledge and experiences of cyberbullying and requested students who had experienced or witnessed cyberbullying and who may be interested in participating in the study to include their contact details. Twelve potential participants were identified. However, eventually only seven of them participated in the study.

It is important to note that the final sample that participated in the study was established after the initial purposive sampling approach was replaced with Snowball Sampling. I decided to adopt this approach once it became apparent that for various reasons (see Addendum I) not all the participants identified initially were able or willing to participate. Atkinson and Flint (2001) recommend the use of Snowball Sampling as a technique to identify participants when working with vulnerable groups. According to them this method is effective because it allows the researcher to access the social networks of the initial sample to provide access to others in the

same target population. Snowball Sampling, as referred to in the literature, involves relying on a series of referrals of participants who know one another to guide and help the researcher to the next one. As a result, I relied upon my first three individual interview participants to put me in contact with other potential participants who fit the selection criteria (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013).

The participants in the focus group were easier to locate than those who indicated a willingness to participate during the individual semi-structured interviews. While locating the participants was an easy task, retaining them presented itself as a challenge (more detail in section 3.6.2.).

### **3.6 DATA COLLECTION**

The qualitative approach and PAR design used in this study informed my decision of which data collection instruments would be best suited. In order to gather rich data for the study from diverse perspectives, individual semi-structured interviews and a focus group session were conducted (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The collection of the raw data took place at the university in an environment where confidentiality and anonymity were highly respected. The familiarity with the particular space ensured that participants felt safe and comfortable enough to share their unique experiences and explore how these experiences may have influenced the construction of their individual identities. The participants who agreed to participate in the focus group session were informed well in advance that they would meet some of their colleagues who had had similar experiences. Staying ethically-minded, the participants were reminded that participation in the study was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any particular point without incurring any penalties. Many of the participants preferred to participate in the individual interviews only.

In order to carry out a full and proper analysis of the data, permission was sought from the participants for the individual semi-structured interviews and focus group session to be recorded. The focus group session was recorded in a room at the Educational Psychology Department. Participants were informed that the particular room was equipped for audio and video recording. I explained to the participants that recording the interviews would afford me the opportunity to stay focused on the conversation instead of writing extensive notes and that it would also allow for detailed transcriptions later on. This, I informed them, would ensure that I honoured their experiences by ensuring that their voices would emerge authentically. I also ensured that the interviews and transcripts would be held in a safe place and that they had the

right to request access to any of the raw data pertaining to them (Bryman, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

### **3.6.1 Semi-structured individual interviews**

Patton (2002: 374) defines an interview as an ‘interaction.’ Individual semi-structured interviews were used to create a space for interaction and conversation, where participants could speak about their subjective experiences and meaning making processes (Crowe et al., 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Schwab & Syed, 2015). A review of the literature indicated that, when doing PAR, semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for the researcher to co-construct knowledge in collaboration with the participants (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). The semi-structured interviews created a space for me to gain insight into the lived experiences of emerging adults who have either been cyberbullied or who have witnessed cyberbullying and to explore with them how those experiences may have influenced the construction of their identities.

The open-ended questions in the interviews allowed the participants to focus on the issues that each of the participants felt were of importance to them. In order to facilitate the process and ensure that the interview would elicit information related to the research focus, I prepared an interview schedule that included a few guided questions (see Addendum C). The semi-structured interviews, therefore, provided the space to gain insight into experiences of the participants, their meaning making, the observation of non-verbal cues as well as allowing me to seek clarification on certain content. In addition, it also allowed me to adapt the interview schedule as the research progressed (Bryman, 2006; Daniel & Daniel, 2015; Gorman et al., 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Schwab & Syed, 2015).

During the course of the interviews I remained cognizant of the fact that the nature of the study was sensitive and that participants could potentially have been adversely affected by cyberbullying. I therefore used my training and therapeutic skills to create a non-threatening environment where participants could feel safe. I particularly sought to display unconditional positive regard, empathy and acceptance throughout the interview process.

The final sample size for the individual interviews was seven. Five female and two male participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in English, as this was the preferred language of the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). The semi-

structured interviews were conducted at times convenient to the participants and did not interrupt the academic timetable of the participants in any way (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The duration of the semi-structured interviews was between 40 and 60 minutes.

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, as it was important to share the experiences of the participants in their own words as far as possible. Iterative data analyses of the interviews enabled me to use the themes that emerged to guide the discussion in the focus group (see Addendum D) (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **3.6.2 Focus group**

The literature suggests that, when researching a sensitive topic, using a focus group may build confidence and act as a safety net for some participants to share their stories. This study was essentially about emerging adults' experiences of cyberbullying and about creating a space where participants would be empowered through telling their stories to the researcher and each other should they so prefer. Therefore, using a focus group was a data collection tool that remained true to my research paradigm, design and methodology. Therefore, the combination of using the individual semi-structured interviews along with the focus group session strengthened the trustworthiness of the study and created a space through which a collective approach allowed me to gain access into the lived experiences of the participants and how these experiences may influence their interaction with others. By involving participants in the research process to the extent to which they felt comfortable, participants were given a voice in deciding how they wanted to be involved and how they felt comfortable sharing their experiences, their meaning making of their experiences with cyberbullying, share their knowledge while interacting with others and exchanging ideas (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2016; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2009). It was interesting to notice, yet at the same time expected, that very few students volunteered to participate in the focus group session. I attributed this to the sensitive nature of the topic and students' experiences with cyberbullying, which may have made them feel uncomfortable about being recognized or sharing their vulnerability with their classmates.

Conscious that this may be the first time that some of the participants shared their stories with others, it was important to create a safe space for them. We spent some time getting to know each other informally and becoming comfortable in the space. Snacks were provided in order to create a relaxed space where conversation could happen naturally and where supportive

listening and good rapport were first established. Thereafter participants appeared to be comfortable with sharing their experiences and opinions with one another (Fletcher, 2015).

Cognizant of the challenges that may arise as a consequence of conducting a focus group discussion on such a sensitive phenomenon, I paid particular attention to power dynamics that arose during the session. One of the challenges I experienced during the focus group discussions was the attempt by one of the participants to dominate the conversation. It was therefore important that I made every effort to ensure that the focus group was a space in which everyone's voice was heard. I also understood that logistical problems may arise while trying to manage the conversation and that this may influence the data I was able to collect.

A stimulus activity (video clip) was presented to initiate conversation around the research study. The stimulus material was selected after the themes in the semi-structured individual interviews had been established. Ritchie and Lewis (2014) recommend using a projective technique or stimulus material with a focus group, because it creates some distance between the participants and the topic at hand. It further assisted in uncovering participants' feelings, beliefs, attitudes and opinions about the phenomena under study, which some participants may have found difficult to express by direct or structured questioning (Ritchie & Lewis, 2014). This technique empowered the participants to share their knowledge as well as learn from one another.

Projecting views on to an external stimulus was a less threatening way to start the conversation around this sensitive topic; it also created the opportunity for direct interactions among the participants, promoted further thought around the topic and provided a space in which I could observe how participants related to one another. It also encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences and challenged one another to think critically about their meaning making processes. My role within the focus group was therefore to ask questions, listen intently and actively to what the participants were saying and keep the natural conversation going. Furthermore, it assisted in validating the information collected from the individual semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2006; Fletcher, 2015; Patton, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

### **3.6.3 Research journal**

In addition to the above, I kept a reflexive journal (see extract in Addendum J). Reflexivity is a term commonly used in qualitative research. It is viewed as the process of continuously reflecting and self-evaluating my own positioning in the research study as well as taking a critical stance on how my perceptions, age, gender, class, race and cultural origins may have

impacted the research process (Ortlipp, 2008; Siddons & Rouse, 2006). Through this reflexive journal, I chose to make my experiences, opinions, thoughts and feelings visible and acknowledged how they may be influencing the iterative data analysis and research process.

I believe that patterns and linkages that are significant to the research emerged through this reflexive process. So, for example, while conducting the individual semi-structured interviews I became aware of how my own experiences with bullying may tint the lens through which I engaged with the data. In this journal I also reflected upon my responses to the experiences and emotions shared by participants during the individual semi-structured interviews, the focus group session as well as my experiences of connecting with participants at various stages during the research study. Retaining participants who had initially indicated interest was a great source of frustration and by recording my experiences around this in my journal, I was able to articulate my frustration and engaged in reflective praxis around my limitations as a novice researcher. This, in turn, prompted me to consult with my supervisor and critical friends (Anney, 2014; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Siddons & Rouse, 2006).

### **3.7 DATA ANALYSIS**

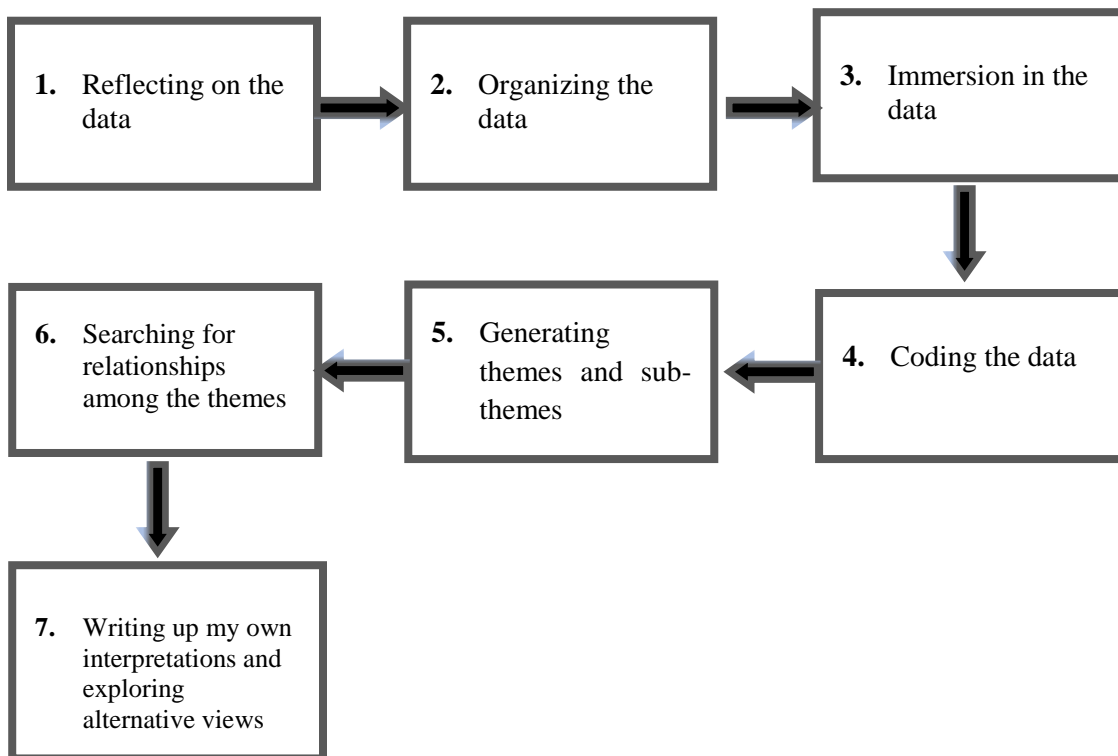
The data analysis in qualitative research is described as the process of seeking to explore, analyze and describe relations of the data. In addition, it is used to create an understanding of the emerging themes and assists the researcher in making meaning of the data. The audio and audio-visual recordings of the individual semi-structured interviews and focus group session were transcribed verbatim. The aim of the transcription was to transform the raw data into a copy that accurately captured the words and understanding of the participants' subjective experiences (Creswell, 2014; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Gorman et al., 2005).

#### **3.7.1 Thematic analysis**

A thematic content analysis was the main form of analysis used to interpret the data (see extract in Addendum I). According to Braun and Clarke (2006:79), "Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data". Using a thematic analysis allowed me to document, bring to surface and make sense of the experiences and meanings that lie within the raw data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Crowe et al., 2015). A thematic analysis draws upon the skills that psychologists utilize in an everyday setting. Thus, a thematic analysis

provided me with a familiar means of organizing and interpreting the qualitative data to create a collective understanding of the participants' subjective experiences (Crowe et al., 2015).

The different stages of the analysis are depicted below:



Once the audio recordings were transcribed into written text, I began organizing, reading and immersing myself in the data. Keeping the research question in mind, I read and re-read the transcripts a number of times to become familiar with the content. Whilst reading the transcripts, I started assigning codes to sentences, words, phrases and paragraphs. At the same time I began reflecting on the field notes I had written in my research journal during the data collection process. This eventually led to grouping together ideas that seemed related and to pondering how they were related. I then proceeded to identify and categorize emerging themes. These were then assigned categories, names and descriptions of the themes were assigned, and relationships between themes were compared to one another. As the process unfolded, I regularly consulted and sought guidance from my supervisor. During our supervision sessions

we considered the themes, categories and relationships between them. Once the process had been exhausted, I wrote up the participants' stories and attempted to make meaning of them. Throughout the study I remained mindful of how I engaged and interpreted their stories and the influence this process could have had on presenting the findings in a way that honoured the lived reality of the participants and ensured that their voices were fore-fronted (Babbie & Mouton, 2013). A sample of the thematic analysis used in this research study can be viewed in Addendum I.

The data analysis was an iterative process and once the emerging themes from the semi-structured individual interviews had been identified, I was able to develop a set of questions or themes I wished to explore in greater depth during the focus group session. The transcript of the focus group session was analyzed in the same way as the individual interviews had been done and a comparison of the themes from the individual interviews and focus group session was done. This included identifying similarities between the transcripts and new themes that have emerged in the focus group session. The information that emerged in the focus group session confirmed the information obtained in the semi-structured interviews, thus displaying credibility and confirmability of the study.

### **3.7.2 Data validation**

The literature states that research studies are usually evaluated according to their validity. In quantitative research the term validity is used to assess the accuracy of findings, while in qualitative research, the various approaches used to enhance the validity of a study are broadly placed under the heading of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to the intentions of the study and the extent to which the study ensures that the information and interpretations provided are credible and dependable. In order to ensure that the study is trustworthy, four variables needed to be taken into account, namely, credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. A description of each of these variables and the steps taken to achieve this trustworthiness in standards of practice are explained below (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Gorman et al., 2005; Guba, 1990; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Merriam, 2002).

#### **3.7.2.1 Credibility**

Credibility, as referred to by Babbie and Mouton (2013), is the degree to which the data collected is accurate, that is, do the findings portray the truth of what has been studied (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013). The literature states that the credibility of a



study is dependent on the richness of the information gathered, rather than the amount of data gathered (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). As a researcher, I aimed to show that the study was credible and trustworthy by implementing triangulation. “Triangulation is the method most frequently used to verify and increase the trustworthiness of qualitative research” (Bless et al., 2013:238). It is used to ensure that the findings are rich, comprehensive and well-developed. To implement triangulation, data was gathered by using multiple methods such as interviews, a focus group session, a research journal and observations (Fletcher, 2015; Gorman et al., 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In addition, I also engaged in conversation with critical friends (educational psychologists, clinical psychologists and work colleagues). Costa and Kallick (1993:50) define a/critical friend(s) as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward”. A critical friend, therefore, contributes an objective perspective to the research process and, in turn, adds credibility to the study.

The semi-structured individual interviews and the focus group session provided the opportunity to engage in member checks to ensure that my interpretations were as close as possible to reflecting the authentic voices of the participants. I attempted to do this by clarifying concepts and confirming interpretations of the participants' experiences and perspectives of cyberbullying (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Fletcher, 2015).

### ***3.7.2.2 Dependability***

According to research, there is an overlap between credibility and dependability. As a result the credibility of the study needs to be present for the study to demonstrate its dependability. Dependability, thus, refers to the strategies used throughout the research process and whether the research study would provide similar results if it were repeated (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). An audit trail (see Addendum J for an excerpt from my reflexive journal) of the research process increases the dependability of the study, as it allows the reader insight into the researcher's thoughts, actions and experiences of the research process. Taking into account that my research was conducted with emerging adults who were postgraduate university students within a university environment and the fact that there is a clear audit trail of the data collection process, one could assume that the study would be replicable within any university environment.

### **3.7.2.3 Confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the extent that the data accurately represents the information that participants presented during the study and is not the preconceived interpretations of the researcher (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Elo et al., 2014). This was a significant step in the study, as I needed to listen to the data and display a true reflection of it (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Merriam, 2002). To be able to do this, I recorded the individual interviews and focus group session in such a way that I had ready access to the raw data. I also kept field notes (reflexive journal) during the research process that demonstrated my thought processes and explained why certain decisions were made at particular times (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Merriam, 2002; Patton, 2002). In an effort to ensure that I honoured the voices of the participants, I remained cognizant of the way in which my actions and what I chose to focus on could influence and impact the participants' answers during the data collection process. In order to mitigate for this risk, I continuously reflected on my thoughts, motives and actions and scheduled intermittent sessions with my supervisor (Gorman et al., 2005; Merriam, 2002).

### **3.7.2.4 Transferability**

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings of the study are sufficient and can be generalized to other settings (Babbie & Mouton, 2013; Bless & Higson-Smith, 2013; Merriam, 2002). From a qualitative perspective, the aim of the study was not to generalize, but rather to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences of either being cyberbullied or having witnessed it. Throughout the process of achieving trustworthiness, I remained conscious of the need to engage ethically with the participants and their stories. Nevertheless, the following strategies were implemented to illustrate transferability and to provide the reader with the opportunity to decide whether or not the research is transferable:

- Thick, rich descriptions were provided regarding the research process, context and findings. The evidence of this was presented in forms of quotes from the individual semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions as well as through the reflexive journal (Gorman et al., 2005; Merriam, 2002).
- A careful selection of participants through purposive and snowball sampling was used to obtain the participants.

## 3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 3.8.1 Ethically Minded

There is a worldwide consensus that the practice of ethical research is central to the trustworthiness of the study. I concur with Marshall and Rossman (2011) who state that the trustworthiness of a study should be judged by how ethically-minded the researcher is likely to be during the research process.

Ethical considerations are crucial to the research process and care should thus be taken when researching the private and intimate lives of marginalized or vulnerable groups (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Using qualitative research can cause many challenges for the researcher who researches vulnerable populations and conducts sensitive research (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). Some of the challenges that I encountered during the research process included issues related to respecting the autonomy of participants (particularly with regard to withdrawing from the study), protecting the identities of vulnerable participants, maintaining confidentiality and seeking ongoing informed consent (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Fletcher, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). In order to address these challenges I considered it imperative to abide by ethical principles that seek to protect the human rights and dignity of the participants who volunteered to be part of this study. In addition to these ethical principles I was bound by the ethical codes of the Health Professionals Council of South Africa for psychologists and the ethical codes of the university. These ethical codes provided me with a framework of how to prevent harm to the participants whilst ensuring that the research study was conducted with rigor and integrity (Bless, Higson-Smith, & Sithole, 2013; Patten, 2009).

As a qualitative researcher I am of the view that developing a critical consciousness means:

- taking into consideration the relationship of the researcher and participants;
- ensuring that participants' voices are heard;
- that their experiences are represented accordingly;
- taking precautions to ensure that participants are protected from harm

- and finally, that the research itself is grounded in moral principles of beneficence, respect for persons and justice (Chabot, Shoveller, Spencer, & Johnson, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

With these principles in mind, I attempted to anticipate any problems that could arise and tried to minimize the risk of them occurring. I also made every effort to ensure that the participants felt they were treated with respect and in a fair and just manner (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, 2016).

The research policy of the University specifies that research involving human participants must be approved by a research ethics committee before the research study commences and by the research institution within the University (Senate Research Ethics Committee, 2013). Hence, ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University (see Addendum F). and Institutional permission to conduct the study at the University were obtained (Addendum E). Only once permission had been granted, did I approach potential participants. I did so by doing a short presentation during their Life Orientation class. After the presentation I invited them to indicate their interest in participating in the study by completing a recruitment survey (See section 3.5).

Since cyberbullying is considered to be a sensitive research topic that could potentially leave participants feeling vulnerable, I ensured that I had a thorough understanding of what is meant by the term, 'sensitive research', and furthermore schooled myself in the potential problems and challenges that may arise when one conducts sensitive research. I was aware that conducting this research could be a stressful experience for the participants and that it had the potential to bring to light emotions that the participants or I may not have been ready to confront (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Plaut, 1994). As guided by the code of ethics for psychologists, I would refer the participants to student support services, should the need arise. I also ensured that I had access to support when needed. I had negotiated access to psychological support services before the research commenced (See Addendum F) (Patton, 2002).

### **3.8.2 Informed consent**

Understanding that qualitative research is subjective and constantly evolving, maintaining informed consent was an ongoing process (Denzin, 2017; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016). My intention was to be transparent in the hope to gain the trust of the participants by being open to them in explaining the purpose of the study, what was expected

of them during the study and informing them that their participation in the study was entirely voluntary (Patten, 2009; Petrova, Dewing, & Camilleri, 2016). Bless et al. (2013:33) further clarify that “participants must be given every assurance that they are free to discontinue their participation at any time without being required to offer an explanation”. Therefore, participants were also informed that they may withdraw from the study at any given point of the research process without incurring any penalties (Bless et al., 2013). After participants had been provided with information about the study in a language that they could understand, I was of the view that the participants were well informed and competent enough to make an informed decision as to whether or not they would like to participate in the study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Once participants indicated a willingness to participate, they were given the consent form to sign (Addendum G).

### **3.8.3 Confidentiality and privacy**

According to the literature, qualitative research can give rise to changes due to its fluid and open design. This is often because participants may only have questions after the interviews or focus group session have taken place. The participants were informed about the potential risks and benefits of the study and how confidentiality would be maintained (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, 2016). In this particular study where some of the participants may have been shamed in a public space, it was important to make sure that they were comfortable with the mechanisms put in place to ensure the protection of their privacy.

In qualitative research, the researcher may use several methods for maintaining confidentiality with participants where the nature of the study is sensitive. Confidentiality refers to the data and the understanding of how the data will be handled and processed in order to ensure privacy and anonymity (Boeije, 2010; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2002). Achieving confidentiality meant that I had to be transparent and respect the rights of the participants to interrogate me around the methods I would use to protect their privacy (Petrova et al., 2016). I therefore, went to great lengths to demonstrate that I valued their right to share only as much as they were comfortable sharing; their right to withdraw from the process and assured them that I was legally bound to make sure that the raw data would be stored in a secure space and that electronic data would be kept under password control. Because of the nature of the phenomenon under study I went to great lengths to ensure that all personal data of the participants was secured from improper access. Participants were informed that all the raw data and transcripts would be stored for five years after the research study had been completed.

Participants were also informed about their rights in accessing the transcripts (that pertain to them), the analysis of the interviews and the final thesis.

Understanding that the nature of the study was sensitive, participants needed to be protected from harm and “undue exposure,” thus, pseudonyms were used to protect and ensure anonymity and privacy of the participants. The pseudonyms were devised by using the participant’s mother's name (mother figure) and combining it with the beginning of their father's name (father figure) (e.g. Susan and Jack = Suja). This created a unique code and was used when reporting on the data. Only my supervisor and I have access to any privileged information given by the participants.

Being aware that this type of research could affect me and that self-care is important, I used my supervision sessions to debrief, further develop my skills and seek guidance.

### **3.9 CONCLUSION**

The objective for this chapter was to provide an overall explanation of the methodology used in conducting the research study. The aim of this research was to explore the experiences participants have with regard to cyberbullying and to gain insight into how these experiences may have influenced their social identities. The research design was described and the reason why specific instruments were used in this study was explained. Following this was a discussion of the data analysis process and the steps that were followed in the analysis. Lastly, the means in establishing trustworthiness and the ethical principles adhered to, concluded the chapter. In the next chapter, the findings of this study will be presented and discussed.

## Chapter 4

# PRESENTING THE DATA

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the findings of the study are presented by means of a discussion of the identified categories and themes that have emerged from the data analysis. This study sought to answer the research question of how experiences of cyberbullying influence the process of identity development among emerging adults. The three sub-questions that were generated in order to further explore the research questions are: What do the participants understand by cyberbullying? To what kinds of cyberbullying have the participants been exposed? How have the participants' experiences with cyberbullying affected them?

The data analysis was a continuous process that began during the data collection process. The transcribed interviews and focus group session were analyzed qualitatively to highlight participants' meaning making. A thematic analysis approach was adopted in order to emphasize the most significant findings, and these are supported by extracts from the individual interviews and the focus group session.

### 4.2 THE PARTICIPANTS, PROCEDURE AND THEMES OF THE STUDY

As mentioned in sections 1.5, 1.6.2 and 3.6, the theoretical population for this study was university students enrolled as PGCE Life Orientation students. From a qualitative perspective the participants were purposefully sampled in order to fulfil certain criteria. The students who participated in the study were between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-four. The participants in the individual semi-structured interviews were two males and five females. The focus group participants were two female and one male student. Three out of the seven participants have reported only witnessing cyberbullying incidences, and the remaining four participants reported that they had experienced cyberbullying personally and have witnessed it as well.

Below is a table representing the demographic information of the participants:

**Table 4.1: Demographics of participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Bystander/Witness or Victim</b>
Sherich	21	F	Bystander/Witness
Jacklyn	24	F	Both
Brejo	22	M	Bystander/Witness
Chrizan	22	F	Both
Heinja	23	F	Both
Marian	22	M	Both
Denita	21	F	Bystander/Witness

The data was collected over a period of four months in the one-on-one interviews. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour each and the focus group session was 90 minutes long.

Pseudonyms have been used to replace the names of the participants in order to protect their rights to privacy and anonymity. In each transcript (a sample is presented in Addendum H) the interviewer is always referred to as “ME”. In the extracts below reference is made to the original transcripts of the individual interviews by using the pseudonym of the participant and the page number in the transcript. Reference from the focus group session is made by using “FG – Participant number: page number”. During the data analysis, categories were identified to gain an indication of the themes that were prominent in the data. Once these had been identified, the themes that stood out in each category were classified. The themes discussed below are the main themes that emerged during the data analysis and they reflect the participants’ perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying or the witnessing of it.

The research questions were considered throughout this process to ensure that the aims of the study were met. This process resulted in the following refined themes and sub-themes:

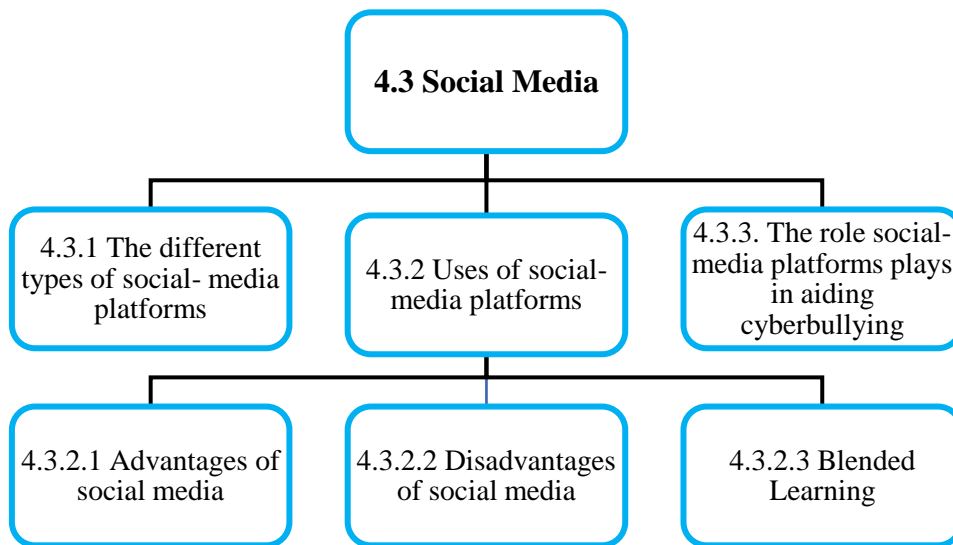


**Table 4.2: Refined themes and sub-themes**

Categories	Main themes	Sub-theme
<b>Theme 1:</b> Social Media	<p>Within this category, the following main themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The various types of social-media platforms</li> <li>• How social media is used</li> <li>• The role social-media platforms play in aiding cyberbullying</li> </ul>	<p>Within some of the main themes the following sub-themes emerged:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advantages of social media</li> <li>• Disadvantages of social media</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 2:</b> Bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How participants understand bullying</li> <li>• Bullying and Cyberbullying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students' perceptions of the various types and effects of bullying</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 3:</b> Cyberbullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How participants understand cyberbullying</li> <li>• Maintaining factors in cyberbullying</li> <li>• Students' perceptions of the effect of cyberbullying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The various types of cyberbullying</li> <li>• Students' responses to cyberbullying</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 4:</b> Bystander/Witness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The bystander's/witness's response to cyberbullying</li> <li>• The feelings experienced by the bystander/witness about cyberbullying</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The victim's response to bystander's/witness's reaction to cyberbullying</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 5:</b> Identity Development	<p>The developmental phases of life:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adolescence</li> <li>• Emerging adulthood</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer relations within the developmental phases of life</li> <li>• The importance of acceptance within the developmental phases of life</li> </ul>
<b>Theme 6:</b> Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Types of support provided</li> <li>• Who is providing the support?</li> </ul>	
<b>Theme 7:</b> Intervention and prevention strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The different approaches</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking guidance</li> <li>• A holistic approach</li> <li>• Legal action and policies</li> </ul>

### 4.3 SOCIAL MEDIA

It was evident in the narratives of the participants that they regularly use social media for various reasons and are greatly dependent on it. In addition, they have definite views about the role social media play in cyberbullying behaviours. Each of these categories is discussed in more detail below.



Along with the evolution of technology, the way in which people communicate and interact with one another has evolved (Chadwick, 2014). Social media and electronic devices have become an integral part of daily living. This view was supported by one of the participants who shared that in his opinion, “social media and all these electronic devices [are] so part of our daily lives, like you can’t even imagine it [life] without it ...” (Chrizan: pg. 7).

One of the participants expressed her perception that the use of the term, ‘social’, was deceptive and whilst it was meant to imply that users should be able to relate to society, organizations or people via these platforms, instead it seemed to have the opposite effect on it’s users. As according to her, “the irony with social media is, it’s supposed to make us more social, but it makes us more like introverted” (Sherich: pg. 16). This view was shared by a participant in the focus group who shared that “through that [type of] connecting, you’re actually disconnecting” (FG – Participant 1: pg. 11).

The following section will explore the subthemes related to the participants’ perceptions of the various social-media platforms as well as what they considered to be the benefits and disadvantages of using the various platforms.

### **4.3.1 The different types of social-media platforms**

This subtheme is concerned with the various types of social-media platforms that have grown in popularity over the last two decades. This growth could serve as an indication that more people are opting to use social-media platforms to connect and communicate with one another globally. Social-media platforms create instant access and connectivity for people in different ways. According to research, in 2016, the most popular social-media platforms used by South Africans were WhatsApp, Facebook and Google (We Are Social, 2016). This aligned with the participants' responses that they "frequently use ... Instagram and Facebook" (Heinja: pg. 5), as well as WhatsApp to communicate and engage with others. All the participants reported using these three platforms and various other platforms to interact with people over social media. Other platforms used by the participants included, but are not limited to Mxit, Tinder, Twitter, Snapchat and YouTube.

### **4.3.2 Uses of social media**

This subtheme describes the various uses of social-media platforms as recognized by the participants. In their narratives they have identified advantages and disadvantages of using the social-media platforms mentioned in 4.1.1.

#### ***4.3.2.1 Benefits of using social media***

All the participants shared that there were a number of advantages to using social media. The most commonly cited among these being the significant role they play in how young people communicate. They cited various reasons for this, such as that it was convenient to use, was easily accessible and relatively cost effective. So, for instance, Marian (pg. 2) referred to "WhatsApp's" "financial benefits" and "instant connection with others". This view was supported by Brejo (pg. 11) who spoke of the fact that "you could stay in touch and connect with people even if you don't have airtime or sms".

In addition to the cost variable most of the participants spoke about the important role social media play in staying socially connected with their peers or, as Chrizan (pg. 2) put it, "I think it's just a nice way[for] people who are really interested in your life and your friends and other people, to keep them updated and to share fun things that you are doing ...". The importance of social media in contemporary relational connectivity is further emphasised by Sherich (pg. 12) who said, "it's good in a sense that you can like kind of stay connected with everyone ..."

and that "... a lot of people rely on [it] for their daily activities such as staying connected with friends and family, staying up to date with the news, job opportunities, etc.".

Spending time with friends is regarded as a significant part of life for adolescents and emerging adults and over time social-media platforms have become a significant tool used when organising social gatherings. Many of the participants mentioned that they would be invited to gatherings via these various social-media platforms or that they also used these platforms to invite others to attend social events. This view was supported by a participant in the focus group who stated that, "all parties and invitations are on Facebook" (FG – Participant 3: pg. 14). They continued by saying that if you were not using any of the social-media platforms "trending" at the time, you would "be left out". This alludes to the fact that different types of platforms are regarded as standard means of communication at different times and if one does not use the same platforms as your peers or friends you were at risk of being excluded from social gatherings or social groups. The participants in the focus group echoed this view. One participant in particular recalled her experience of this when she was at school:

"I never had a blackberry so I never had BBM ... I would remember coming back on a Monday and people speaking about parties or whatever happening over the weekend and I'd be like well ... why didn't you invite me why didn't you let me know about this ... they were just like well sorry it was like ... BBM broadcasting" (FG – Participant 2: pg. 15).

The participants also shared that most people these days had electronic devices that allowed them to access some form of social media. Heinja shared that the advantages of using social media stretched beyond social connection to being "really good for business to expand and to promote their products and everything like that, and to create awareness about your product" (Heinja: pg. 2).

In the focus group participants also alluded to the fact that social-media platforms were fast becoming an integral part of academia. They shared that the growing expectation of educators to be readily available for their learners meant that "the homeroom teachers" would be expected to each "have a WhatsApp chat group with their learners" (FG – Participant 3: pg. 20) [see more information in section 4.3.2.3].

#### *4.3.2.2 The disadvantages of using social media*

Many of the participants concurred with the literature that using social media has advantages and disadvantages. Some of the disadvantages of using social media mentioned by the participants included the fact that it creates a space in which you make yourself vulnerable, as you are often exposed to the world and, yet, at the same time one is physically isolated from the world. Another of the disadvantages relates to one's inability to control what is put on social media about you. The participants referred to "bad pictures" and "horrible posts" and the influence these can have on your sense of self and future job prospects. All the participants agreed that in today's job market, recruiters often view your social-media profile in order to gain more information about you. Sherich's (pg. 25) assertion that "a lot of ... a lot of people who are recruiting like they check you're, your social media and try to like find out what kind of person you are and they see ... if they see certain things on there, they're just not going to hire you instantly," confirmed this as a legitimate fear.

Other participants spoke about how emerging adults felt vulnerable in the face of their inability to totally control what was shared about them via social-media platforms and the threat that this posed to their future. In his individual interview Brejo (pg. 5) shared that when he posts on social-media platforms he is "very careful of what I post in there [social-media platforms] cause people, employers even, they see what you have posted". Heinja (pg. 7) supports this view that what you or others post about you can affect your future. According to her, "because I have aspirations and dreams further on in my life, I don't frequently post like drinking pictures and you know when you go out with your friends, they always want to take a picture and I don't like getting pictures with drinks in my hands or stuff on social media. Because of what I study as well, kids looking up to you and so forth". Furthermore, Jacklyn (pg. 6) believed that, as a future teacher, "the things on there [social media] is going to give them [learners] an indication of how they can react towards me".

Since social media do not always afford one the opportunity to see the person on the other side of the screen, it leaves a lot of space for misinterpretation. Four of the participants supported this view and shared Chrizan's (pg. 7) opinion that it creates a "space for miscommunication" and a lack of insight into the effect that the 'perpetrator' may have on the person. Furthermore, Jacklyn (pg. 4) highlighted that engaging on social-media platforms "takes away from face-to-face interactions" and because social media has made people accustomed to engaging online with others, "we don't know how to deal with conflict resolution in person and so what we are

doing, we go to a place where we can be anonymous online and we don't have to face that person ...”.

Another challenge of using social-media platforms was identified by Marian, who was of the view that using these platforms could also have an impact on friendships and personal relationships. The increased access to technology and online social networks has encouraged users to engage in online romantic relationships and friendships by using social-media platforms such as Facebook, Tinder and WhatsApp. However, according to some of the participants, the relationships that are formed via these sites are not always healthy. Marian (pg. 3) supports this view and shared that his “relations with people have been affected by social media” in a negative way.

A few of the participants pointed out that social-media platforms also create pressure and expectation to display ‘ideal’ images about oneself. One of the participants shared that her past experiences of engaging on social-media platforms have influenced who she has become and how she interacts on these platforms presently:

“I just want to be like who I am, I don't want these people to put this little idea, ideal on top of me, ugh, some people just have the weirdest ideas about life in general” (Heinja: pg. 4). She went on to say that, because of her experiences around the pressure to project herself in a certain way in the past, she was now “much more vigilant with ... security and what people post of me and of when people take pictures of me ...” (Heinja: pg. 12).

Another use of social-media platforms illuminated by the participants was how it is often used to alleviate anxiety and feelings of loneliness. One participant in particular spoke of how “people can't just walk now, they almost feel self-conscious like you have to be on your phone ... I think people use it as like comfort” (Sherich: pg. 4).

### **4.3.3 Blended learning**

This subtheme refers to both the advantages and disadvantages of using social-media platforms as identified by the participants. It specifically alludes to the fact that social-media platforms are becoming an essential part of learning and have been integrated into academia.

As technology comes of age, higher education institutions and other learning institutions are trying to incorporate what is called, blended learning into the learning environment. This means that online engagement between lecturers and students; and students and students is

incorporated into the curriculum. Whilst this is viewed as a positive development in Higher Education, it is important to take cognisance of the fact that the online interaction may trigger some insecurities within students and thus leave them hesitant to participate in such activities. Most of the participants shared that, whilst they understood the value of this trend, they were of the opinion that these “learning” platforms may also open spaces for cyberbullying to occur. Jacklyn (pg. 9) spoke of an experience of cyberbullying that happened via WhatsApp. She stated that the chat group had been created so that group members involved in an academic assignment “were contacting each other ... to make it convenient ...”, however, she was involved in an incident that she considered to be bullying. She later explained how this incident made her feel reluctant to participate in other online interactive learning environments and that, like other participants, she was concerned about the negative impact this could have on her academic progress.

#### **4.3.3 The role social-media platforms play in aiding cyberbullying**

Most of the participants alluded to their ambiguous feelings about the relationship between social media and cyberbullying. One of the participants mentioned that social-media platforms made it “very accessible [for some people] to bully other people” (Marian: pg. 1). This view was shared by Denita (pg. 5) who said that she “... definitely [thinks], you know, [it] opens or creates a whole new problem that you wouldn’t have should you just have face-to-face communication .... So there’s this open void that you can do just what you want”. Also, the reality of personal information and pictures being so readily accessible to others concerned some of the participants as “it just seems like you can’t trust anyone these days with social media” (Heinja: pg. 18).

Additionally, participants were of the view that social-media platforms create open access to large audiences and that this makes them feel exposed and vulnerable. Chrizan (pg. 83) said “I don’t make statuses because I feel like then I’m too exposed. I don’t want to, I don’t know who’s going to be able to see it ... I just don’t trust the internet ...”.

Three of the participants’ past experiences with social-media have influenced how they view the impact it has on various aspects of their lives. A key concern raised, was around the amount of time they spent on these platforms and how the activities related to their participation on these sites influenced their sense of self in relation to others. One of the participants shared the influence it had on her mental health, “I think sometimes you don’t, you get lost in how much

time you spend on it ... And I think you beat yourself up about it because you sit in your little room and it's a whole thing about the depression and everything just builds on top of you and you're thinking you're not good enough" (Heinja: pg. 6).

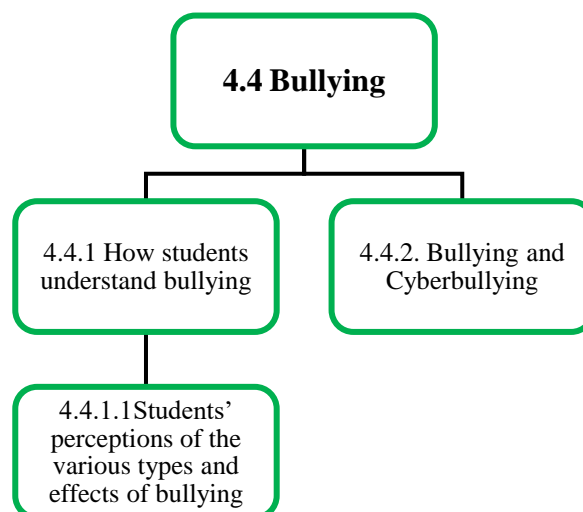
Another participant was particularly conflicted about how much she "love[s] social media" and "how much of my time it consumes" (Sherich: pg. 13).

The participants shared that, when cyberbullying happened, it usually started quite innocuously on one social platform and then evolved to a different type of social engagement on another. So, for example, many of the participants mentioned that most of cyberbullying initially happened on Facebook and then moved to Instagram as the specific social-media platform grew in popularity.

The data gathered from the narratives of the participants indicated the prevalence and role of social-media platforms in their daily lives. They spoke of the various uses of social-media platforms and referred to its advantages and disadvantages. The participants also made apparent that social-media platforms have only recently emerged and whilst being a tool used to engage in cyberbullying behaviours, there are already similar adverse behaviours in society.

#### 4.4 BULLYING

This theme is concerned with gaining insight into the perceptions of the participants' experiences and understanding of bullying. It was interesting to notice that six of the seven participants mentioned that they had experienced some form of bullying during their school careers even though they had not experienced cyberbullying.





#### **4.4.1 Students' perceptions of bullying**

Only two of the participants expressed their understanding of bullying in the individual semi-structured interviews. Both Jacklyn and Marian explained their understanding of bullying as inflicting discomfort and harm onto someone else.

“inflicting unwanted, I would say, pain or discomfort onto another person ...”  
(Jacklyn: pg. 1).

In addition to the discomfort that is felt, Marian further noted that bullying can also be unintentional. According to him “sometimes you don't do it intentionally” (Marian: pg. 1). This view is supported in the literature, as the literature defines bullying as either being direct or indirect. For example, direct bullying would comprise of physical bullying whereas indirect bullying includes, but is not limited to, social isolation and gossiping, which could sometimes be regarded as unintentional (Venter, 2013).

##### ***4.4.1.1 Students' perceptions of the types and effects of bullying***

This subtheme discusses the types of bullying that were identified by the participants during the individual semi-structured interviews and the focus group session. It seemed as though verbal and physical bullying were the two most commonly experienced types of bullying. The participants identified several forms of verbal bullying they had experienced during the course of their lives. This included name-calling, joking in a negative way, disparaging comments, coercion, blaming and gossiping. According to participants there were varying degrees or levels of the bullying. They also shared that verbal bullying and its effects often go unnoticed and victims then do not get the support they need. They spoke of the emotional and psychological harm they had experienced. One of the participants highlighted that her experience of indirect verbal bullying resulted in her leaving the school to avoid the bullying or as she says, “I ran away from my one problem to the next” (Heinja: pg. 28). She goes on to say “that was probably why I don't have that much self-confidence that I should have” (Heinja: pg. 26).

Another participant also shared how her experiences of verbal and emotional bullying led to her experiencing “feelings of hurt ... also embarrassment ... and then loneliness because you are all of a sudden on your own” (Chrizan: pg. 14). She went on to say that these experiences have also affected the way she interacts with people; she expresses this as “I definitely struggle

a little bit with feeling as if people want to be friends with me ... it gives me a little bit of anxiety ... or that feelings of like I'm not actually wanted in that group" (Chrizan: pg. 15).

The participants also shared experiences with various forms of physical bullying. They cited examples of hitting, kicking and pushing. Brejo mentioned that he had experienced both verbal and physical bullying while he was in Australia. He said that while he was there, he "got a lot of verbal teasing" and "they decided [to hit me with] a big log at the back of my head which ... I got stiches ..." (Brejo: pg. 22). He further mentioned that he responded to the bullying by becoming the bully himself: "what I did, I became the bully ..." (Brejo: pg. 23).

An interesting perception that was noted amongst the participants' views about bullying was that it was related to earlier developmental phases of life. All the participants referred to bullying as something that occurred mainly during the school going years. Sherich's (pg. 5) words captured these views when she mentioned that "it just seems like it was more a thing that happened when I was younger".

Most of the participants in this study shared that they had personally experienced some form of bullying during their childhood. Being involved in bullying seemed to have affected them on a physical and emotional level as well, and some highlighted that this effect can follow one into adulthood. One participant emphasized this by stating that "it's incredible how something that happened so long ago still does have an influence on you ..." (Chrizan: pg. 16).

#### **4.4.2 Bullying and cyberbullying**

The comparison between cyberbullying and bullying is a common trend in the literature, and it does not come as a surprise that it was discussed in the individual semi-structured interviews and focus group session. Four of the seven participants in the individual semi-structured interviews and all the participants in the focus group session emphasized that the big difference between cyberbullying and bullying is the ability to recognize risk and consequences through non-verbal cues such as facial expressions or body language. Denita (pg. 5) mentioned that "with face-to-face communication you read off a person's body, you know their behaviour and their ... non-verbal cues that you'd get face-to-face, so you'd know what you're saying is hurting the person's feelings, you could see that they're getting upset and you would naturally stop. Whereas via social media you don't have that".

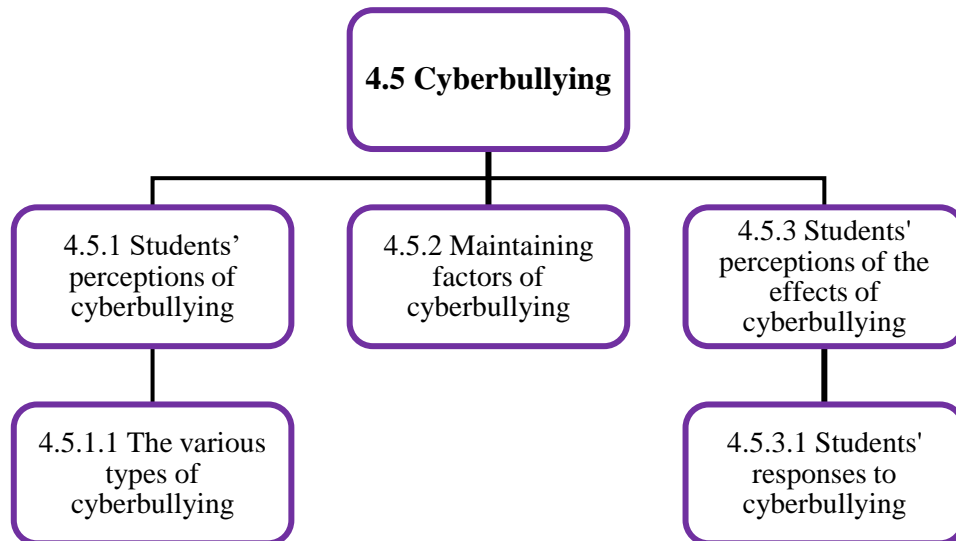
Another distinction that was mentioned between bullying and cyberbullying is that with bullying there is some control over what's happening, for example, once the issue is handled, the bullying behaviour usually stops. Whereas with cyberbullying there seems to be limited to no control over it. The ability to monitor online behaviour is challenging because people are not always up to date with the latest social-media platforms or how children and young adults use language when they are amongst their peers. This could lead to making wrong assumptions or even confronting other individuals without really understanding the context in which something is happening.

Sherich is of the opinion that cyberbullying is worse than traditional bullying because of the ease of access and the anonymity afforded by technology and social-media platforms. In her individual semi-structured interview, she mentioned that "it's almost like worse in a way than someone just saying something to you in person" because "people can bully you" and "a lot more easily online because they don't have to face the person" (Sherich: pg. 9).

It is evident that the students' views of bullying indicated that bullying is still very prevalent in society despite the surge in cyberbullying. Many of the participants' meaning making of their own bullying experiences have lead them to have very specific perceptions about bullying and cyberbullying and its impact.

#### **4.5 CYBERBULLYING**

The emerging adults who participated in this research study had definite opinions and views regarding the nature and extent of cyberbullying. These views comprise of the students' perceptions of cyberbullying, the different types of cyberbullying and the students own personal experiences of cyberbullying.



### 4.5.1 Students' perceptions of cyberbullying

This theme was concerned with gaining an indication of the participants' understanding of cyberbullying. The literature states that there is no unanimous agreement on the definition of cyberbullying, however, many researchers tend to use Hinduja and Patchin's (2010) definition of cyberbullying. They define it as "willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones and other electronic devices". As expected, it was a complex concept to define amongst the participants and the participants' responses corresponded with the literature. One of the participants in particular echoed the reality that cyberbullying is "quite difficult to define" (Marian: pg. 1).

A clear pattern appeared in the students' narrative responses, indicating their understanding of cyberbullying. It was often mentioned that cyberbullying involves behaviour where "people are being broken down or insulted and attacked psychologically or physically" (Chrizan: pg. 1). It was further described as "using social media or using electronic devices mostly when it is connected to the internet as a vehicle to bully someone or harass someone ..." (Marian: pg. 1). A good example that illustrates the majority of the responses about the participants' perceptions of cyberbullying is summed up by Heinja:

"I would say that cyberbullying is anything to do with attacking people, like putting them down on a social media platform. Like anything like Twitter or Facebook or Instagram or even WhatsApp. Like texting people in a derogatory manner or I don't know, speaking about someone on social media and attacking them on social media for everyone out there to see" (Heinja: pg. 1).

Three of the seven participants expressed their perceptions of cyberbullying as bullying that evolves into cyberbullying by using the internet, electronic devices or social-media platforms. Participants mentioned that, when they think of cyberbullying, they “immediately think of what bullying is”, and “with cyberbullying it happens via the internet, via either text, either on social page ... that’s bullying happening on our electronic devices ...” Jacklyn (1:10-13).

Another participant described cyberbullying as “a mixture of online bullying and many like social media anything that requires something on the internet where somebody could be disparaging towards someone to another one that could be ruining their reputation, rumours that get spread”. He further mentioned that it can be “anything that has like the effect that has like undermining someone’s dignity ...” (Brejo: pg. 4).

In addition to the above, although cyberbullying is viewed as an act of adverse behaviour, the narratives show that the participants believed that cyberbullying can be intentional and unintentional. Thus, looking at it with a social constructivist lens, how someone interprets what is posted or shared could be identified as cyberbullying depending on the person’s point of reference or meaning making of past experiences:

“What you said can so easily be interpreted in the wrong way .... And I mean every person interprets stuff from their own perspective and from their own like way they’ve been brought up and all that stuff. Like it’s kind of like a filter through which they read or listen to stuff. So, if people with a different filter than you read it, they experience it completely different and then they act often and then it becomes very ugly very quickly” (Chrizan: pg. 5).

Furthermore, participants were of the opinion that “even if they weren’t necessarily trying to bully you but they posted photos of you like, maybe passed out drunk or something, now it’s going to have a negative impact on you ...” (Sherich: pg. 26). However, they were cognizant that “it depends to what context they are talking about that person online ... there is a whole lot of ways you interpret what somebody says” (Brejo: pg. 7).

#### **4.5.1.1 The types of cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying is a relatively new research topic, following the rapid increase in the use of mobile (cell) phones and the internet. The types of cyberbullying acts that exist are endless. The participants in the study identified various characteristics of cyberbullying. Some of these characteristics were, “rumours that get spread” (Brejo: pg. 4), “texting people in a derogatory manner ...” (Heinja: pg. 1), “posting something about them or like a picture of them, creating

fake accounts to taunt someone and making nasty comments about people, either via social media platforms or electronic devices” (Sherich: pg. 1 and 6).

Jacklyn and Sherich supported the literature and highlighted that cyberbullying can be in two specific forms, direct and indirect. Jacklyn (pg. 1) stated that “you can watch videos where someone is actually physically bullying someone or they pre-recorded a video discussing someone, naming names, actually just putting that person down in the most unspeakable way, calling them names and then posting that video on social media for everyone to see. Obviously, we can see that goes viral and then another form would be where someone actually contacts you physically and pay tabs on you on Facebook ...”.

#### **4.5.2 Maintaining factors of cyberbullying**

Once participants had expressed their understanding of cyberbullying, they spoke of the various factors that, in their opinions, were maintaining cyberbullying. One of the themes highlighted here was the anonymity afforded by technology that is used as a crutch to build confidence. This anonymity that is afforded by hiding behind a screen enables the perpetrator to act without remorse or feeling guilty because the perpetrators “don’t even realise the hurt that they might be causing” (Chrizan: pg. 12). Bejo (pg. 29) supported this view when he said “people get so like dissociated from that, they will be like oh he killed himself, good .... You don’t really have to feel any emotions, it is just you and the screen ...”.

In addition, four of the seven participants were of the opinion that social-media platforms also play a role in cyberbullying; they concur with the following view:

“Social Media makes it so possible for another human being to anonymously attack someone else” (Jacklyn: pg. 2).

Furthermore, one participant in particular felt very strongly about the anonymous nature that social-media platforms and electronic devices provide. He shared that in his opinion hiding behind a screen is “very much a cop out for a lot of people who want to bully because now they suddenly can have a different name. They can have their own profile picture or it’s, it’s a cop out” (Marian: pg. 2).

All the participants had the same perception towards the fact that the anonymity afforded by the social-media platforms gives people the confidence to behave more adversely than they would in a face-to-face interaction and in some cases, may even say things that is not true.

Three of the participants stated that “because they [people] are anonymous ... they say extremely nasty stuff” (Chrizan: pg. 10), and most times will “behave differently online, they almost take on like a different persona ...” (Sherich: pg. 12). Furthermore, the anonymity that is provided allows people to act “brave enough and actually say what we [they] think ...” (Jacklyn: pg. 4).

In more traditional forms of bullying the bully often takes advantage of the person that appears to be younger, smaller or weaker in some way. The bullying behaviour is also confined to a certain space and time. In contrast, cyberbullying has no boundaries and as a victim you can be bullied anytime of any day by any person or group of people. “You’re not directly or physically having to be there to bully the person .... It’s accessible to everybody” (Denita: pg. 2). It is perceived to be inescapable as participant 2 (FG:63) said in the focus group session, “it follows you everywhere basically it's not about going home and then you're safe in your own environment it's still there because you still have your phone”. Furthermore, to support this view, it was stated that, “that’s the big thing about social media because everyone can see it and if you like post something else out there anyone can just like comment on your status .... It doesn’t matter where they are ... you can’t escape it” (Heinja: pg. 1), and that “for all you know it could be a five-year-old” (Marian: pg. 2).

A recurring theme that emerged was the permanent nature of cyberbullying and the feeling of being exposed to a large audience. Four of the participants mentioned that they “don’t think youngsters today, even ourselves at varsity understand that concept of how permanent it is and how real the damage is” (Jacklyn: pg. 3). Another participant supported this view by saying that “it’s an endless cycle” because “even though you take it down, they still remember that .... They can screen shot it” (Denita: pg. 2).

#### **4.5.3 The effects of cyberbullying**

In this subtheme participants identified several effects caused by cyberbullying. According to the students, individuals who are targeted are made to feel “insecure”, “uncomfortable” and unsafe. The effects of experiencing cyberbullying, as experienced or witnessed by the participants were mainly emotional in nature. A participant mentioned that she “felt insecure and I felt like oh my word, someone else is seeing my behind on social media everywhere” (Chrizan: pg. 10). Amongst other things it made them feel humiliated, depressed and insecure

about themselves. In addition to this, another participant voiced that her experiences scarred her emotionally. She said:

“The ways that she did it and the ways she phrased her words, it struck not just fear, it struck emotional damage into me .... At first it was frustrating, very frustrating and then it got to a point where I felt helpless because I knew no matter what I am going to do in the situation, she is in control now” (Jacklyn: pg. 10).

Along with the emotional pain experienced, participants expressed feelings of physical repercussions as well. These included; “... didn’t have an appetite. I would go to sleep and stand up tired the next morning even though I had enough hours of sleep ...” (Jacklyn: pg. 16). Another participant mentioned that she knew of “young people [who] have even like committed suicide ...” (Sherich: pg. 8).

One of the participants shared that cyberbullying could have more serious psychological and physical effects on a person. She mentioned that her younger sibling had experienced depression as a result of cyberbullying and when “the depression was officially diagnosed ... umm ... depression and anxiety ... umm ... she started medication. Then it was a case of overmedicating because she’s that unhappy ...” (Denita: pg. 20).

Participants also related how cyberbullying affects relationships and friendships. They alluded to the social isolation victim experience. Brejo (pg. 20) shared that, in a situation where he witnessed cyberbullying, he thought that the cyberbullying experience “probably has impact[ed] her [victim] quite a bit as well from a friend’s stand point. She doesn’t have very many friends”.

Furthermore, four of the seven participants mentioned the lack of insight most people have about the lasting and damaging effects cyberbullying can have on a person. In the individual interviews a participant expressed the view that “the effects of cyberbullying are way more severe than, you know, what’s commonly perceived and known” (Denita: pg. 1). It seems as though people react spontaneously without giving their actions much thought. Participants spoke about the permanent nature of social-media platforms and mentioned that “it is already engraved into the cyber network ...” (Jacklyn: pg. 2). This response suggests that it will be close to impossible to remove whatever has already been shared on social-media platforms and the fact that it can potentially be viewed by millions of people in a matter of seconds.



#### **4.5.3.1 Response to cyberbullying**

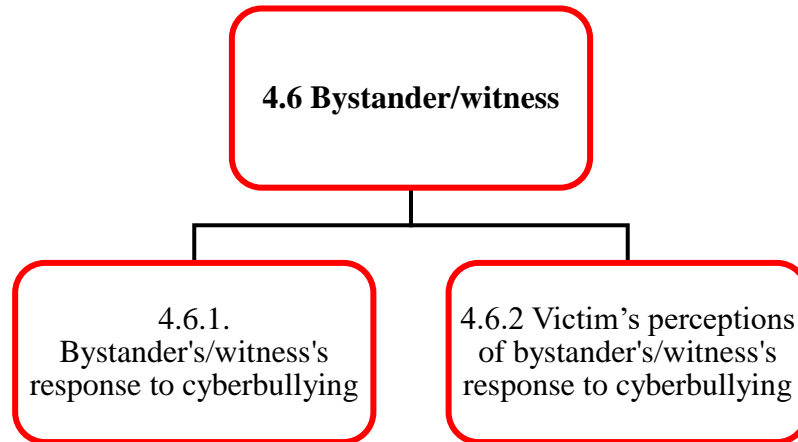
It was evident in the participants' narratives that experiencing cyberbullying has negative connotations and that the way in which one responds to these experiences has the ability to either prolong or minimize the cyberbullying behaviour. Avoidance seemed to be identified as the most common response amongst the participants when dealing with the occurrences of cyberbullying. Participants mentioned that the experience made them believe that they "have to keep this distance now" because they needed "to protect" themselves" (Brejo: pg. 23). This perception then resulted in social isolation or avoidance of situations that could potentially place them at risk. At one stage in the individual interviews, Denita mentioned that her sister "deleted her accounts a couple of times" as a coping mechanism. She further elaborated that "she literally tried to hide her existence ..." (Denita: pg. 49). This statement speaks to the majority of participants, as they spoke of how they would begin to avoid classes and/or buildings and communal areas: "like I didn't go to the building at all" (Heinja: pg. 19).

Another participant mentioned that she asked the individual (whom she knew) to remove the post that was put up, but the person refused to do it. Jacklyn spoke of an incident where she confided in her mother about the cyberbullying that she was experiencing, but even though she was supportive, it did not help the situation. She said that "I was feeling so miserable and ya to a point where I had to contact my lecturer" (Jacklyn: pg. 11).

Marian, on the other hand, took matters into his own hands and mentioned that he changed his number to escape the cyberbullying. Other responses to cyberbullying as cited by the participants included reporting the incident to an authority figure, exercising as a coping mechanism and dropping out of school.

#### **4.6 BYSTANDER/WITNESS**

This theme is concerned with the occurrence of the bystander effect and focuses on the perceptions of the victim and the bystander(s)/witness(es) and their experiences of cyberbullying. During the early stages of the research process participants completed a short survey that indicated their positioning with regard to cyberbullying being a victim, bystander/witness or both. Thus, their comments in the interviews emphasized the important role that the bystander/witness can play in the bullying behaviour and in the lives of the victims.



As mentioned in Chapter 2, section 2.3.2, a bystander can play a significant role in the outcome of the bullying behaviour. In traditional face-to-face bullying the bystander can either assist or reinforce the perpetrator, remain an observer or support and defend the victim (Obermaier, Fawzi, & Koch, 2016; Olenik-Shemesh, Heiman, & Eden, 2015). By assisting the perpetrator, the bystander is reinforcing and encouraging the aggressive act, while supporting or defending the victim provides social support and may minimize some of the long-term effects that it may have on the victim (Obermaier et al., 2016; Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2015). Additionally, in a cyberbullying incident the bystander can also assume the same three roles. Furthermore, the bystander can encourage the perpetrator with subtle behaviours, for example, by clicking “like” on the Facebook post of the perpetrator. Because of the anonymity and the potential large audience that the internet and many social-media platforms provide, five out of the seven participants, of whom a bystander/witness mentioned that he/she either just observed the post, or shared it without realising that it was reinforcing the behaviour.

#### **4.6.1 Bystanders’/witnesses’ responses to cyberbullying behaviour**

This subtheme involves the various responses of the bystanders/witnesses to the cyberbullying incident(s) observed. Four of the participants spoke of their inability to respond as bystanders/witnesses in the individual interviews.

On the other hand, three of the seven participants mentioned that they had not reacted to the cyberbullying they witnessed on social-media platforms. Reasons for not defending the victim or becoming involved, as identified by the participants, were related to not having a close relationship with the victim or fear of misinterpretation and becoming the victim themselves. For example, Brejo mentioned that he did not intervene in the situation because he “didn’t know

her [victim] that well”; he further mentioned that “she was one of my acquaintance ...” (Brejo: pg. 18). Additionally, Chrizan (pg. 12) mentioned that she “would never post back unless I feel like I am able to explain myself completely clearly without being misinterpreted. So usually I won’t get involved on a social media platform ... I feel like it won’t really make a difference ... there’s a lot of like, just a lot of spaces where something can be misinterpreted. So, I feel like in the end it might create a bigger problem.”

Furthermore, Denita spoke of how she tried to help her sister by posting comments back to the perpetrator via the social-media platform used to engage in the hurtful posts. She mentioned that in her opinion she thought she was helping, but instead aggravated the situation:

“I realised like me sticking up for her was not helping because it’s just making her look even weaker. So, it was like a catch twenty-two. Like the more I tried to help, the more it made it worse” (Denita: pg. 35).

She further spoke of how she viewed another bystander’s/witness’s lack of attempt to help her sister; it “was like another, you know ... like well no-one’s going to protect me so you know, that’s the end of it for me. So, she just sunk deeper and deeper into this depression” (Denita: pg. 34).

Another participant spoke of the injustice she observes as a bystander/witness on these platforms, and that she would like to see justice for the victims of cyberbullying. She stated that if she was the victim, she would like to “get some kind of justice or like make her [perpetrator] realise that it was the wrong thing to do” (Sherich: pg. 9).

#### **4.6.2 Victims’ perceptions of bystanders’/witnesses’ responses to cyberbullying**

Most of the participants shared their views about the further humiliation victims felt when the bystander/witness attempted to help, but in the end, only made matters worse. For example, a participant mentioned that “it’s just sad ... your other friend on the group that didn’t even try to come up for you, just saying that it’s not that bad. Like she tried to make it seem better but it only makes it worse” (Heinja: pg. 21).

For another participant, being emotionally affected by the cyberbullying incident, prevented her from letting go of her anger towards the bystander/witness. In her opinion he had the “bystanders effect, watching what is going on, not doing anything” (Jacklyn: pg. 14). This particular incident made her hold a grudge against the bystander/witness when she mentioned

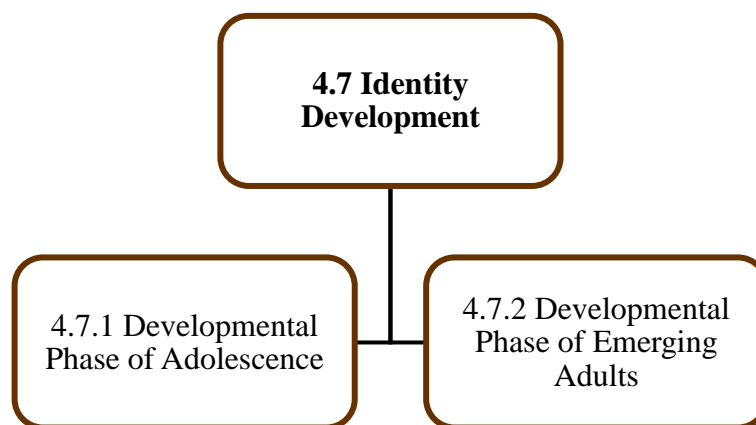
that “it frustrated” her to the point where she “got angry with him [bystander.witness]”. She further stated that she felt upset towards him because he did not say anything, but instead observed silently:

“I got angry with the fact that he didn’t even just make a choice and say okay I am with her or I am with you. It would have been better than doing nothing” (Jacklyn: pg. 14).

Denita expressed a significant point that is discussed in the literature. She mentioned that, as a witness/bystander, it is easy to offer advice and suggest ways to help minimize the effects of cyberbullying or minimize the cyberbullying itself, however, as a victim it is not as easy to implement them: “... and like it’s easy for me as a sister to say ‘ignore’ it you know” (Denita: pg. 10).

#### **4.7 IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

It was evident in the stories of the participants that social-media platforms and cyberbullying may influence the way in which we see ourselves in comparison to others. This appears particularly so during adolescence and emerging adulthood. This section intends to illustrate the participants’ views of the various ways cyberbullying may have influenced the participants’ identity development. Several references have already been made with regard to sections 4.3.2.2 and 4.5.3.



Identity development refers to the various experiences and processes that one experiences in life and which may contribute to and help in forming a coherent sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). Identity development is believed to begin in adolescence and continues throughout one’s

life (Donald et al., 2014). Within this process there are crucial stages where identity development is the key focus, a view that was supported by the participants in this study.

#### **4.7.1 Developmental phase of adolescence**

According to the participants, there are certain fundamental tasks that should be encountered during one's life in order to form a sense of identity. These developmental tasks can be divided into four categories: physical development, intellectual development, emotional development and social development. The developmental task, I would like to highlight, is the one of social development. The following extract summarizes the participants' views about adolescence:

“... especially that sensitive development stage, grade 8, 9, where the children are just so aware of themselves and they have such a big need for acceptance and like peer influences and that type of stuff, and I think at that stage the balance is too out, like the balance between emotional intelligence and what their needs are socially” (Chrizan: pg. 4).

Furthermore, social development is an integral part of forming an independent identity and is currently greatly influenced through young people's access to and engagement on social-media platforms. Adolescence is a challenging developmental phase often fraught with intra- and interpersonal conflict. Adolescents interact with different people and different environments, and in this way, start forming their own meaning of the world. Brejo spoke of his bullying experience and mentioned that, as a young South African boy who lived in Australia, he stood out in the crowd, and this was enough reason for his perpetrators to bully him, “it is all about the image that I got bullied” (Brejo: pg. 21).

In the individual interview conducted with Chrizan, she expressed how, as a teenager, she strived for acceptance from her peers and how her experiences and choices that she made during that time influenced her self-confidence. In the extract below she mentions that she found her sense of belonging within a positive and caring group of friends who built up her confidence. In this light, they affirmed her and made her feel accepted into the group: “I had a few friends in another school that was very upbuilding. Like they would always build my self-confidence and they would just be positive people” (Heinja: pg. 27).

All the participants were of the opinion that, during adolescence, social development and social status are very important. According to them social-media platforms have grown in popularity amongst adolescents because it provides a space for them to advance their social status. Jacklyn

added that social-media platforms create the space where adolescents can find acceptance and a sense of belonging. She stated that adolescents “say stuff that they shouldn’t have said just because they want attention ...” (Jacklyn: pg. 4). This relates to the many uses of social-media platforms as discussed in section 4.1.2. According to the participants, because acceptance and belonging are of great importance to young people during this developmental phase, adolescents may find themselves posting comments or videos without cognisance of the consequences. This spontaneous engagement on social-media platforms may then make them susceptible to becoming the target of cyberbullying.

Sherich (pg. 17) spoke of adolescence as a time where she “just wanted to fit in and was kind of like insecure and stuff”. It therefore appears that, while engaging on social-media platforms was an important part of the participants’ lives, it may not have always satisfied their desires to fit in. According to some of the participants, this then made young people vulnerable to perpetrators who surf the internet, as they may latch on to this vulnerability and engage with them in ways that reinforce insecurities in the adolescent experience, and in doing so leave them with life-long scars.

The level of vulnerability experienced by adolescents may also influence how they respond to peer pressure. The findings from the literature suggest that peer pressure plays a significant role in adolescents’ social development and because there is a dire need to fit in, adolescents may find themselves succumbing to the peer pressure. Denita spoke of her sister’s experience of cyberbullying and the lengths she went to in order to fit in:

“... the fact that she couldn’t find a place where she belonged or fitted in, she just couldn’t cope with that ... she could not cope with the fact that her peers via the cyber world would not accept her ... I mean she tried everything. She would cry for the latest clothes and the latest shoes and the latest phones ...” (Denita: pg. 28).

In addition to the aforementioned, calling one another insulting names such as “loser” and “slut” stood out as the way peer pressure is expressed among young people. Denita shared these comments that caused her sister to consider taking her own life:

“The amount of times I’ve had to fly through to where she lives because she’s like, ‘I’ve locked myself in the bathroom and I just want to tell you I love you, but I can’t do this anymore’” (Denita: pg. 30).

It is evident from the data that participants share the view that one's experiences during adolescence may contribute to the way one sees one-self and that, in turn, may influence the adult one becomes.

#### **4.7.2 The developmental phase of emerging adulthood**

This subtheme focuses on the students' perceptions of their social development in this phase of life and how past experiences of cyberbullying may have influenced the person they have become.

The participants were of the opinion that this phase of life is characterised by freedom and exploration. They referred to it as a time of life where, "at university ... people want to be more liberal, they want to express their opinions" (Chrizan: pg. 2). They also mentioned that attending social events is a very significant part of this exploration. Chrizan shared that she uses social-media platforms "to keep up to date with what's going on" and "to organise events" (Chrizan: pg. 3).

While the nature of social-media platforms may be to increase social contact, one of the other participants expressed that it could also have the opposite effect. She pointed out that social-media platforms encourage minimal physical interaction and ultimately left one feeling isolated and lonely. She explained that, as an emerging adult "you struggle because you sit in your room and you don't see other people and you don't mingle, you don't socialise, you can't get that positive feeling of motivation from other people" (Heinja: pg. 8).

In addition, two participants viewed a social-media platform as a space that facilitates criticism towards others and about one-self. This alludes to the fact that, although social-media platforms create the space for freedom of expression, people may still be at risk of being judged and critiqued for the opinions they share via these platforms. These comparisons may therefore affect the person's self-image and self-esteem.

"I do feel it creates a lot of opportunity for comparisons, for people to feel inferior"  
(Chrizan: pg 6).

"They see all these perfect bodies or these girls .... So all these perfect people and all these perfect ideal lives .... In reality, it's a different story and they can't live up to that. They feel down and they feel ... some people get depression" (Heinja: pg. 3).

Three of the participants were of the view that, as emerging adults, they are better equipped to deal with experiences such as cyberbullying: “university people have more solid identity so that stuff like [cyberbullying] might not affect them so much in that like later-on in life” (Chrizan: pg. 22). They ascribed this to being more matured in their thinking and having a more stable sense of self than they had as adolescents. Sherich (pg. 18) described it as being “more comfortable in my own skin .... At university you’re a bit more mature ... kind of know yourself better”. The term that was used to describe this maturity was one’s “emotionally development” (FG – participant 1: pg. 4). It was further mentioned by a participant that it took her “longer to recover from previous experiences when I was younger than to recover now” (Heinja: pg. 31).

However, it is important to point out that the participants also expressed that their earlier experiences of bullying and cyberbullying influenced how they see themselves today and who they are as individuals. Chrizan stated in her narrative that she is “just a little bit unsure of” herself and made the realization during our conversation that “something that happened so long ago still does have an influence on you” (Chrizan: pg. 1). Brejo also spoke of how his experience of bullying affected the way in which he interacts with people today: “I just think the way I interact on social media now sets me up in such a way that they don’t have the opportunity to do that” (Brejo: pg. 13). He mentioned that he does not want anyone to experience the hurt he felt and is therefore more aware of what he posts on social-media platforms and steers away from conversations that could potentially make him susceptible to cyberbullying. Heinja (pg. 20) concurred with this view and said that “trust is a big thing that I’m looking for now after that [experience]”. Another participant suggested that “conflict makes you a bit harder, it makes you resistant” (Jacklyn: pg. 19). This, once again, highlights the life-long effects that bullying and cyberbullying may have on a person.

Additionally, Jacklyn mentioned how her experience of cyberbullying changed her behaviour. She stated that she “was irritable at home” and “very attacking”. She further mentioned that she “would act out of anger, out of resentment and that is not who I am ...” (Jacklyn: pg. 16). Her meaning making of her experience affected her present cognitions due to the context of where and how the cyberbullying occurred. She, therefore, does not like group work anymore due to the fact that her experience of cyberbullying happened in a group context whilst working on a group project via a social-media platform: “I am not keen on group work settings anymore ... there was a linkage between the place and the people and that wasn’t great for me” (Jacklyn: pg. 19).



Forming relationships and friendships in this phase of life also appears to be different in comparison to forming them during adolescence. As mentioned earlier, fitting in, is at the crux of an adolescent’s world where as emerging adults no longer have this need: “Until varsity where I just decided okay, I still have a little bit of self-esteem problems but I can overcome it. I can be myself cause everyone here is just being themselves” (Heinja: pg. 29).

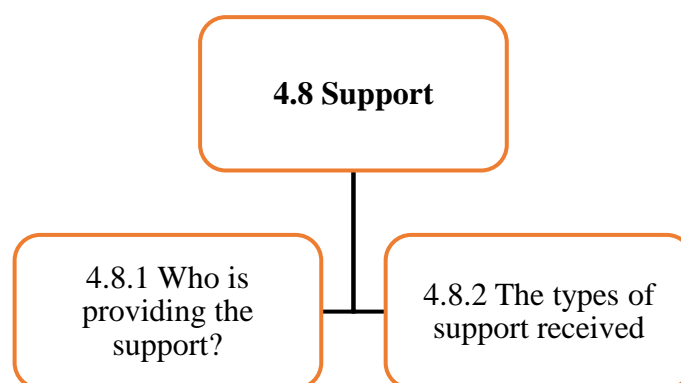
Participant 2: “I think it's just like you’ve evolved and developed so that you can handle the situations accordingly.”

Participant 1: “Ja you grow up. In the end you start to realise that if you have your core group of friends then that’s fine” (FG: pg. 18).

In summary, it is evident in the participants’ narratives that no matter your age or developmental phase of life, one’s meaning making of experiences of bullying and cyberbullying may influence the way in which you view your place in the world and interact with the world.

## 4.8 SUPPORT

Most of the participants discussed the various types of support they received as a victim of cyberbullying. They also referred to the different people from whom they sought support and explained the influence that the type of support had had on their development. In the section below, I have used extracts from the transcripts of the individual interviews and the focus group session that allude to the participants’ perceptions about support.



### 4.8.1 Who is providing the support?

Participants stated that, apart from cyberbullying, numerous challenges present itself during the transitioning period of young child to adolescence and from adolescence to emerging adulthood. They considered the development of one’s social and emotional well-being as

critical in developing resilience. Resilience, according to the participants, is required when dealing with challenges in life.

All of the participants emphasized the importance of support and how the type of support received as a child may have an influence on the development of one's identity. It was established in the individual interviews and the focus group session that support can serve as a protective factor and that it can be received from various people; it does not only need to come from parents. These people included, but are not limited to, parents, family members, friends, lecturers and teachers.

Chrizan (pg. 15) mentioned that she felt lucky to have a supportive mom because “she really taught me the values that matter in life and I think I was able to keep that and also develop a self-confidence despite of that [being bullied].” She also mentioned that she has sisters and was “able to speak to them about it [the problem]” (Chrizan: pg. 7).

It was expressed amongst the participants that support needs not only be offered by family members, but that it could be anyone that can offer help in some way. One participant reported that she had contacted her lecturer to inform him about the cyberbullying that she was experiencing via WhatsApp during a class project. A different participant reported that he had mentioned his cyberbullying experience to his partner.

As evident in the narratives, the participants sought and received help from various role players in their lives. It is important to note that, despite the different types of people from whom support was received, they all helped the victim in some way.

#### **4.8.2 Types of support received**

It appears to be the perception of the participants that receiving the ‘correct’ form of support from family, friends, educators and partners is crucial in developing a stable sense of self. Types of support that were identified amongst the participants included personally intervening in the cyberbullying, taking matters into their own hands and talking about the issue.

Jacklyn, who had sought support from her lecturer, had mentioned to him that she experienced cyberbullying via a chat group that was created in order to conveniently communicate with one another about the group project they had had. She expressed that in an attempt to intervene, the lecturer organized “a mediation session” (Jacklyn: pg. 12), and this helped to resolve part of the problem.

Additionally, in the focus group, the participants emphasized their perceptions of the significance of support during childhood. They mentioned the following:

Participant 2: “In my case, I feel like my mom ... ja my mom put in enough effort for me to like be secure enough in myself because I remember with Mxit you had the chat rooms options and I was just like there’s no way I’m going like into a chat room or just like ...”.

Participant 3: “Ja me to I was so scared of that.”

Participant 2: “Venturing into that area because I felt like my mom would not be happy with that because it's so risky it's just ... or it's just ja. Maybe it's just my personality also like I’m not ... I’m risky in the sense of adventure and like fun stuff outside but not ... I don’t want to go and play on the dark side at all. So I ... I guess I would just stay, steer clear of that type of stuff but I ...”.

Participant 3: “So it depends on the individuals.”

Participant 2: “Ja but I also do feel like how I have been brought up contributed to me wanting to go into a chatroom or not.”

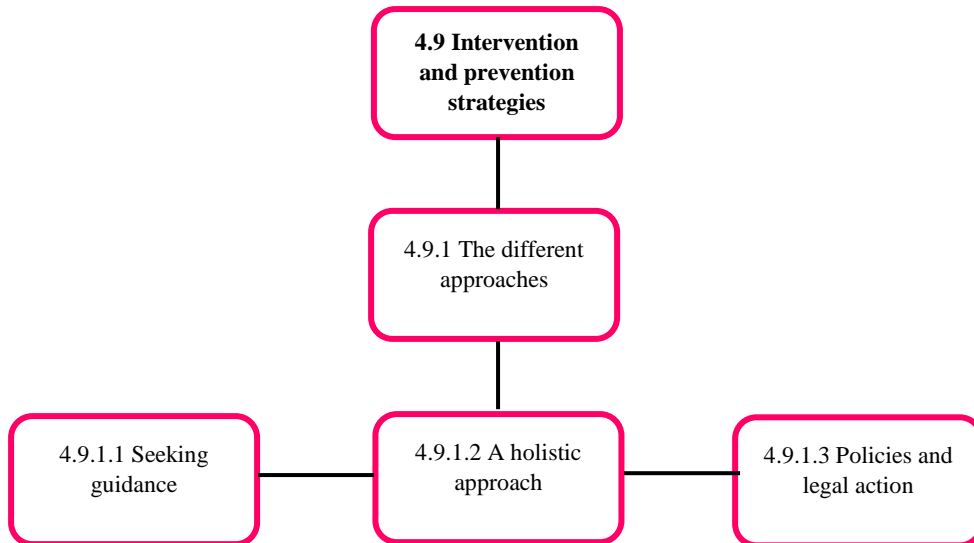
(FG: pg. 30)

On the contrary, Brejo mentioned that he did not seek help during his experience, instead he took the matter into his own hands. He mentioned that he “just did sport and got fitter and then became almost a bully” (Brejo: pg. 23).

Furthermore, Denita echoed the vicious cycle of cyberbullying and explained how her sister, at sixteen years old, ended up being pregnant. She reported that, in her opinion, her sister did not receive adequate support during her experiences of cyberbullying and therefore sort support elsewhere, which lead to her to engage in risky behaviour. The risky behaviour led her to getting pregnant that only gave people more reason to cyberbully her.

#### **4.9 INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAMMES**

While it was not the aim of the study to explore intervention and prevention strategies, the discussion about support led participants to talk about intervention and prevention programmes. In the following section, strategies suggested by the participants will be shared.



### **4.9.1 Seeking guidance**

The participants in the study spoke about intervention strategies such as seeking counselling to help with some of the effects that may be experienced as a result of cyberbullying. Sherich (pg. 22) mentioned that one should “get counselling because I think that is something that you need to overcome”. Another suggestion from a participant was attending mediation sessions, particularly when the perpetrator is known to the victim. She was of the opinion that “get[ing] someone from the outside with an objective perspective to mediate the situation will help” (Jacklyn: pg. 21).

#### **4.9.1.2 A holistic approach**

It was indicated that a holistic approach to address cyberbullying within the school environment is needed. This perception was reinforced by several participants who suggested that the school needs to stand together against cyberbullying. A particular student mentioned that teachers should be “on the lookout for distractions or quiet children and find out what their backgrounds are” (Heinja: pg. 34). Participants shared the view that teachers should also educate learners about “the impact that words and comments can have on the next person” (Denita: pg. 67). Furthermore, it was suggested by Chrizan (pg. 17) that teachers and parents should also focus on “positive development” within the home and school environment.

The participants also identified that anti-cyberbullying campaigns in various contexts could be an essential method in attempting to address cyberbullying. They felt that these campaigns

should be aimed at creating awareness not only in the learning environment, but also within communities. Their views were summarized by Denita's assertion that:

"I don't think that our communities are aware of the true impact of cyberbullying ... I don't think they are educated enough to look out for the signs" (Denita: pg. 69).

"It's definitely important to educate communities, families, and schools as not only to their responsibilities towards the victims of cyberbullying but also ways in which they can protect them" (Denita: pg. 71).

#### **4.9.1.3 Policies and legal action**

None of the participants in the focus group session were aware of any formal policies or procedural strategies that social-media platforms have with regard to addressing cyberbullying. The participants maintained that they were unaware of any formal structures in place to assist them when dealing with incidents of cyberbullying. Policies that aim to clamp down on cyberbullying and which serve as guidelines on how to deal with certain incidences were highlighted as an important step to be taken by the various platforms. These views of a conversation around this topic during the group session are summarized by the extract below:

Participant 2: So, actually I can understand that people who create the social media don't really feel like they should be the ones responsible for it but then again if you're looking at cigarettes and alcohol they are obliged by law to actually do inform people about the harms of their product. So, if you had to decide whether social media falls into does it fall into the category of a business that has such definite harms that it should be stated that it should be a law that there should be warnings about it or does social media fall into the normal entertainment category. But even with movies and series and stuff, they should say this is not for children under the age of thirteen.

Participant 3: "Ja."

Participant 2: "Like warning like that is actually all over ...".

Participant 1: "Our world so maybe it should just be brought in ...".

Participant 2: "And maybe you can even put a age restriction to certain social media ...".

Participant 1: “Isn’t there one?”

Participant 2: “If you can make a law because like for a country and say like ...”.

Participant 3: “Ja, ID number or something.”

Participant 2: “Ja, stuff like that.”

Participant 1: “And an IQ test.”

(FG: pg. 46).

Furthermore, participants were of the view that taking legal action would serve as a deterrent for future cyberbullying. Sherich (pg. 24) suggested that “get[ing] involved legally with the person” would have a greater impact than not, when trying to stop cyberbullying. She further stated that she “would just want justice, like I’d want to like sue the person ...”

#### **4.10 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

In summary, this chapter presented the categories, themes and subthemes that emerged from the data collected during the research study. The research findings indicate that the participants in this study were in agreement with the literature and other research studies about bullying and cyberbullying. It is evident that for the participants of the study, cyberbullying is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define. They further identified various types of bullying and cyberbullying acts and alluded to the negative psychological, emotional and physical effects that these experiences have had on them. Furthermore, the participants in this study disclosed how they responded to the experienced cyberbullying and made reference to the various people they accessed to acquire support. The participants also spoke of the role that a bystander/witness can play in the lives of the victim and perpetrators.

In conclusion, it is evident in the research findings that the meaning participants attached to their experiences of cyberbullying or witnessing of it first-hand, had in fact, influenced the development of their identities. It was also evident that social-media platforms play a significant role in aiding cyberbullying acts. The next and last chapter of this thesis contains a discussion of these findings in more detail. Chapter 5 will also serve as an overall conclusion, where the research findings will be discussed, and the study's strengths, limitations and recommendations for future research will also be presented.

## Chapter 5

# DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research study was to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perceptions of cyberbullying and the impact that it may have on the development of their identities. The participants in this study were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. In conducting this study, I used a qualitative approach that was grounded in the social constructivist paradigm. This approach afforded me the opportunity to acknowledge the different realities that were created by the participants as they interacted in their social environments. It also provided me with insight into how experiences of cyberbullying may have influenced the processes of identity development among emerging adults. Furthermore, by using this approach, I was able to gain insight into the participants' understanding of cyberbullying, the kinds of cyberbullying the participants may have been exposed to and how (if any) those experiences have affected them.

The context of this study was a university in the Western Cape of South Africa. The data analysis process was iterative and the data was analyzed using a thematic data analysis. The thematic data analysis enabled me to identify and explore categories and themes that emerged from the transcripts of both the individual interviews and the focus group session. The data was presented in Chapter 4. In this chapter the findings of this research study will be discussed according to the literature explored in Chapter 2. This chapter will also highlight some of the challenges I experienced facilitating the individual and focus group sessions; it will address the limitations of the study and will propose recommendations for future research.

### 5.2 A SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The framework that informed this study was social constructivism. Social constructivism emphasizes that knowledge about reality is constructed through the interactions between individuals and the contexts they may find themselves in (Patton, 2002). It further suggests that there is no absolute truth about reality, but rather an assimilation of the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences of reality. This study did not aim to reveal the "truth"

about cyberbullying, instead, my intention was to provide a comprehensive picture of what was portrayed by the participants in this study.

This research study explored the nature and extent of cyberbullying, the participants' perspectives and experiences of cyberbullying, the role social-media platforms may play in cyberbullying and in identity development, the role of support and the possible influence that a bystander may have on the victim of cyberbullying. Furthermore, the developmental life phases of adolescence and emerging adults were discussed. The participants in the study also suggested prevention and intervention strategies to help in targeting cyberbullying.

### **5.2.1 Participants' responses and narratives of cyberbullying**

As presented in the literature and findings of the study, cyberbullying continues to be a disturbing trend not only among adolescents, but also among emerging adults. The participants were of the opinion that cyberbullying was a complex concept and found it challenging to define. Brewer & Kerslake (2015) support this view in saying that "definitions of cyberbullying vary, illustrating the recency of the phenomenon ...". Many of the participants shared that they understood cyberbullying as an anti-social act that uses electronic devices to access the internet and various social-media platforms. They also alluded to the inescapable nature of cyberbullying (Badenhorst, 2011). A participant in the study mentioned "It's everywhere... You can't escape it" (Heinja: pg. 9). Further exploration of this topic led to the identification of the various types of cyberbullying that the participants were aware of. Some of these included the spreading of rumours, creating fake accounts to taunt people, and others mentioned humiliating people by posting nasty comments or sharing embarrassing pictures and videos. These types of cyberbullying were also cited in the literature (Antoniadou et al., 2014; Badenhorst, 2011).

The participants also conveyed several factors that they experienced as maintaining bullying and highlighted its perceived effects. So, for example, three of the participants in the study shared that they had lost their appetites, felt insecure, humiliated and depressed. The participants' views are supported in the literature by researchers who have found that some of the most commonly experienced effects of cyberbullying include, but is not limited to; low self-esteem, low academic performance, poor mental health and possible suicide (Chadwick, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). The participants also shared that they felt there was a number of factors that contributed to the initiation and maintenance of the cyberbullying behaviour.



## 5.2.2 Participants' perceptions about social-media platforms

Since there has been an escalating trend in the use of, and easy access to, social-media platforms over the last one or two decades, I set out to explore the participants' use of social-media platforms and their perceptions of this growing trend (Davis, 2013). All the participants shared that they use Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp on a regular basis. The participants also spoke of the various uses of social-media platforms and alluded to its disadvantages and advantages. They mentioned that social-media platforms are favourable means of communication because it provides instant and constant connectivity, it is cost-effective and provides the opportunity to keep up to date about the various social events and the latest news around the world.

They further alluded to the use of social-media platforms in academia. They attribute the incorporation of social-media platforms into academia to the increased popularity as the preferred means of communication of the student population. The literature concurs with their views and shares the numerous ways in which educational institutions have incorporated social-media platforms into blended learning curricula (Campbell et al., 2015). Whilst viewed as a step in a positive direction, engaging on these platforms may cause further insecurities in individuals who have had negative experiences with the internet and social-media platforms.

The participants' perceptions of the role social-media play in maintaining cyberbullying were also explored. They shared that incorporating social media into the curriculum also increased students' vulnerability to falling prey to cyberbullies. Their views concurred with the literature, which points to the fact that easy access to social-media platforms, ease of access to other people's profiles and the anonymous nature of social-media communication, all serve to create a space for perpetrators to easily engage in the act of cyberbullying (Balakrishnan, 2015; Campbell et al., 2015).

Another significant concern raised by the participants in this research study was that open access social-media platforms have a large audience and information can be shared with this audience very quickly. They point to the impact this can have on a person's reputation or sense of self. In addition to this, participants shared that the way in which individuals engage on these platforms may influence how they see themselves in relation to others. All of these factors may create insecurities within the person and his/her social standing and in turn influence who he/she becomes, i.e. his/her identity.

#### **5.2.4 The bystander's perceptions about cyberbullying**

Once an understanding of their views about cyberbullying and social-media platforms were attained, I set out to explore the perceptions of the participants who had indicated that they had witnessed cyberbullying first-hand. The reason why I thought this was important, was because studies around this phenomena have found that the encouragement or minimization of a cyberbullying incident is partially dependent on the bystander's reaction or response to the incident (Obermaier et al., 2016; Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2015). Their responses contributed valuable information to this study and may elicit future studies on this topic. "He didn't do anything about it" (Denita: pg. 34), reflects a common response among the participants who were identified as bystanders, which was that many chose not to intervene and did nothing about the incident they had witnessed. However, the most common response related to the risk and the potential that existed for them becoming the cyberbully's next victim. This was a significant theme that emerged from the data because according to a substantial amount of literature, the bystander's response has a considerable influence on the victim and the behaviour of the perpetrator (Allan et al., 2017; Chen, Chen, Li, & Wu, 2015; Olenik-Shemesh et al., 2015).

During the course of the interviews and the focus group session various participants shared that receiving support from others can serve as a protective factor. They also pointed to the fact that this support was given by various role players in the lives of the victims. There are studies that confirm that support may play a significant role on a person's identity, academic achievement and psychological well-being (Chen et al., 2015; Conger et al., 2017; Noble-Carr & Woodman, 2016). It also became apparent amongst all the participants that the various types of support received from different people at different times in their lives had made a positive difference in their lives as adolescents and as emerging adults.

#### **5.2.5 Identity development in the developmental life phases**

Since the aim of the study was to explore perceptions of how cyberbullying may impact identity development, it was important to review the literature on identity as well as obtain the participants' views about identity in their developmental phase of life. It was interesting to note that many of the participants spoke of cyberbullying as something that mostly happened during their teenage years. This, therefore, extended my review of the literature to include the phase of life regarded as adolescence.

### 5.2.5.1 *Adolescence*

According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is usually marked by a time of life where the individual begins to form a sense of who he/she is, an identity. This phase of life is also characterized by many inter- and intrapersonal challenges, including finding acceptance and belonging amongst peers. In one of the individual interviews conducted, the participant referred to her experience as an adolescent as a phase of life where she “just wanted to fit in and was kind of insecure” (Sherich: pg. 17). This speaks to vulnerability and impressionability of young people in this life stage. It is therefore important to point out that engaging on social-media platforms may not always ‘satisfy’ the adolescent’s desire to fit in. Perpetrators often engage on these social-media platforms preying on the vulnerability and perception of social marginalization. This experience may then cause further insecurities within the adolescent, and this could have life-long effects. Developmental theorist, Erik Erikson (1968), points to adolescence as a critical stage of life when the choices adolescents make and the people with whom they associate can influence what they experience and how they may see themselves in relation to their world. One of the participants in the individual interviews spoke of how her sister’s perpetrators targeted her insecurities illustrating the effects of cyberbullying: “she [was] like, ‘I’ve locked myself in the bathroom and I just want to tell you I love you, but I can’t do this anymore’” (Denita: pg. 30).

### 5.2.5.2 *Emerging adults*

Emerging adulthood, the life stage that was the focus of the study, is known as the *in-between* phase of life (Schwartz et al., 2005). This period of 18 to 25 years was significant for the study because these individuals assume adult roles, but have not yet taken on adult responsibilities (Arnett, 2000). It is considered to be a time during which the individual is free to explore more about himself/herself and may engage in riskier behaviour than they would have during adolescence (Arnett, 2016). This vulnerability may make them more susceptible to either engage in acts of cyberbullying or become victims of cyberbullying. However, it was the opinion of most of the participants in the study that they were emotionally more capable to deal with cyberbullying than they had been as adolescents. One particular participant mentioned that, as an emerging adult one has a “more solid identity so that stuff like [cyberbullying] might not affect them so much in that like later-on in life” (Chrizan: pg. 22). They further shared that their experiences in adolescence have shaped who they are today and, in turn, they have become more resilient towards challenges that they now may encounter in their lives. Furthermore, the

meanings that they attribute to their experiences of life thus far contribute to how they may see themselves as adults one day.

In summary, the question of how cyberbullying impacts emerging adults' lives is a complex one, and it does not have a simple answer. As acknowledged by the literature and the participants, cyberbullying is multi-faceted and affects individuals and groups in multiple ways, all of which is not yet fully understood. However, I hope that the findings of this study will contribute to dearth of information regarding cyberbullying and emerging adults, and I hope to encourage other researchers to explore this phenomenon further.

### **5.3 STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY**

This study set out to explore a topical issue about how little empirical data exists. It did so in a way that sought to give voice to the lived realities of the participants in ways that they felt comfortable. Qualitative research and particularly Participatory Action Research encourages us to forefront the knowledge of the participants. Some of the participants shared that this had been the first time they had shared their experiences, either as a victim of or a witness to cyberbullying. In seeking to make meaning of their experiences with me, they have contributed to the social and academic conversation around a social issue that causes a great deal of harm to individuals and the contexts that they navigate. Working with this, often hard to access, population allowed me as a novice researcher to reflect on how my life experiences and meaning making process may influence my ability to engage with people who have had experiences similar, yet different to mine. Reflexive praxis helped me to conduct the interviews in a non-threatening environment that sought to provide a comfortable space for the participants to share their personal experiences of cyberbullying and how they perceived it to have impacted their identities. Ethical engagement with the participants and the data ensured that the conversation around this sensitive topic afforded participants an opportunity to have their voices heard.

In seeking to ensure the trustworthiness of my study, I made every effort to remain transparent. All of the individual interviews and the focus group session were recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also kept a research journal where I recorded my feelings and thoughts of the research process. I immersed myself in the data and consulted regularly with my supervisor to ensure that I stayed true to the stories of the participants and fore-fronted their voices. Extracts of the transcriptions and the research journal are included in the study to allow readers to draw

their own conclusions about whether these methods were appropriate. These conclusions can serve as enhancing the reliability of the study.

This study in accessing a hard to reach population can contribute to the scientific knowledge base of cyberbullying among emerging adults in a South African context. It is important to tell the stories of people who experience cyberbullying in their own words so that we can encourage more people to seek psycho-social support. Whilst it focused on a small sample, this study achieved its aim of adding to a growing body of scientific knowledge seeking to explore the participants' perceptions about cyberbullying and the impact it may have on identity development and people's quality of life.

#### **5.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

As with all research studies, this study was also restricted by certain limitations. This study comprised of a limited number of participants, therefore their stories must be understood from an individual perspective as opposed to a generalized portrayal of a whole population. The small number of participants may have been a result of the sensitive nature of the phenomenon. In addition, challenges in finding a time that suited all participants, as examinations and teaching practice made the research a challenging and time-consuming process. However, in spite of the confinements of the study, the qualitative data gained offers significant insight into the participants' perceptions of cyberbullying and the impact that it may have on identity development.

Although I maintain that the sample rendered valuable information and that the sampling methods used were useful when considering the nature of the topic, in hindsight, a broader population could have been considered. Furthermore, the results of the present study must be viewed tentatively, because, although a diverse sample, it is not a nationally or internationally representative sample. It is suggested that future studies examine larger and more varied samples of emerging adults and this phenomenon.

In addition, as with all qualitative research, I have to consider my role in the research process. Despite my attempts to remain objective and to separate my own assumptions and perceptions from the phenomenon under study, I now realize that it is not always possible. However, transcribing the individual interviews and focus group session verbatim; using direct quotes to support my findings, keeping a research journal of my thoughts and feelings about the research

process, consulting with my supervisor and critical friends and critically engaging with current literature about my phenomenon, are all indicative of the fact that I was rigorous in my attempts to ensure that I did not influence the research process.

## **5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given that research on cyberbullying among emerging adults was limited, it is recommended that further research be conducted in a South African context. It is important to conduct research that seeks to increase insight into the factors that enable cyberbullying and to explore ways in which these can be minimized. In addition to the aforementioned, I would like to highlight some of the recommendations made by the participants around targeting cyberbullying and relate these to the literature.

It is indicated in the literature and was suggested by the participants that education and awareness programmes may be an effective method to overcome the challenges that cyberbullying may present in the near future (Badenhorst, 2011; Behrens et al., 2017). One of the many avenues to consider in this regard includes evaluating the role communities and learning environments play in the lives of children and young adults. The participants of the study were of the opinion that a holistic approach in combating cyberbullying is needed. They referred to the various warning signs that parents, care-givers and educators can look out for and also recommended educating the broader communities about cyberbullying and healthier ways of engaging on social-media platforms. They also advocated for social-media platforms to take on more responsibility with regard to implementing policies that can serve as guidelines on how to deal with incidences of cyberbullying and should consider running anti-cyberbullying campaigns.

Furthermore, because there is evidence that suggests cyberbullying may affect identity development, seeking support from an objective point of view can serve to be therapeutic for the victim (M. C. Cappadocia, Craig, & Pepler, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). The person or people providing the support may include peers, family members or professionals.

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

It is hoped that this study will be used to address other concerns related to cyberbullying and emerging adults, and that it has captured and presented the participants' experiences authentically. It is evident that cyberbullying incidences among the youth and emerging adults

in South Africa are on the increase; it is therefore imperative that research be ongoing in order to develop effective strategies to target cyberbullying in all areas of life. While there are still many barriers to accessing vulnerable populations for research, I found it enlightening that the participants shared their personal experiences with me and that I could afford them the opportunity to give a voice to their experiences. Furthermore, identity development seems to be a dynamic and evolving process among the youth and young adults, and it is therefore possible that dealing with cyberbullying may become more complex.

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## Addendum A:

### Invitation to participate in a research project



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jou kennisvenoot • your knowledge partner

#### **An Invitation to Participate in a Research Project**

The focus of this project is: *'Tertiary Students Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity'*

Good Day

This study will be conducted by Fazeelah Osman (Bsoc.Sci [UCT]), (BA Honours [UWC]), (PGCE [UCT]) from the Department of Educational Psychology at Stellenbosch University. As a partial requirement of this Master's degree in Educational Psychology, a research projects needs to be completed in the form of a thesis. You are invited to participate in the research project because you are a student in the Educational Psychology department, more specifically a post graduate Life Orientation student who is presently doing their Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). Thus, your perspectives and experiences of cyberbullying at this university are important for this research because you continuously engage in personal, psychological, moral, cultural and constitutional areas and might encounter cyberbullying issues in your school setting one day.

The aim of this study is to explore emerging adults' perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying in a South African learning context. It also aims to gain insight into how experiencing or witnessing cyberbullying first-hand have influenced your identity development.

If you volunteer to participate in this study the following will be asked of you:

- a) You will be asked to complete and sign a consent form
- b) During the study you will be asked to complete a short background information questionnaire. This will take approximately 10 – 15 minutes.
- c) You will be asked to participate in an individual interview concerning the theme of cyberbullying and identity development. This will take approximately 45 - 60 minutes.
- d) Subsequently, you will be given the opportunity to participate in a small focus group discussion about your experiences and perceptions of cyberbullying. The focus group will take approximately 60 - 90 minutes.

e) If you are interested and would like to volunteer to participate please complete the information below:

1. **Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

2. **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

3. **What do you understand by the term Cyberbullying?**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. **Have you ever experienced or witnessed cyberbullying first-hand?**

YES       NO

6. **Would you be interested in taking part in the:**

a. Individual interview       b. Focus group       c. Both

7. **Your Contact details:** email: \_\_\_\_\_

Cell no (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

\*Please note that your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences or penalties of any kind.

Regards,

Fazeelah

(Researcher)

## Addendum B:

### Letter to potential participants



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**The focus of this project is: ‘Tertiary Students Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity’**

Dear [name],

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research project. I appreciate you taking the time to contribute to this research project and your willingness to meet with me and share your thoughts and experiences about ‘Tertiary Students Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity’.

Please indicate the times that would be convenient for us to meet for the individual interviews during the first week of April 2017. Subsequent to the individual interviews, I will be in contact with those individuals who have indicated a willingness to participate in the focus group session in order to schedule a meeting.

Please note that your participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences or penalties of any kind.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me via email at [fosman@sun.ac.za](mailto:fosman@sun.ac.za). Again, thank you very much for your time and effort.

Kind Regards,

\_\_\_\_Fazeelah\_\_\_\_

(Researcher)

## **Addendum C:**

### **Interview Guide – Individual Interview**

#### **Individual Semi-Structured Interview Schedule**

##### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Introduce self as a master's student in educational psychology
- 1.2 An explanation of the purpose of the interview will be given to the participant
- 1.3 Confidentiality, anonymity (pseudonym) and support will be discussed with the participant.
- 1.4 The format of the interview and the length of the interview will be explained.
- 1.5 Permission will be sort to audio record the session.
- 1.6 Any further questions that participants may have will be clarified.
- 1.7 Informed consent will be obtained from the participant before the commencement of the interview.

##### **2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

- 2.1 Re-look at Addendum A
- 2.2 Tell me what you know about cyberbullying, what is your understanding of cyberbullying?
- 2.3 What is your opinion about social media? What platforms do you use?
- 2.4 Do you think social media creates problems for people that otherwise wouldn't occur? Explain.

##### **3. QUESTIONS**

- 3.1 When did you become aware that cyberbullying exists?
- 3.2 Have you experienced cyberbullying or witness it happen?
- 3.3 Can you tell me more about it?
- 3.4 How long did it occur for?
- 3.5 Did it affect you in any way? (Cause any insecurities?) was it noticeable by others?
- 3.6 What did you do about it or how did you react to it?

- 3.7 Have you ever experienced bullying? At school?
- 3.8 As a potential teacher, what signs would you lookout for?

#### **4. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

- 4.1 What advice would you give somebody that was personally attacked online?
- 4.2 Probes – in response to information shared during the session.
- 4.3 Is there anything else you would like to say that you feel is important?

*Thank you for participating in this interview. The personal information that you have shared is respected and your identity will remain confidential.*



## **Addendum D:**

### **Interview guide – Focus Group**

#### **Focus Group Interview Schedule**

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Introduce self as a master's student in educational psychology
- 1.2 An explanation of the purpose of the focus group will be given to the participants (emergence of themes from the individual interview).
- 1.3 Confidentiality, anonymity and support will be discussed with the participants.
- 1.4 The format of the interview and the length of the interview will be explained.
- 1.5 Permission will be sort to video and audio record the session.
- 1.6 Any further questions that participants may have will be clarified.
- 1.7 Informed consent will be obtained from the participant before the commencement of the interview.
- 1.8 Introduce stimulus activity (Projective Technique)

#### **2. QUESTIONS**

- 2.1 Thoughts about video
- 2.2 Was there anything significant that stood out for you personally?
- 2.3 Is cyberbullying a significant issue in the university setting?
- 2.4 Have you found any methods that can help to reduce these incidents and/or effects?

#### **3. ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS**

- 3.1 Questions based on the themes that have emerged from the interview session
  - 3.1.1 I would like to enquire more about the permanent nature of cyberbullying that stood out in the individual semi-structured interviews
  - 3.1.2 Tell me more about the lack of insight into how lasting the effects/damages of cyberbullying is.
  - 3.1.3 Another theme that stood out in the individual interviews was the concept of anonymity and how it boosts confidence. What are your thoughts?

- 3.1.4 It was also mentioned that experiences of cyberbullying influence your personal development and social behaviour and sometimes even your own perception of who you are (keeping in mind that everyone experiences cyberbullying differently).
- 3.1.5 Resilience of emerging adults – what do you think is meant by “matured thinking.” (Highlighted in the individual interviews)
- 3.1.6 How do you think social media platforms can take better control of cyberbullying without shutting it down?
- 3.2 Are there any questions that are important that I have left out?

## Addendum E:

### Institutional permission



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23 November 2016

Ms Fazeelah Osman  
Department of Educational Psychology  
Stellenbosch University

Dear Ms Osman,

**Project: *Tertiary Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity***

Institutional permission is granted to proceed with this project as stipulated in the institutional permission application. This permission is granted on the following conditions:

- Participation is voluntary.
- Persons may not be coerced into participation.
- Persons who choose to participate must be informed of the purpose of this survey, all the aspects of their participation, the risks to participation, their role in the study and their rights as participants. Participants must consent to participation. The investigator may not proceed until they are confident that all the before mentioned has been established and recorded.
- Persons who choose not to participate may not be penalised as a result of non-participation.
- Participants may withdraw their participation at any time, and without consequence.
- Data must be collected and processed in a way that ensures the anonymity of all participants.
- The data that is collected must be responsibly and suitably protected.
- The investigator must pay due diligence in seeing that the data is handled in the strictest confidence.
- The use of the collected data may not be extended beyond the purpose of this study.
- Individuals may not be identified in the report(s) or publication(s) of the results of the study.
- The privacy of individuals must be respected and protected.
- The investigator must conduct this survey within the provisions of the Protection of Personal Information Act, 2013.

Best wishes,

#### **Copyright**

Senior Director: Institutional Research and Planning



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Afdeling Institusionele Navorsing en Beplanning • Institutional Research and Planning Division  
Privaatsak/Private Bag X1 • Stellenbosch • 7602 • Suid-Afrika/South Africa  
Tel. +27 21 808 3967 • Faks/Fax +27 21 808 4533

## Addendum F:

### Approval notice



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### Approved with Stipulations Response to Modifications- (New Application)

20-Feb-2017  
Osman, Fazeelah F

Proposal #: **Copyright**

Title: Tertiary Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity

Dear Mrs Fazeelah Osman,

Your **Response to Modifications - (New Application)** received on **06-Feb-2017**, was reviewed by members of the **Research Ethics Committee: Human Research (Humanities)** via Expedited review procedures on **20-Feb-2017**.

Please note the following information about your approved research proposal:

Proposal Approval Period: **20-Feb-2017 -19-Feb-2018**

The following stipulations are relevant to the approval of your project and must be adhered to:

**The researcher has addressed many of the issues raised by the REC. A few issues have not been adequately addressed, however.**

**1) In terms of the protection of privacy associated with the use of video recordings the researcher has focussed her response on the process by which participants will have input into deciding whether focus groups will be video recorded, rather than the crucial ethical issue of the identification of participants in the video recordings and the need to, e.g., obscure participants' faces if feasible. Please respond to this issue directly. [RESPONSE REQUIRED]**

**2) The researcher's response regarding asking participants to indicate their race is acceptable but does leave questions as to why she specifically thinks that the race category would generate interesting differences whilst ignoring the impact of other socio-demographic variables, e.g., gender. It may also be interesting to see how experiences vary between male and female participants and she does not appear to have recognised this fact. [NO RESPONSE REQUIRED – FOR CONSIDERATION ONLY]**

Please provide a letter of response to all the points raised IN ADDITION to HIGHLIGHTING or using the TRACK CHANGES function to indicate ALL the corrections/amendments of ALL DOCUMENTS clearly in order to allow rapid scrutiny and appraisal.

Please take note of the general Investigator Responsibilities attached to this letter. You may commence with your research after complying fully with these guidelines.

Please remember to use your **proposal number** **Copyright** on any documents or correspondence with the REC concerning your research proposal.

Please note that the REC has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor

## Addendum G:

### Letter from psychologist

Copyright



CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST

11 August 2016

Dear participant

During the process of your participation in Ms Osman's study, you may experience some discomfort or difficulty.

If this happens, it is important that you seek support either by contacting one of the numbers she has provided or from a counselor or therapist.

Ms Osman has asked me to provide you with my details in the event that you need someone to talk to and don't have anyone in place.

I am a clinical psychologist in private practice and you are welcome to contact me. Although I charge standard medical aid rates, I am open to talk about this with you and Ms Osman if payment is difficult.

Kind regards,

Copyright

Clinical Psychologist

Copyright

Copyright

Copyright



Copyright

Copyright

BA Psych Cum Laude (UJ) BA Psych Honors Cum Laude (UJ) MA Psych (UJ)  
Registered with the Health Professions Council: P/SD 12/7205  
Practice number: D86D01D627941

## Addendum H:

### Consent to participate in research



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### STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

#### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

---

**REFERENCE NUMBER:** Copyright [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by **Fazeelah Osman** (Bsoc.Sci [UCT]), (BA Honours [UWC]), (PGCE [UCT]), a Masters in Educational Psychology student, from the Department of Educational Psychology at Stellenbosch University. As a partial requirement of this Master's degree in Educational Psychology, a research projects needs to be completed in the form of a thesis. You are invited to participate in the research project entitled 'Tertiary Students' Perceptions of the Impact of Cyberbullying on their Identity'. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a student in the Educational Psychology department, more specifically a Post Graduate Life Orientation Student who is presently doing their Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) and have either experienced cyberbullying or have witnessed it first-hand. Thus, your perspectives and experiences of cyberbullying at this university are important for this research because you continuously engage in personal, psychological, moral, cultural and constitutional areas and might encounter cyberbullying issues in your school setting one day.

The information presented here will explain the details of this project. You may contact the researcher if you require further explanation or clarification of any aspect of the study.

#### 1. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research is to explore emerging adults' perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying in a South African learning context. It also aims to gain insight into how experiences of cyberbullying may have influenced participant's identity development.

#### 2. PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study the following will be asked of you:

- You will be asked to complete and sign this consent form
- During the study, you were asked to complete a short background information questionnaire. This took approximately 10 – 15 minutes.
- You will be asked to participate in an individual interview concerning the theme of cyberbullying and identity development. This will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes.
- Subsequently, you will be given the opportunity to decide whether or not you would like to participate in a focus group discussion about experiences and perceptions of emerging adults around cyberbullying. The focus group will take approximately 60 - 90 minutes.
- The interviews and focus group will be conducted at times and locations convenient for you during March - April 2017.
- You will also be requested to indicate your availability to clarify or confirm information shared during the individual interview and/or focus group, via electronic correspondence or telephonically, should the need arise.

### **3. POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. This study is of a sensitive nature and it may therefore bring about some emotional discomfort such as reliving the experience, lack of sleep or sleep problems, mood problems, loss of confidence or becoming distressed and withdrawn. Every effort will be made to minimize this discomfort. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage during the research process either face-to-face or via email.

If any discomfort should arise during or after the study, you may contact (at no cost):

The Centre for Student Counselling and Development where a twenty-four hour crisis service is available or you may visit the centre to seek support or help.

Crisis number: Copyright [REDACTED]

Tel: Copyright [REDACTED]

You may also contact (at no cost to yourself):

Clinical Psychologist: [REDACTED]

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

PS [REDACTED]

#### **4. POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR COMMUNITY**

Cyberbullying is prevalent within South Africa and more specifically among young adults in tertiary institutions. Its negative consequences may affect individuals physically, emotionally and mentally. This research aims to give insight into the lived experiences of those who have experienced or who have witnessed cyberbullying. The results of the study may be used to inform intervention and prevention strategies within a tertiary institution.

#### **5. PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

The participant will not receive any payment or any form of remuneration for participating in the study.

#### **6. CONFIDENTIALITY**

Every effort will be made to ensure that your personal information and data is kept in strict confidence during and after the study. To ensure anonymity, any information that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Anonymity will also be maintained by assigning participants pseudonyms at the beginning of the interview process. Only the supervisor and principal investigator will have access to this information and shall treat this data with respect, abiding by the ethical codes set out for the researchers.

There is a possibility that the focus group may be audio and visually recorded to assist data collection and coding. If you prefer it to only be audio recorded, please inform the researcher. All electronic data collected will be stored securely in a password protected folder on the researcher's external hard drive, which will be securely locked in a cupboard. All notes, recordings and transcribed conversations will only be accessed by the researcher and her supervisor.

#### **7. PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

If you volunteer to be part of the study, you may withdraw from the study, and inform me either face-to-face or via email, at any time without any consequences or penalties of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering and still remain in the study. The researcher may withdraw you from the study if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.



## 8. IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Ms. Fazeelah Osman, the principal investigator (researcher), or Dr. Damons, the supervisor assigned to the study.

Principal investigator:

Supervisor:

Mrs. Fazeelah Osman

Dr. Lynne Damons

Tel: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

Email: [REDACTED]

## 9. RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact Ms [REDACTED] at the Division for Research Development.

Copyright [REDACTED]

### DECLARATION AND SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

The information above was explained to me by Fazeelah Osman in English and the participant is in command of this language or it was satisfactorily translated to him/her. The participant was given the opportunity to ask questions and these questions were answered to his/her satisfaction.

I hereby consent voluntarily to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

.....

**Name of Participant**

.....

**Signature of Participant**

.....

**Date**

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I declare that I explained the information given in this document to .....  
[*name of the participant*]. [*He/she*] was encouraged and given ample time to ask me any  
questions. This conversation was conducted in [*Afrikaans/\*English/\*Xhosa/\*Other*] and [*no  
translator was used/this conversation was translated into ..... by  
.....*].

.....  
**Signature of Investigator**

.....  
**Date**

## **Addendum I:**

### **Transcript with Thematic Colour Coding**

#### **COLOUR CODING KEY:**



- **SOCIAL-MEDIA PLATFORMS**



- **CYBERBULLYING**



- **BULLYING**



- **BYSTANDER/WITNESS**



- **IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**



- **SUPPORT**



- **INTERVENTIONS AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES**

Individual Interview Transcript



Copyright

Themes

Sub-themes



Supports literature:  
difficult to define

<b>M:</b>	<p>Yes well, I think cyber bullying has been. <u>It's quite difficult to define per se</u> but I think the big thing is, is that using social media or using electronic devices mostly when its connected to the internet as a, as a vehicle to <u>to bully someone</u> or to <u>harass someone</u> but I think a big thing about it is the fact that it's used almost like it cannot be substituted with normal bullying. <u>Ya</u> normal verbal bullying. <u>It's like there's certain advantages it gives.</u> And I think those are definitely underlying assumptions in or underlying premises for why one would use it. You know that <u>it's easier, more accessible</u> or whatever <u>ya</u>.</p>	<p><b>Cyberbullying</b></p>	<p>Understanding of cyberbullying</p>
		<p><b>Social Media</b></p>	<p>Maintains CB</p> <p>Positives of social media</p>
<b>ME:</b>	<p><u>Ya</u> what you understand by bullying?</p>		
<b>M:</b>	<p><u>Bullying so...</u> Basically, I think <u>basically inflecting discomfort to someone else.</u> <u>Ya</u> which is also very difficult because sometimes <u>you don't do it intentionally.</u></p>	<p><b>Bullying</b></p>	<p>Understanding of bullying</p>
	<p>Okay that's quite interesting. And what's your opinion about social media and cyber bullying?</p>		
	<p>I think social media is a <span style="background-color: black; color: black;">[REDACTED]</span> <u>Its, it make it very accessible to bully other people.</u></p>	<p><b>Social Media</b></p>	<p>Negatives of social media</p>
<b>ME:</b>	<p><u>Ya</u>,</p>		
<b>M:</b>	<p>And I think it made it much <u>more accessible</u> and I think I feel like it's a very much a <u>cop out</u> for a lot of people who want to bully because now suddenly <u>they can have a different name.</u> They can have their own profile picture or its, it's a cop out. I mean it's just like ...</p>	<p><b>Cyberbullying</b></p>	<p>Maintains cyberbullying</p>
		<p><b>Cyberbullying</b></p>	<p>Types of cyberbullying</p>
<b>M:</b>	<p><u>Anonymous</u> I just want to say just grow a pair you</p>		<p>Things that aid cyberbullying</p>

574

543 Copyright And that's how it showed I just send those messages and [every  
544 00:18:44]... and I thought everyone knew about it but then obviously **at that age they**  
545 **won't often go sit and think oh... this...**

Developmental age – adolescence. How they think at this stage of their lives

546

547 **ME:** You didn't tell this one.

548

549 Copyright ...this person doesn't actually have...

550

551 Copyright **BBM** → Types of SM used

552

553 Copyright Ja now we have to go back to **Mxit** and let her know that we're having a  
554 party...

555

556 Copyright You send a broadcast... **It did and I often felt so excluded and obviously**  
557 **my mom would try and be like no its okay like they didn't mean it and stuff but I'd**  
558 **always say like if they really cared about me enough anyways they would have let me**  
559 **know or they would have missed me at the party or whatever. But I think at that... I**  
560 **think...**

Type of support and from whom

Effects of cyberbullying, intention

561

562 Copyright They would have found another way to tell you.

563

564 Copyright Ja but what I didn't take into consideration also is how much everyone is  
565 actually just focussed on themselves so like if... you don't often get people at that age  
566 really looking out for other people everyone is just kind of trying to find their own little  
567 space in the world and find their own way.

Adolescence – trying to fit in, acceptance. Absorbed in their own bubble

568

569 **ME:** The way they fit in ja.

570

571 Copyright Ja and they just want to... **as long as they're invited to the party and then**  
572 **they're happy and relieved...**

## Addendum J:

### Extract from Research Journal

**18-04-2017**

I have had only one response from students thus far. I have therefore sent out the same email to the students again. If I receive no response again, I will have to consider another means of contacting the students. In staying ethical in my methods, I will consult with various textbooks such as Merriam, Patton, Marshall and Rossman and so forth.



Dear [redacted]

Please see attached document. Please note that I have continued interviews until the end of April.

Kind Regards,

**20-03-2017**

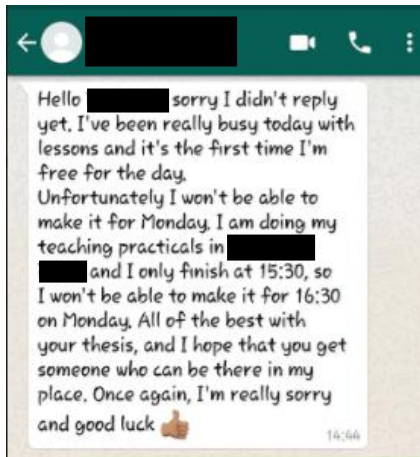
I have only received four responses thus far. Interestingly, only females have been volunteering to participate in the study. This makes me wonder if the male students are shying away because it is not 'manly' to speak about such a sensitive topic or if it is because, in their opinion, they have not experienced or witnessed cyberbullying. Is there a lack of understanding and ability to identify cyberbullying?

Today was my first interview. I was pleased with the interview throughout the process (despite being anxious). However, I realized that I did not probe as much as I would have like to. If necessary I will contact Copyri again to have a further discussion about the topic. I really appreciated that Copyri was so open and honest, revealing personal information, and relating her perceptions about cyberbullying and the impact it may have on identity development. I also came to realise that the room I had selected to conduct the interviews was a comfortable and amenable venue for an interview of this type to take place.

It has really been a frustrating process to obtain volunteers for my study. I have been emailing participants every week, I have resorted to whatsApping those who have provided me with their numbers as well.

**25-08-2017**

I have finally received some responses from student regarding the focus group session. Many students however, cannot attend the session as they are away on their teaching practical's in different parts of Cape Town and are not operating in the [REDACTED] area. I have emailed and WhatsApp'ed 10 participants and so far I have a potential of 5 participants attending the focus group session on Monday 28-08-2017.



**28-08-2017**

Only three participants attended the focus group session. This was disappointing. One of the participants sent me a WhatsApp message on the day indicating that she was ill and was put off for the week (see sick certificate). The other participant ended up not pitching. This was my first experience of administering a focus group. I felt anxious at the beginning but because I kept it as an informal discussion, I quickly overcame the anxiety. The participants also seemed to have overcome their anxiety quickly. It was noticeable during the session that one participant was dominating the conversation. I had to use my skills as a psychologist too ensure that all participants were heard. I had to do so subtly as not to offend the other participant. It was an informative discussion and interesting to see how their perceptions concurred with the data obtained in the individual semi-structured interviews.

I now need to transcribe the recording and begin the data analysis process of the focus group session.