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“People think it’s a harmless joke”: Young people’s understanding of the impact of technology, digital vulnerability, and cyber bullying in the United Kingdom

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### **Abstract**

Young people's technology use has increased exponentially over the last few years. To gain a deeper understanding of young peoples' experiences of digital technology and cyber bullying, 4 focus groups were conducted with 29 11- to 15-year-olds recruited from 2 schools. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed three themes: Impact of technology, vulnerability, and cyber bullying. Technology was seen as a facilitator and a mechanism for maintaining social interactions. However, participants reported experiencing a conflict between the need to be sociable and the desire to maintain privacy. Cyber bullying was regarded as the actions of an anonymous coward who sought to disrupt social networks and acts should be distinguished from banter.

*Key words:* cyber bullying; online vulnerability; risk;

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The current study examined 11- to 15-year-olds’ technology use, their perceptions of the risks and benefits of using technology, and their understanding of cyber bullying through qualitative methods. The introduction of the Internet and the increasing capabilities of digital technology have profoundly changed the human experience (Kwan & Skoric, 2013). A theoretical account for an individual’s propensity to engage with technology is provided by the technology acceptance model (Davis, 1989; Davis, Bagozzi, & Warshaw, 1989). The model combines perceptions of ease of use and usefulness, attitudes towards the technology, and behavioural intentions as predictors of actual use. More recently, the model has been revised to include perceptions of self-efficacy whilst using technology (Igarria & Iivari, 1995) suggesting that people are more likely to use and be more accepting of technology when they have high self-efficacy.

One of the primary purposes for most Internet use is one of communication and smart telephones are now the device most frequently used to access the Internet in the UK (Ofcom, 2015). Whilst a generation ago the norm was for children to interact with one another in the physical world, the majority of today’s young people recognise that ‘socialising’ also includes an online component in the form of emails, social networking sites, and text messages (Jackson & Cohen, 2012). Undoubtedly, cyber socialising can have positive benefits for young people including: maintaining connectivity with social contacts (Chayko, 2014), reducing loneliness (Ando & Sakamoto, 2008; Odacı & Kalkan, 2010), promoting social responsibility (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009), and facilitating knowledge acquisition (Thorpe et al., 2015) and knowledge transfer (Erickson & Johnson, 2011). However, whilst the use of digital technology has many benefits it is not without risks.

Recently Livingstone and Smith (2014) argued that the risks young people face when using technology co-occurs with risks encountered in the face-to-face world. These risks include cyber bullying, contact with strangers, sexual messaging, and pornography (Livingstone & Smith, 2014). However, Finkelhor (2014) countered Livingstone and Smith's claims by suggesting that: (a) the digital environment is less perilous than the face-to-face world, (b) experiences in the digital world are not unique but extensions of experiences in the face-to-face world, and (c) developing young people's life skills would ameliorate the effects of negative experiences more effectively than training on using technology safely. Moreover, Quelhas Brito (2011) suggests that 'panic' always accompanies new technology. Therefore, the extent to which young people are vulnerable whilst using digital technology remains unclear, especially with regards to their own perceptions of risk.

The risk of cyber bullying is one readily identified by parents, teachers, and practitioners as a growing concern (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013) and is underscored by the media coverage of young people committing suicide following experiencing cyber bullying (see Pendergrass & Wright, 2014). Despite receiving significant attention in the literature, there is little agreement with regard to the conceptualisation and definition of cyber bullying. Following a recent meta-analysis, cyber bullying has been defined as an: "(a) intentional aggressive behaviour that is (b) carried out repeatedly, (c) occurs between a perpetrator and victim who are unequal in power, and (d) occurs through electronic technologies" (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014, p. 37). Debate also exists regarding the nature of the acts that constitute cyber bullying. Willard (2007), for example, suggested that there were eight forms of cyber bullying: Flaming (angry and vulgar online exchanges); harassment (repeated sending of nasty and insulting messages to the victim); denigration (spreading of rumours and gossiping about a person online to damage his/her reputation or friendship); impersonation (to cause someone to get into trouble or to damage someone's

reputation by pretending to be that person and sending material on that person's behalf); outing (sharing secrets or humiliating information of another person on the Internet); trickery (to convince someone to share humiliating information, then making the information available online); exclusion (to intentionally exclude someone from an online group in order to cause hurt to the person); and cyber stalking (to repeatedly harass someone such that they feel threatened or afraid).

Despite some researchers arguing that there are some parallels between cyber bullying and face-to-face bullying (e.g., Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012), young people recognise cyber bullying as a distinct form of bullying (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). In addition to the nature of the cyber bullying acts, there is also reported variation in the media used to cyber bully with instant messenger, social networking sites, email, small text messages, websites, voting booths, chat rooms, and bash rooms can all be used to target others (Beale & Hall, 2007).

The literature suggests that cyber bullying has a number of unique characteristics. Through technology, the cyber bully is able to extend their bullying beyond the school grounds and 'follow' their target into their home (Slonje & Smith, 2008) meaning that the target is potentially accessible 24 hours a day (Anderson & Sturm, 2007) exacerbating the potential consequences of cyber bullying (Davies, Randall, Ambrose, & Orand, 2014). The longevity of the message is another defining feature of cyber bullying with the relative permanence of online material fostering a sense of power in individuals who engage in cyber bullying (Wong-Lo, & Bullock, 2011). The Internet's capacity for storing an unlimited amount of content often means a single act of bullying has the appearance of being repeated over an indefinite length of time. The nature of the attack can also differ from traditional face-to-face bullying. Slonje and Smith (2008), in their study of 12- to 20- year olds, found that the use of pictures and/or video clips were perceived as having greater impact on the target than

traditional name calling, insults, or threats, due to the content and the unknown nature of the audience. In addition, technology-mediated communication provides the perpetrator with the option of remaining anonymous. Anonymity can have a disinhibiting effect leading individuals who might not otherwise engage in traditional bullying behaviours to do so more comfortably online (Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2009). Finally, the lack of supervision in electronic media is a factor that cannot be ignored (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Schools are seen as agents of enforcement in traditional bullying (Holt & Keyes, 2004) but in cyber bullying, despite the high profile cases of recent years, there remains no clear individual or groups who serve to regulate deviant behaviours on the Internet. Together, these characteristics reinforce the proposition that the cyber world is potentially a liberating environment for many young people (Erdur-Barker, 2010).

The current study examined 11- to 15-year-olds' technology use and conceptualisation of cyber bullying. Qualitative methods were used in preference to other methods to gain a richer insight in to the young people's experiences (Gibson, 2012). In particular, focus groups were used to answer the following research questions: (1) which digital technology young people used, (2) how young people used digital technology, (3) what young people considered to be the risks and benefits of using technology, and (4) what young people understand by the term cyber bullying.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Four focus groups were conducted with 29 11- to 15-year-olds recruited from 2 schools in the Midlands in the UK. One school was a secondary school with pupils from school years 7 to 13 and the other school was a high school with pupils from school years 9 to 13. Table 1 describes the characteristics of participants in each focus group. Each of the focus groups

comprised participants who were randomly selected by school personnel and were from the same year group.

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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## **Procedure**

Each focus group was facilitated by the lead author and explored with participants the technology they used, their thoughts about technology, and their understanding of cyber bullying. In recognition of the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, for some young people, Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, and Wilsdon's (1995) recommendations were followed. Consequently, each focus group comprised young people of a very similar age. Also, during the introduction to the focus group the discussion was started with general warm-up questions (e.g., questions around which technology young people used) before more sensitive issues were explored (e.g., questions focusing on the risks associated with technology use). The focus groups took place during one lesson and lasted for approximately one hour. All focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Consent was initially given by the head teachers at the participating schools and then letters were sent to parents/guardians asking them to give consent for their son/daughter to participate. The participants also gave their verbal assent before the focus group.

## **Data analysis**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the transcripts from the focus groups to examine the young people's own experiences of using technology. IPA enables researchers to gain an understanding of the participants' lived experiences and how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). However, IPA also recognises that although it is possible to get close to the worlds' of others, no one outside of

the experience can ever do this completely. Therefore, the analysis relies partly on the researcher's own understanding of the data, and it is this interpretation that is needed to make sense of the participants' personal world.

To analyse the data, Smith and Eatough's (2007) four step IPA process was followed. First, to gain insight in to the participants' accounts, the transcripts were read repeatedly. Second, initial themes within the data were identified and then organised into clusters. Third, the initial themes were refined and grouped together according to commonalities. Finally, based on the clustering of the themes, superordinate themes were identified. As recommended by Smith and Eatough, during each stage of the process, the data was revisited to ensure that the conclusions that were drawn were appropriate and reflected the participants' accounts.

## **Results**

The analysis yielded three main superordinate themes: Impact of technology, vulnerability, and cyber bullying. These three superordinate themes individually reflected common similarities in the themes identified during the analysis process (Braun, & Clarke, 2013).

### **Impact of technology**

The participants talked about a range of impacts that technology has had on their lives. They were quick to highlight the many benefits that they believed were afforded to them by using technology. For example, technology was identified as a convenience and a mechanism to maintain social contact with friends or family members that lived in other countries. Focusing on maintaining friendship networks, participants talked about how social media and technology allowed them to find out what their friends had been doing, access information about social engagements, and share photographs with friends. Talk also centred around how using technology was expected by peers and the modern world more generally.



Consequently, technology use was identified as a popular thing to do and a form of entertainment suggesting that, for these participants, technology use was normative.

For some participants this normative use of technology was so strong that they talked about how technology has become so much a part of their everyday lives that they were dependent on it, whilst for others this dependence went a stage further with them not being able to imagine life without their technology:

*“I actually don't think people can live without technology now because we've adapted, like life's adapted to it but [...] everyone's switched to email and digital things.” (Charlotte, age 14, Focus group 1)*

Common with the concept of dependency on technology, some participants talked about how this dependence and potential over reliance on using technology may result in them becoming addicted to technology. Whilst some talk centred around the potentially addictive nature of technology, some participants were more philosophical about the potential addictive nature of technology, recognising that if they had not encountered technology previously then they would not be so reliant on it:

*“It's really addictive but like we wouldn't be addicted to it if we didn't have it in the first place but like now we've got it we don't want to get rid of it” (Chique, age 15, Focus group 2)*

This suggests that technology, for these participants, may have taken the place of other media to complete day-to-day tasks. For example, participants talked about how they were reliant on technology to complete school work because they perceived it as an easier way to access the information that they needed compared to using books. However, some of the participants recognised that technology could be a distracter as well as a facilitator when completing homework: Participants talked about how tasks could take longer using technology than if they had used an alternative means because they may become distracted by the other features of the technology rather than the task at hand.

Although technology was perceived to have many benefits, and some of the participants talked about how they were dependent on the technology they used, some participants also discussed in the unlikely event of technology no longer being available that they could live without it:

*“Yeah, we could live without it but we haven't been told that we have to live without it.*

*(Gertrude Papa, age 14)*

*In the long term if we have to, it's just the fact that it gets them over it, that if, say that one of us gets our phone taken off us, it's not the end of the world, it's like we can't text but think [...] you'd be able to live without it” (Amy, age 15, Focus group 1)*

Whilst participant talk readily identified the many perceived advantages of using technology, participants were also quick to highlight what they perceived to be risk factors associated with using technology. For some participants, they recognised that they may regret their actions or something that they have posted online. This could be short-term regret for a comment made on a social media site or a longer-term regret pertaining to when their actions during the teenage years may come back to haunt them in adulthood. For example, participants discussed how comments they had posted online during their teenage years could impact on their future careers:

*“So if they look back on your Facebook page and they can put a post on something that [...] was like, I don't know, not appropriate then they probably won't like be able to even get a job” (Charlotte, age 14, Focus group 1)*

### **Vulnerability**

A second theme that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups was the participants' perceptions of their vulnerability in the digital world. This feeling of vulnerability was typified by participants feeling like they had to relinquish control of their personal information and data to others in order to actively engage, and fully participate, in social

networking sites. However, this act of relinquishing personal information in order to comply with the requests of social networking sites meant that some of the participants felt that their privacy had been violated and they also discussed how they were expected to disclose personal information when they often did not want to:

*“Yeah, I keep getting told to update it and add things and I’m like to don’t want people to know things like where I went to school, where I went” (Messum, age 15, Focus group 2)*

This expectation to disclose personal information also caused some participants to reflect on, and discuss, that they felt vulnerable because people could find out what they regarded to be personal information which they wished not to share with others:

*“Like he was saying you leave yourself open for people to look at you an’ [...] researching what you about” (Simon, age 15, Focus group 4)*

Counter to this perception of losing control of their personal information and the expectation to share information with others through technology, some participants were also very vocal in their desire to regain some control and privacy whilst online:

*“...it’s like I don’t want the whole of Facebook to see what I have just bought” (Chique, age 15, Focus group 2)*

Talk also focused on how individuals could regain control over the information that was made available to other users of social media sites through changing privacy settings. However, whilst participants were aware of how to maintain their own privacy online, they also discussed how interacting with others through social media could, despite their own privacy settings, make them vulnerable. Specifically, participants discussed how interacting with other social network users who did not have such stringent privacy controls as they did often meant that their personal information could still become visible to other users, which was again perceived as being beyond their control. Linked in to this discussion was talk

about the potential mechanisms through which private comments were disclosed publically leading to what the participants regarded as a violation of privacy:

*“If, if you like, if you like someone’s photo then it comes up on a news beat that so and so likes someone else’s photo and it’s like well that’s private you don’t need to know that they like it or comment on it” (Bobbi, age 15, Focus group 2).*

The potential for other social media users to access individuals’ accounts also made some participants feel vulnerable. Participants talked about how people that they did not know could potentially search for them through social media and this knowledge was associated with feelings of fear:

*“Basically, like someone over in America or wherever could be going through my [.] profile, as we’re talking right now so [.] it’s kinda, it’s a little bit, little bit scary to be honest when you think about it” (Beeker, age 15, Focus group 2).*

Whilst for some participants the fact that unknown individuals could contact them through social media was a concern and made them feel vulnerable, other participants also talked about how they frequently accepted requests from unknown others to join their social networks. This suggests that there was a tension between maintaining privacy and the desire to engage with a wider audience beyond an individual’s immediate social circle. Some participants talked about how they would accept requests from unknown others to join their social network but at the same time recognised that this may be a potentially risky strategy. Despite the desire for privacy, and the recognition of the risk of allowing unknown others to join social networks, participants talked about how they felt safe interacting with their networks because they were only interacting with friends resulting in a false sense of security with regard to who they were interacting with:

*“It’s like at the end of the day when I go down my wall it’s just mostly like things from me and my friends so I think oh it’s just me and my friends but then you go through your friends*

*and there's like 100's of people here I don't really know that well and don't know what they're doing with all this information" (Messum, age 15, Focus group 2).*

Related to this false sense of security that using social media can create, talk also centred on how participants recognised that there is a common desire to use social media to broadcast information to others as a means of validating aspects of social relationships. Some participants talked about how they used social media to share pictures with others to maintain relationships whereas others talked about how social media fulfilled a validation role to confirm the status of their relationships:

*"Facebook is fine, most people now they don't actually think that you're in a relationship unless you put it on Facebook. (Messum, age 15)*

*Yeah, its not official until its Facebook official" (Chique, age 15, Focus group 2)*

Consequently, it seems that whilst participants wanted to control what information they shared with others through social media in order to regain some control over their personal data, a tension existed with the need to use technology to validate aspects of their sense of self. Further, this tension also reflected participants' talk about how they thought that they were less vulnerable than others who used technology:

*"I think the worst thing is people don't take precautions because they think that they are like your normal person it, it can't happen to them it can only happen to people who are someone, it can't, it can happen to anybody" (Alan, age 13, Focus group 3)*

This suggests that participants were aware of the potential risks with using technology and the potential dangers that they could encounter. However, they continued to use social media sites because they perceived the risk as low or something that would happen to other people, unless something negative did happen to them and then this would change how they used the technology:

*"I suppose we've got the thought in our, in our minds that the risk of cyber bullying or [...] anything that can go wrong is very low and probably won't happen to us err and when it does happen to us it really hits home and we start to become more cautious, more aware"(Bruce Wayne, age 14, Focus group 1)*

### **Cyber bullying**

The final theme that emerged related to participants' experiences of cyber bullying and cyber aggression. Participants discussed how cyber bullying was an extension of face-to-face bullying and involved carrying out acts of bullying using digital means. However, whilst there was overlap between how face-to-face bullying occurred and cyber bullying, participants were also aware that cyber bullying had some unique characteristics. For example, participants talked about cyber bullying having the potential to be constant because of the nature of technology used and their potentially unlimited access to it. Specifically, the participants described how cyber bullying could happen at any time of the day or night which reflected their constant engagement with, and access to, technology. Conversely, face-to-face bullying would typically only occur in the presence of peers and, as such, could have a clear cut off point.

Participants described a range of acts that they considered to constitute cyber bullying including targeting someone because of what they had said, nastiness, blaming someone for something, sharing personal or private information with others, disruption to social networks, and threats. Common to all of these examples of cyber bullying, was the notion that the target of the behaviour is likely to take offense to the action or that the action would be interpreted as hurtful. Regardless of the media used to cyber bully and the nature of the act, participants acknowledged the importance of recognising the effect on the target:

*"I would say it's more the content of the message and not the media, medium it which it was delivered 'cause [...] a message could have a lot of threats, insults [...] and all these kind*

*of things which can affect you. The medium doesn't really matter it's still cyber bullying whichever way you look at it" (Bruce Wayne, age 14, Focus group 1)*

Cyber bullying acts were also identified as escalating when friends or other unknown individuals joined in such that the act would be further perpetuated. However, the participants had a clear shared understanding of which behaviours constituted cyber bullying. Further, the participants also made the distinction between cyber bullying and banter, suggesting that whilst banter could easily become cyber bullying because of potential ambiguity of how the message could be perceived, banter between known individuals was regarded as harmless. Banter was also seen as something that occurred between friends and was considered to be a bit of fun:

*"The only, the only people who I would like [...] try and like have banter with and a bit of a joke with are people who like I'm like really close with so I'd know that they'd like understand the joke" (Messum, age 15, focus group 2)*

Whilst participants described many unique characteristics of cyber bullying, they also made parallels between cyber bullying and face-to-face bullying that took place in school:

*"But it goes back into like school life, the groups we hang out in [yeah] all of the popular people like, like each other's photos and stuff and if you're friends with like not so popular people in comparison then they'll do something and like the group of popular people will all just like take the mick on this like one unpopular person" (Chique, age 15, Focus group 2)*

The participants also considered the underlying motives for an individual to act as a cyber bully. One catalyst for engaging in cyber bullying was identified as the dissolution of a face-to-face friendship with cyber bullying used as a mechanism to retaliate. Talk suggested that individuals who had previously been friends may create false profiles to engage in cyber bullying behaviours. Participants also discussed how acts of cyber bullying were cowardly

and that one potential motivating factor for the acts was to enhance the bully's level of self-esteem:

*"People who are jealous of you, I don't know cowardly, they're not strong themselves, they just take it out on other people to make them feel better"* (Amy, age 13, Focus group 1)

The potential for anonymity was also identified by participants as a reason for why people may engage in cyber bullying behaviours. Anonymity could operate on many levels including: the target not being aware who the perpetrator was and the perpetrator could be hidden from the consequences of their actions because they were not in the same physical environment as the target. Further, because the perpetrator of the bullying behaviour may not be identifiable this was regarded as empowering the bully to continue their acts:

*"Cyber, cyber bullying it's like taking [.] aim at someone coz they won't give it back to you, so it's like going for the weak person just coz you won't get it back"* (Chique, age 15, Focus group 2)

Similarly, participants also talked about how engaging in cyber bullying acts using online media rather than using text messages affords those who engage in such behaviour the excuse that someone had hacked in to their account or used their computer whilst they were still logged in. Participants recognised that accountability for actions could be reduced by blaming others and also the anonymity of social media. By shifting the blame for the bullying behaviours this would allow the perpetrator to be further protected from the consequences of their actions.

In addition to highlighting the unique nature of cyber bullying and the possible underlying motives for engaging in the behaviour, some of the participants also talked about the potential consequences of experiencing cyber bullying. The participants described how the consequences of cyber bullying were potentially wide ranging including feeling upset and



feelings of isolation because of the number of people involved in the cyber bullying, to more extreme consequences of cyber bullying such as suicide:

*“... you hear about cyber bullying quite a lot on the news and like erm this person has died because of cyber bullying and it's quite sad because these people think it's a harmless joke when really it could be really hurting someone” (Charlie, age 12, Focus group 3)*

Talk also focused on what can be done with regards to cyber bullying. Some participants described how teachers, parents, and the police could be potential sources of support following cyber bullying. However, the participants felt that in some cases it may not be appropriate to disclose experiences of cyber bullying because they thought the behaviour was not serious enough to warrant outside intervention or they believed that the cyber bullying would be short lived:

*“...if like somebody robbed your bike you'd call the police but if someone cyber bullied you, you wouldn't like call, you wouldn't like tell your mum because you think it won't last that long...” (Bob, age 12, Focus group 3)*

For some participants there was a tension between a desire to disclose their experiences of cyber bullying to an appropriate adult and the fear of the consequences of this disclosure. The fear took many forms including making the situation worse, the potential unknown consequences of disclosing experiences of cyber bullying, and the possibility of exacerbating cyber bullying in to face-to-face bullying:

*“People get, yeh, that's, people get scared of telling of telling adults and things like that because they don't know what's, if they did tell an adult they don't know what's going to happen to them afterwards [...]which is wrong, it's [yeah]. People should be able to tell people confidentially but like what they are going through and things like that without being being in fear of, being punched or beaten up or whatever” (Beeker, age 15, Focus group 2)*

## **Discussion**

The IPA yielded three superordinate themes: Impact of technology, vulnerability, and cyber bullying.

### **Impact of technology**

For the young people who participated in the study technology use was regarded as a normative every day activity, with technology acting as a life facilitator. This finding is consistent with the growing literature that suggests as a society we are increasingly relying on technology to complete many day-to-day activities (Giedd, 2012), and the impact of technology on young people is even greater than it is on older generations. The participants highlighted how social media and technology are increasingly being used to maintain and develop social networks. Consequently, technology may be serving an important role in creating a shared environment for the fostering of relationships which previously was more tightly confined by geographical limitations. The role of proximity has been identified as an important antecedent in social relationships (Rivera, Soderstrom, & Uzzi, 2010). It seems that technology is now being used as a method of enhancing proximity and, as such, influencing young people's social relationships. However, for some of the participants this benefit of facilitating social interactions needed to be balanced with regard to their perceived over reliance on technology. Many of the young people discussed how the technology use had permeated their lives so much they could easily become addicted to it.

One of the potential explanations for why the young people felt that they may become over reliant on technology is that some social media sites were being used to validate aspects of the self and social relationships. Previous research has also reported that young people with larger audiences to broadcast information to through social network sites have higher levels of life satisfaction (Mango, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012). However, whilst technology was such a central part of the young people's lives it may be that the participants were

experiencing fear of missing out and, as such, engage with technology more frequently. Fear of missing out, a relatively new phenomena, is characterised by a desire to remain continually connected to social media because of a desire to be part of social relationships because of the belief that others may be having 'rewarding experiences' that an individual is not part of (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHann, & Gladwell, 2013). Further, because of the information made available on social networking sites individuals also become aware of the valued experiences that they are not part of and, as such may experience mood changes and a reduction of life satisfaction (Przybylski et al., 2013).

### **Vulnerability**

There was also evidence that the young people were aware of some of the potential risks of using technology and were particularly concerned by the permanence and longevity of the history on the Internet. Some of the participants were concerned that things that they had done during their teenage years would follow them into adulthood akin to some form of reputational bias which can influence social interactions (Thelwell, Page, Lush, Greenlees, & Manley, 2013). Moreover, these "digital footprints" may also impact on young people's future education and career prospects (O'Keeffe, Clarke-Pearson, & Council on Communication and Media, 2011).

Another risk that was identified by the young people was befriending unknown individuals through social network sites as part of the desire to achieve a high number of followers/friends. The desire to have a high number of followers/friends on social network sites influences young people's behaviours on these sites (Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012). For some of our participants, a tension was evident as they endorsed an optimistic bias (Cho, Lee, & Chung, 2010): These young people reported that they only accepted friend requests from people they know and then went on to describe how many of their friends/followers were unknown to them. The optimistic bias is predicated on an individual's belief that

compared to others they are at less risk of negative events (Zhao & Cai, 2008). Associated with an optimistic bias is the third person effect. The third person effect is the belief that others will be more influenced by media messages than the individual (Perloff, 1993). Further, when the optimistic bias and third person effect are applied to technology use, individuals report that they are more knowledgeable of technology than their peers (Salwen & Dupagne, 2001) and better able to protect themselves when using social media sites (Paradise & Sullivan, 2012). Aside from protecting an individual's self-esteem, these beliefs may also be explained by an age effect because when using technology people report that those who are younger than themselves are more likely to be negatively affected because of a lack of knowledge and wisdom which develops with age (Scharrer & Leone, 2008). Future research should further explore what characteristics of an individual such as their personality traits, confidence using technology, and knowledge of the functionality of technology contribute to risk.

### **Cyber bullying**

The final theme that emerged in the analysis focused on cyber bullying. As identified in the existing literature (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011), some of the participants regarded cyber bullying as an extension of face-to-face bullying. This could be because cyber bullying can be triggered by something that happened at school (Cassidy et al., 2009) or because both face-to-face bullying and cyber bullying involve social exclusion and spreading rumours (Wang et al., 2012). There was also an awareness of the potentially relentless nature of cyber bullying because of the continual access to technology. This is something that has been identified in previous research as a defining feature of cyber bullying (Anderson & Sturm, 2007). Of course, for a target of cyber bullying the fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013) and the desire to be constantly connected may serve to exacerbate the impact of the bullying.

Whilst the literature has debated whether behaviour needs to be repeated for it to be considered cyber bullying (Smith, 2004), for the participants of our study whether an act was defined as cyber bullying was dependent on the effect that it had on the target. If the recipient of the act was "affected", then regardless of the medium this was taken to be cyber bullying. Participants also identified upset, distress, feelings of isolation, and suicidal ideation as potential consequences of experiencing cyber bullying. This continuum of consequences is similar to those identified in previous research that explored the association between cyber bullying experiences and psychosocial adjustment (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009; Spears, Slee, Owens, & Johnson, 2009). Consequently, when researchers examine cyber bullying it would be prudent to ensure that the potential consequences of the act are made clear to participants if definitions of cyber bullying are given. Similarly, future research should make the intention of the act clear to participants as the current participants readily made the distinction between "banter" and cyber bullying. "Banter" was interpreted as something fun that happened between friends which is consistent with Dynel's (2008) proposition that banter is an "interactional bonding game" (p. 246) that is interpreted as playful by interaction partners.

The motives of an act were also seen as a defining feature of cyber bullying. Cyber bullying acts were attributed to enhancing the self-esteem of perpetrator and the power that the potential anonymity of technology. As highlighted in previous research, participants believed that both the anonymity and the potential to blame a hacked account protected the perpetrator from their actions. Further, this supports Patchin and Hinduja's (2006) argument that the potential to shift the blame and be anonymous means that an individual's behaviour is no longer constrained by the norms and rules of social interactions.

Fear of the consequences of reporting cyber bullying to adults was the greatest barrier to disclosing experiences. In particular, the young people were concerned that any intervention

by an adult would exacerbate the situation and make the cyber bullying worse. Whilst previous research has identified fear as an inhibitor of reporting cyber bullying, this has tended to be associated with a fear of the removal technology rather than an escalation of the bullying episodes or a recognition that adults' abilities to intervene are often limited (Cassidy et al., 2013; Jackson, Cassidy, & Brown, 2009). Therefore, when adults do intervene it is important that the consequences of reporting the cyber bullying are carefully managed such that an unintended consequence of making the situation worse is avoided.

### **Future research and limitations**

These unique characteristics of cyber bullying identified in the current study underscore the importance of developing research definitions of cyber bullying based on young people's experiences. Ensuring that the definition is aligned with young people's conceptualisation of cyber bullying may go some way to reduce the variability in the reported prevalence rates and, as such, allow researchers and practitioners to gain a more accurate representation of the scale of the issue. Therefore, future research in this area must utilise an appropriate working definition of cyber bullying that is appropriate to the research population.

Whilst the current study revealed insight in to young people's experiences of using technology and cyber bullying, the sample was limited to two schools. School ethos has been found to influence experiences of face-to-face bullying (Eliot, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2010; Espelage & Swearer, 2003) and whilst cyber bullying typically happens out of school extending this line of research with young people from a range of backgrounds would provide further insight in to their experiences. However, it should be noted that small sample sizes from a homogenous group are advised as best practice when using IPA to facilitate a deeper understanding of participants' experiences (Clarke, 2009). We also recognise that there is a potential that young people may not share their views during focus group discussions. However, Peterson-Sweeney (2005) argues that young people may feel less intimidated and

more relaxed when participating in a focus group compared to an individual interview and, as such, may be more likely to discuss topics with researchers. Further, in the current study, before the focus groups commenced the recommendations by Hoppe et al. (1995) were implemented to contextualise the topic.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, the findings reveal that young people regard technology use as normative and that they are aware of the risks of using technology but are overly optimistic with regard the likelihood of experiencing such risks. Clear definitions of cyber bullying were given and young people recognised the distinction between cyber bullying and “banter” and focused on the consequences of the behaviour on the target.

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Table 1

*Characteristics of participants according to focus group*

| Focus group | n | n male | n female | <i>M</i> age | <i>SD</i> age |
|-------------|---|--------|----------|--------------|---------------|
| 1           | 6 | 3      | 3        | 13.86        | .38           |
| 2           | 7 | 4      | 3        | 14.86        | .38           |
| 3           | 8 | 4      | 4        | 11.88        | .65           |
| 4           | 8 | 7      | 1        | 15.00        | 0             |