ABSTRACT

LUURS, GEOFFREY D. CHATting About Cyberbullying: An Activity Systems Analysis of Cyberbullying. (Under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Craig).

The purpose of the current study was to qualitatively examine the cyberbullying experiences of young adults. 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young adults who self-identified as cyberbullies, as targets of cyberbullying, and as bystanders to cyberbullying. In addition to identifying the qualitative characteristics of cyberbullying, the current study examined cyberbullying using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) to assess the co-constitutive relationship between individuals, their behaviors, and cultural systems of activity in which they are embedded. It is in activity that we can see behavior as socially grounded while still understanding the shaping influence that culture has on individuals. CHAT explicates the behavioral, technological, and social dimensions that mediate cyberbullying by assessing individuals and their actions alongside the cultural and environmental systems that motivate, shape, and contribute to cyberbullying's occurrences. In that sense, cyberbullying should be examined for its cultural systems (as done with CHAT) alongside behavioral models of learned behavior (as seen in more traditional social cognitive theories).

This study expands the current literature in three important ways. First, it establishes and explicates the interrelation between individuals and culture by challenging both the communibiological and social learning approaches to aggression research. The connectedness of individuals and their socio-material activities shows that both viewpoints have merits and that cultural behaviors, such as cyberbullying, are not fully embedded within one’s self nor in one social upbringing. Individual actors and their activities act upon one another. Second, it further articulates the definition of cyberbullying by suggesting the possibility of multiple forms or repetition and a new understanding of what intent means to cyberbullying researchers. Finally, it
suggests an updated, rhizomatic model of activity to account for the broad span of intertwined activities that act upon and shape individuals and which individuals act upon and shape. Cyberbullying remains a persistent social problem, only through continued analysis of individuals and the activities in which they are embedded can we refine our prevention programs and policies and enhance our prevention efforts. More work is needed.
DEDICATION

Lori, Ed, Nash, David, Jackie, Aria, Alex, and Makiah: I am blessed to be a part of your family. I cannot wait to see what happens in the future for us and our children. The world can do with a little bit of spit and vinegar.

Courtney, John, Kaeleigh, Emmaleigh, and Gage: Watching your family grow has been one of my greatest joys. Thinking of you kids makes every day better.

Mom and Dad: Thank you for never giving up. You gave me love even on the days when I deserved it the least. It was a long road, but your boy made it.

Jen: You are my best friend. Every dream I have is with you by my side.

Mason: All of this is for you. You are my life's work. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. First things first, big rocks. I hope that the world you inherit from me is just a little bit kinder to one another, a little bit more empathetic, and full of love for other people. Be good to others, surround yourself with people who build your character, and never give up.
BIOGRAPHY

Geoffrey Luurs (Ph.D. North Carolina State University, 2018) is an interpersonal communication scholar. His research interests include relational and family communication about difficult and taboo topics. He is also interested in the mental and physical health outcomes people face when communicating about difficult topics. His work can be found in *Hyperrhiz*, *The Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *Computer-Mediated Communication in Personal Relationships*, and the *Routledge Handbook of Communication and Bullying*. 

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I'd like to thank my participants. Stories of cyberbullying are written in the scars on our bodies and minds. Your willingness to tell your story helps an entire field of researchers to better serve our society for generations to come. Without you, this work would not exist.

Finally, I'd like to thank the NCSU community. It is my honor to serve our wonderful students. Thank you to the graduate students in CRDM, the English Department, and the Department of Communication with whom I shared offices and classes. Thank you to the faculty of those same departments making my time in Raleigh truly special. I am proud to be a member of the Wolfpack and will continue to Think and Do at every turn.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** .................................................................................................................. vii

**LIST OF FIGURES** ............................................................................................................... viii

**CHAPTER 1 – Introduction and Background** ...................................................................... 1

- Organization of the Dissertation .......................................................................................... 5

**CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review** ........................................................................................ 6

- Types of Negative Communication ...................................................................................... 6
  - Hurtful messages. .................................................................................................................. 6
  - Aggressive communication. ................................................................................................. 10
  - Bullying. ............................................................................................................................... 13
  - Cyberbullying. ....................................................................................................................... 16
  - Activity systems approach to negative communication research. .................................. 24

- Theoretical Framework - Cultural-Historical Activity Theory ............................................. 25
  - Tools. ................................................................................................................................. 30
  - Subjects. .............................................................................................................................. 31
  - Objects. ............................................................................................................................... 35
  - Rules, communities of practice, and the division of labor. .............................................. 36
  - Remaining gaps. .................................................................................................................. 38

- Research Questions .............................................................................................................. 39

**CHAPTER 3 - Methods** ..................................................................................................... 40

- Qualitative Inquiry ................................................................................................................. 40

- Recruitment Materials .......................................................................................................... 42

- Participant Characteristics ..................................................................................................... 42

- Procedures .............................................................................................................................. 43

- Data Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 45

**CHAPTER 4 - Results** ....................................................................................................... 48

- Research Question One – What are the Qualitative Characteristics of Cyberbullying? ...... 48
  - Idiosyncrasies: Hard lines and soft lines. ............................................................................... 49
  - Cyberbullying is a communication phenomenon. ............................................................ 51
  - Cyberbullying is repetitive ................................................................................................. 63

- Research Question Two ......................................................................................................... 65
  - Subjects at work: Actors, labor, and artifacts. ................................................................. 66
  - Culture at work: Communities of practice ...................................................................... 74
  - Tools: Using the affordances of technology. ..................................................................... 79
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 – Participant Demographics 126
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Expansive Learning Model</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Traditional CHAT Model</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Model of Anonymity Types</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1 – Introduction and Background

Audrie Pott, Amanda Todd, Kenneth Weishuhn, Jadin Bell, Rehteah Parsons, Emilie Olsen, Alyssa Morgan, Katelyn Davis—These are just some of the high-profile suicides by young people who have been said to have experienced bullying or cyberbullying in the past six years (Alter, 2015; Bazelon, 2013; Elmer, 2015; Grenoble, 2012; "Oregon Teen hangs himself," 2013; "Polk County authorities investigating abuse", 2017; Queer Voices, 2012; "Three 16-year-old boys are charged", 2013). Cyberbullying is the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others (Roberto & Eden, 2010; Roberto et al., 2014). Cyberbullying research expands upon the similar, but different phenomenon of face-to-face bullying. Olweus (2016) states a person has been bullied "when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself" (para. 1). To date, popular press outlets tend to focus on extreme cases of depression and suicide as the result of experiencing cyberbullying (e.g., Broderick, 2013; Dahler, 2013; Pappas, 2015; Sidorowicz, 2015; "The top six unforgettable cyberbullying cases", 2016). All too often, cyberbullying experiences can contribute to self-harm and suicidal ideation (Broderick, 2013); however, those cases should be recognized as outliers. Other negative physical and mental health outcomes are more common, such as struggling in school, being unable to complete one's work, being less able to form and maintain healthy relationships, and/or being unable to recover from one's experience with cyberbullying (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014). Preventing suicidal ideation rightly receives intense scholarly focus in the fields of psychology, sociology, and childhood education, but there is a need to recognize that cyberbullying is an inherently communicative behavior that plays out in the interpersonal relationships of targets,
aggressors, bystanders, and those that surround them. The National Communication Association has deployed its bullying task force to examine all forms of bullying and cyberbullying, across the lifespan, and in a variety of contexts including racial, economic, and gender-based bullying. The current study will contribute greatly to that initiative as it examines the communicative and relational features of cyberbullying messages and behaviors.

The rapid spread of the Internet and its accompanying information and communication technologies (ICTs or digital communication tools) has allowed motivated individuals to find ways to take harassment and bullying from a face-to-face context to a digital environment. Though face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying are not the same thing, 90% of those who report being cyberbullied also report being bullied offline (George & Odgers, 2015). Digital communication tools give those who harass even more access to targets than ever before. Face-to-face bullying typically happens at school or in one's neighborhood but stops in the confines of one's home. However, cyberbullying allows aggressors 24-hour access, across any distance, and aggressive messages can spread virally across a wide audience, all with the simple click of a button. Moreover, escaping cyberbullying is difficult. One might suggest opting out of digital spaces where cyberbullying occurs (i.e., “just click x”, “just sign off”), but it might not be possible to walk away from social spaces where all of one's friends remain (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010). Young people who experience cyberbullying cannot escape their situation unless they decide to completely cease electronic communication (Wong-lo & Bullock, 2011). Therefore, people targeted by cyberbullying behavior are faced with the difficult decision of dealing with the negative effects of cyberbullying or dealing with the negative effects of losing connection or contact with friends.
Bullying and cyberbullying (heretofore referred to as (cyber)bullying when discussing both forms) can be harmful to those who experience it, including those who perform the bullying behavior. Face-to-face bullying has been linked to negative consequences for the physical, mental, and social health of perpetrators and targets alike (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Those who experienced face-to-face bullying were more likely to be anxious and depressed (Gladstone, Parker, & Mahli, 2006). Young adults (i.e., aged 18-25) who experienced cyberbullying showed increased suicidal ideation, although it is not clear whether those who experience cyberbullying became depressed or if those who were depressed represented ideal targets for cyberbullying perpetration (Hinduja, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). People who were cyberbullied were more likely to display delinquent behaviors than those who were not (Junger-Tas & van Kesteren, 1999). Sinclair and colleagues too found negative health outcomes to be related to experiencing cyberbullying, but also found those involved in cyberbullying had an increased rate of drug use, drunk driving, and school delinquency (Sinclair et al., 2012). Targets of cyberbullying reported feeling vengeful and angry, and sometimes sought revenge on those who have slighted them (c.f. Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Victims were more likely to display increasingly violent behavior, which may be appropriated back into the cycle of cybervictims becoming cyberbullies and vice versa (Bullock, 2002). Due to the wide range of negative physical and mental health outcomes related to cyberbullying behaviors, further research is needed to better understand what motivates people toward aggression, negativity, and cyberbullying.

(Cyber)bullying is a persistent problem. Some scholars believe this is due to popular legitimizing myths that say that (cyber)bullying is inevitable, it is just teasing gone wrong, and victims just need to toughen up and deal with the harsh world in which they live (Walker,
Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Digital technologies open young people to new modes of vulnerability. Many young people are ill-prepared and lack effective communication skills required to cope with electronic bullying experiences (Li, 2005). Although there is a burgeoning body of literature on cyberbullying in psychology, sociology, and childhood education, more research about the communication processes that motivate and perpetuate cyberbullying is needed. Most research on cyberbullying has been atheoretical and instead focuses on generating data to show the prevalence and predictors of cyberbullying. Now that the data exists, it is necessary to push cyberbullying research forward using theoretical approaches to data generation and analysis.

In its current state, the extant data situates (cyber)bullying as either trait-based (something internal to those who cyberbully) or as something learned societally (through learned behaviors), both viewpoints have merit. The following study used cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT or activity theory; Engeström, 1987) to accommodate both possibilities. Activity theory is a descriptive framework that uses collective activities—a system of interrelated subjects, objects, tools, rules, communities of practice, and divisions of labor that contribute toward a desired outcome—as its molar unit of analysis (Engeström, 2011). It is in activity that we can see behavior as socially grounded while still understanding the shaping influence that culture has on individuals. CHAT explicates the behavioral, technological, and social dimensions that mediate cyberbullying by assessing individuals and their actions alongside the cultural and environmental systems that motivate, shape, and contribute to cyberbullying's occurrences, a move that is lacking within the extant literature. In that sense, cyberbullying should be examined for its cultural systems (as done with CHAT) alongside behavioral models of learned behavior (as seen in more traditional social cognitive theories).
Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation includes six chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two contains a review of relevant literature, the theoretical framework for the study, and the research questions. The literature review provides an overview of hurtful and aggressive communication, bullying, and cyberbullying. Although hurtful communication, aggressive communication, bullying, and cyberbullying are similar topics, parsing out the features of each allowed me to explain when cyberbullying is similar and why cyberbullying is different than other forms of negative communication. Existing gaps in cyberbullying research were identified for exploration. The theoretical framework for the study explained the tenets of cultural-historical activity theory as a descriptive framework for understanding the cultural components of cyberbullying. It showed how theories, such as CHAT, can address theoretical gaps that are present in extant cyberbullying research.

Chapter three discussed the methodological components of the project, including the design of the research, the target population for the project, the research questions, and how data was collected and analyzed. Chapter four detailed the findings of the study separated by emergent themes from the semi-structured interviews. Chapter five discussed the implications of this study’s findings and major takeaways from the results. Chapter six, the conclusion, looked to the future of cyberbullying research and how cyberbullying researchers can answer the challenge of defining, studying, and understanding how cyberbullying contributes to cultural activities. The dissertation ended by discussing its limitations and directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review

Types of Negative Communication

There are many types of negative communication, some of which can be considered (cyber)bullying, and others that cannot. The following chapter discusses the communicative and relational features of four types of negative communication phenomena: hurtful messages, aggressive communication, bullying, and cyberbullying. Each type of communication has unique features that separates them from each other, but all also share features that are useful for understanding cyberbullying more deeply. The shared features of various types of negative messages means cyberbullying researchers must pay attention to message recipients’ interpretation of the message when determining whether cyberbullying has occurred. Therefore, I argue cyberbullying and other forms of negative communication are intrinsically related to one another and each can be useful for understanding the others.

Hurtful messages.

Hurtful communication has received considerable attention from interpersonal communication scholars with a focus on close friendships, family relationships, and romantic partnerships (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; 2010; 2014a; 2014b; Vangelisti, 1994; Young, Bippus, & Dunbar, 2015; Zhang, 2009; Zhang & Stafford, 2008, 2009). Communication literature on hurtful messages has been primarily framed in the context of messages that were meant to be helpful, but hurt the recipient. A message is hurtful when it instills a feeling that results in emotional injury for the recipient (Vangelisti, 1994). In helpful but hurtful communication, the message is perceived negatively by the recipient regardless of the sender's intent. A hurtful message is one that is perceived as a negative action by the recipient and that causes harm.
Hurtful communication can happen in any relationship, even satisfying ones. Young, Bippus, and Dunbar (2015) found relational satisfaction to have no effect on whether conflict and, by extension, hurtful messaging arose in romantic relationships despite general wisdom suggesting that satisfied relational partners should hurt each other less than unsatisfied partners. Of course, each relational dyad will have unique considerations for message intentions, intensity of hurtfulness, and recipient response to hurtful messaging that must be situated contextually (i.e., face-to-face/online, the context of the relationship, the Kairos of the situation, etc.). Although honesty may be considered a valuable trait, honest but hurtful communication is not always needed, wanted, or beneficial in close relationships (Zhang, 2009; Zhang & Stafford, 2008, 2009). Hurtful messages may present face-threat to both the sender and receiver and could potentially damage the relationship (Zhang & Stafford, 2008). Unwanted helpful but hurtful communication research has centered primarily on close and romantic relationships, but the findings in the extant research should translate to other relational contexts. Helpful, but hurtful communication could damage any of one’s relationships if the message is perceived as overly hurtful.

Perception is paramount in hurtful messaging. The level of hurtfulness perceived by the recipient of the message carries more weight than the sender’s intent (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; 2010; 2014a; 2014b). A message encoded to be benign may be interpreted as hurtful, or worse, by the recipient, which can cause a distancing response. Recipients evaluate the hurtfulness of a messages in two contexts: the proximal context and the distal context (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Zhang, 2009; Zhang & Stafford, 2008, 2009). The proximal context includes a person's thoughts or feelings about an interaction (e.g., perceived hurtfulness, attributed motive). Proximal evaluations are more volatile than their distal counterparts and are often interaction-
specific. The distal context includes psychological variables, such as self-esteem, depression, or one’s beliefs about what a relationship "should" be like. Distal evaluations tend to be more stable over time and includes one’s attitudes toward a subject, one’s personality, and one’s chronic mood states. Although proximal/distal evaluations have primarily appeared in the hurtful communication literature, they remain useful when examining other types of (negative) communication.

One's predisposition toward volatile proximal evaluations or negative distal evaluations can affect the hurtfulness perceived in a message. Those whose outlook expects messages to be hurtful may not require repeated hurtful interactions before experiencing trauma. Experience contributes to the pain caused by the most recent message. To assess the proximal effects of hurtful communication, recipients measure the intensity of hurtfulness alongside the perceived intention of the message, relational quality with the sender, and the frequency of hurtful messages (McLaren & Solomon, 2008). Each proximal, interaction-specific interpretation is used when recipients decide whether they should distance themselves from hurtful communicators. If a recipient is predisposed to view messages as harmful, a distal evaluation, then they are also more likely to view their relationship with the message sender as damaged (McLaren & Solomon, 2014a). One's predisposition towards viewing messages as hurtful is also likely to remain relatively stable across interactions (and potentially across relationships).

Intent or motivation warrants special attention in negative communication studies. A hurtful message must be evaluated both by its content, but also by what it says about the relationship between sender and receiver. For example, Young and colleagues (Vangelisti & Young, 2000; Young, 2010; Young, Bippus, & Dunbar, 2015; Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chávez-Appel, & Rex, 2005) found relationship satisfaction to play a role in participants' responses to
hurtful messages in family relationships. Those with low levels of relationship satisfaction were most likely to respond aggressively (called distributive communication), and to avoid communication as a response to hurtful messages (Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chávez-Appel, & Rex, 2005). Despite this low relational satisfaction contributing to the distribution of hurtful messages, conflict occurs in all relationships, even satisfying ones (Young, Bippus, & Dunbar, 2015). The topic of the hurtful message affected one's willingness to use integrative communication in response to a hurtful message. The “packaging”, or way in which the message was delivered, matters (Young, 2010; Young, Bippus, & Dunbar, 2015). Responses that were viewed as coercive, like threatening to perform other undesirable behaviors, produced more aggressive communication than productive communication (Young, Kubicka, Tucker, Chávez-Appel, & Rex, 2005).

Hurtful messages also happen in non-romantic and non-close relationships. Despite the literature’s underlying assumption that helpful but hurtful communication occurs in a relationship where all parties wish to continue the relationship, some communicators may not choose to maintain contact following the hurtful message. Hurtful messages can still damage relationships that are not yet close or that were once close but are now strained. What matters is the effect on the recipient. Negative communication scholars can thus pull from the hurtful communication literature the important features of hurtful messages, the communicative responses they garner, and the relational impact hurtful messages have. Contextual clues matter. Perception sometimes meaning more than intent, the proximal and distal effects of communication, integration and distancing responses, and distributive communication are all useful concepts for the broader study of negative communication patterns and are sufficiently
robust to be useful across the gamut of relationship types. Indeed, hurtful communication contributes greatly to the interpersonal nature of negative communication.

**Aggressive communication.**

Another class of negative messaging is aggressive communication. Infante and Wigley (1986) define aggressive communication as "attacking one's self-concept instead of, or in addition to, one's positions on a topic of communication" (p. 8). Like hurtful messages, some communication that is meant to be helpful can be considered aggressive if it hurts the recipient's sense of self through hurt feelings, anger, embarrassment, and relational damage (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Aggressive messages are unlike other goals-oriented messages in that, while they can have a positive persuasive goal in mind (i.e., helpful but hurtful communication) an end-goal is not a necessary component. Some aggressive messages are meant to solely produce psychological pain for the recipient (Heisel, 2010). Aggressive communicators do not always require a reason for communicating negatively. Messages must be understood within a context and situated in the issue of intent, especially the intent to cause harm (Heisel, 2010).

The packaging of aggressive communication can affect its impact and evaluating aggressive messaging requires consideration for the context of the message. Aggressive communication comes in two forms: explicit and implicit aggression (Heisel, 2010). Explicitly aggressive communications include, but are not limited to, messages laden with profanity, threats, character attacks, and attacks on one's background, competence/ability, or appearance (Infante & Wigley, 1986). Explicit aggression is likely to be interpreted as meaning to cause psychological harm to its recipient (Heisel, 2010). Implicit aggression may still cause harm but includes more “innocuous” messages. For example, giving someone the "cold shoulder" by ignoring them is implicitly aggressive when contextual clues dictate the exclusion is being used
as a form of punishment for the recipient (Heisel, 2010). Aggression can occur in digital communication, as well. Communicative features, such as capitalization being used to indicate yelling, word choice, and emoticons can be used to convey anger or aggression (Heisel, 2010).

Aggressive communication can be damaging to one's interpersonal relationships. Take, for example, a situation where athletes face aggression from coaches and teammates that is meant to serve as motivation to perform better. Aggressive communication may be expected, even welcomed in this situation. Though it is expected as part of the culture, even this welcomed aggressive communication is linked with relational dissatisfaction and damage to athlete's interpersonal relationships on and off the field (Kassing & Infante, 1999). With context in mind, people who habitually participate in explicit and implicit aggressive messaging are considered generally verbally aggressive as their demeanor does not change significantly over time (Heisel, 2010). General aggressiveness is akin to the distal responses found in the helpful but hurtful communication literature (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988).

The source of aggressive communication patterns is something that has been debated across academic disciplines over the past 30 years. Scholars disagree on whether aggression is a trait inherited genetically or something learned socially. Trait theorists assume a biological component to communicator's aggressiveness (Beatty, 2005; Infante & Wigley, 1986). The communibiological approach assumes aggressiveness is a trait passed on genetically and "hardwired" into a person at birth (Beatty & Pence, 2010). Trait attribution models indicate that aggressiveness might not be a choice but, instead, something instilled in a person's predispositions. A predisposition towards negative communication is a longer-term distal effect, making it relatively stable over time. There is some biomedical support for a trait theory of aggression. Harmon-Jones and Siegelman (2001) found correlations between one’s prefrontal
cortex response to insults and aggressiveness. Anterior asymmetry in the prefrontal cortex can lead to the triggering of the "fight-or-flight" system's (FFS) responses in the brain, leading to aggressive response.

The communibiological approach of Beatty and colleagues (Beatty, McCroskey, & Valencic, 2001; Beatty & Pence, 2010) shows that biology plays a statistically significant and important role in aggressiveness, but it does not explain all of the variance in people's aggressive behaviors. Some scholars have taken a different approach and argued that aggressive communication is based on social-learning theories and argumentative skills deficiency models. Social learning theories argue behaviors are learned through a person's environment (Bandura, 1977). Behaviors are acquired through observing media, family communication patterns, and life experiences that suggest parameters for acceptable and unacceptable behavior (Schrodt, Witt, & Messersmith, 2008). Argumentative skills deficiency (ASD) models suggest verbal aggressiveness is due to a lack of ability to effectively argue for one's wants and needs (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989).

I took a more holistic approach by accepting the possibility of communibiological and social learning as constitutive of cyberbullying by founding the discussion of cyberbullying in the shared cultural activities of the participants in this study. Although there may be contributing biological factors that affect one's disposition towards negative, hurtful, or aggressive communication, I argue that those characteristics are mediated by environmental factors and social learning as well. Regardless of whether a person's aggressiveness comes from biological predisposition or is cultivated socially, it tends to find homeostasis over time (Wright & Craig, 2010). Furthermore, children who display greater levels of pro-social communication skills tend to respond with negative messages less frequently, which may be a result of pro-social
inclination buffering against asymmetrical prefrontal cortex activity, and thus aggression as the result of activating the fight-or-flight system when one endures insults (Blechman & Culhane, 1993; Dumas, Blechman, & Prinz, 1994; Wright & Craig, 2010).

Like hurtful messages, aggressive communication must be evaluated for intent and relational context but adds to the discussion the issue of goals-orientated communication (or lack thereof). Furthermore, it adds the possibility for both explicit and implicit negative communication. Both explicit and implicit messages contribute to the complicated social landscape that people must navigate every day. Whether the source of aggression is biological, cultural, or both, it appears as a social phenomenon through our communicative patterns.

Bullying.

Bullying is a social problem that affects people of all ages. The American Academy of Pediatrics (2009) called it a serious health concern for US adolescents. One issue that scholars of bullying face is the struggle of defining bullying and distinguishing it from other forms of negative communication. Olweus (2016) says a person is bullied when he or she "is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons" (para. 1). In addition, the person being bullied may have difficulty in defending himself or herself from the attack. Other common definitions of bullying feature power imbalances between bully and target and that the communication must be intentional (Barlett & Gentile, 2012; Randall 1997). Because traditional bullying happens in a face-to-face setting, differences in body weight and physical stature can contribute to bullying behaviors (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2010). Other scholars separate bullying from teasing based on whether the message recipient is a part of the in-group telling the joke (Eder, 1991). Although one might consider bullying to be a childish behavior that happens at school or in the neighborhood between adolescents, research has shown
that adult bullying also occurs in arenas such as the workplace (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2007; Cowan, 2013; LaVan & Martin, 2008). Bullying is a problem that occurs across the life-span.

Bullying can be communicated in many ways. It may include relational manipulation (e.g., inclusion, exclusion, gossip, rumors), physical acts (e.g., punching, kicking, yelling, pushing), and/or verbal taunting (e.g. threats, degrading comments, teasing) that inflict harm on others (Mills & Carwile, 2009). Physical and verbal bullying are more "visible" in the eyes of witnesses due to their overt and direct nature. It is clearly a case of physical bullying when a person is pushed to the ground, punched, kicked, or screamed at by their peers (Mills & Carwile, 2009). Additionally, those within earshot of verbal bullying can examine word choice to determine that threats, degrading comments, and unwanted teasing are causing harm to the message recipient (Mills & Carwile, 2009). There may even be gendered differences in bullying behaviors with males tending to rely on physical and verbal communication because of their direct nature and females relying on relational bullying because it is indirect (Abeele & de Cock, 2013; Mills & Carwile, 2009; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009). Relational bullying is less direct and may even be seen as normal behavior by those who witness it (Abeele & de Cock, 2013; Alvarez, 2012; Mills & Carwile, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009).

Bullying may be motivated by relational factors such as advancing or terminating relationships or increasing one's social position. Several studies have taken a systems approach to understanding how bullying affects interpersonal relationships (Adler & Adler, 1995; Cowen, 2013; Miller-Ott & Kelly 2013a, 2013b; Underwood, 2003). Adler and Adler (1995) found that bullying was intrinsically linked to cliquish behaviors in youth social hierarchies. They found
that certain social groups occupy the upper echelon of a given school class, and their popularity is agreed upon by both in-group and out-group members. Those who were more popular had more social cache to participate in bullying behaviors while also being able to avoid being bullied. Duck (2011) might call this endorsing a social order. In-group membership can be communicated through methods of inclusion and exclusion in group activities, including the bullying of other students (Adler & Adler, 1995; Miller-Ott & Kelly 2013a, 2013b). Navigating social cliques at school largely motivates the relational bullying researchers find when studying school-aged children. Research shows that those on the fringes between popular and less popular social groups may use bullying to communicate their desire to solidify their position with one group over the other (Adler & Adler, 1995). Being a "mean girl" or "tough boy" is simply one way by which people navigate their social environment (Infante, Riddle, Horvath, & Tumlin, 1992; Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2013b; Underwood, 2003). Although age may play a role in cliquish behaviors, these behaviors are seen across the lifespan and in a variety of social contexts (Adler & Adler, 1995; Cowen, 2013; Underwood, 2003). Bullying is a form of relational aggression, and, because relational aggression is damaging to one's interpersonal relationships, it can ultimately lead to relational termination (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2013a).

The extant literature makes it clear that bullying is a complex topic with studies rightfully focusing on instances of behavior and iterations of cruel messages. Bullying is both physical and relational and is constituted through negative communication patterns and the cultural systems in which they occur. A holistic approach toward aggressive/negative behaviors and messages is the most appropriate way to compensate for the contextual data that is breathed to life by examining cultural systems alongside behaviors and messages using a systems approach to studying bullying—individuals and their shared cultural activities are intimately interconnected. Although
bullying occurs in face-to-face contexts, it is entangled deeply with its digital counterpart, cyberbullying.

**Cyberbullying.**

Studies of online harassment and cyberbullying face a large definitional problem, as well (Langos, 2012). Scholars of cyberbullying have utilized a wide variety of definitions. Cyberbullying is similar to bullying in that it includes repetitive, intentional, psychological torment (Tokunaga, 2010). It can also be committed by an individual or group against other individuals deemed unable to easily defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008; Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014). Cyberbullying also has unique features that make it different than bullying and other forms of harassment. For example, the cyberbullying act is experienced through digital communication technologies (Roberto & Eden, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). Roberto and Eden (2010) describe cyberbullying as the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technology by an individual or group to threaten or harm others. Cyberbullying may also include other forms of online harassment, such as trolling or flaming behavior (Buckels, Trapnell, & Palhus, 2014; Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010).

Langos (2012) argued that a workable definition of cyberbullying is crucial to the field of research. As shown previously, negative communication can come in many forms. The dynamic nature of the communication technologies and behaviors involved with cyberbullying make it exceedingly difficult to set strict inclusion criteria for what constitutes cyberbullying and what counts as something else. The problem begins at the outset as cyberbullies and victims are named. Terms, such as "cyberbully" and "victim," may improperly confine studies of cyberbullying because not every target of online harassment that meets the inclusion criteria considers themselves to be a victim. These "victims" may perceive mean or cruel communication
as something different than cyberbullying based on their own experiential understanding of what constitutes cyberbullying. "Cyberbully," too, may not work when messages can be interpreted as online harassment even when the sender does not intend to harm its recipient. As noted in the helpful, but hurtful communication literature, there are certainly instances where injury was not meant by a "cyberbully," but the recipient still felt hurt by the message.

The terminology surrounding studies of online harassment must adapt to fit the evolving context of cyberbullying. Mean or cruel behaviors experienced via technology can have the same outward effect as face-to-face harassment, but not be considered cyberbullying by the targets of the online harassment. For that reason and because cyberbullying shares features with other forms of negative communication, the current study took a wide berth in defining cyberbullying by also including other forms of hurtful messages, aggression, or bullying if they 1) occurred through digital communication technologies, and 2) were perceived as cyberbullying by the message recipient. Other potential negative behaviors that may fall into this category included cyberstalking, denigration, and/or unwanted outings (Li, 2006). The broad approach speaks to how cyberbullying is experienced culturally and moves away from the compartmentalization of instances of negative behaviors. It is important that cyberbullying studies bridge the gap between scientifically sound academic research and the complex experiences of young people involved in the social systems in which cyberbullying occurs.

Most children and teens will experience or witness cyberbullying at some point in their lives (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2014). Age plays at least some role in the introduction of cyberbullying into the lives of young people as Kowalski and Limber (2007) found fewer 6th graders reported recent cyberbullying experiences than 7th and 8th graders in the same school. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2011) found
88% of social media-using teens have witnessed or experienced cyberbullying on social media sites. Of those, 12% reported it had happened frequently, 29% reported it happened sometimes, and 47% reported it happened once in a while. Cyberbullying is not simply a problem that fades as individuals age and mature; adults experience it too. Although adult cyberbullying occurs less often, Pew's (2011) data indicated that 69% of adults had experienced bullying or cyberbullying. Data collected three years later showed 73% of adults have witnessed online harassment and 40% of adults have experienced online harassment (Pew Research Center, 2014). The data clearly show cyberbullying to be a common experience for young people and older people alike.

Offline behavior is also linked to online behavior in some cases. Hinduja and Patchin (2007) noted schoolyard bullying has been linked with victims lashing out through other offensive or anti-social behaviors like vandalism, theft, school delinquency, drug use, fighting, and other forms of school violence. It is reasonable to extend anti-social offline behaviors to the digital environments that permeate contemporary youth culture. Li (2006) found when people are identified as bullies (face-to-face) in the physical world, they are also likely to be identified as a cyberbully. Those who are both "bully" and "victim" are also likely to experience both roles online (Accordin & Accordino, 2011). People who participate in cyberbullying are also more likely to be on the receiving end of cyberbullying when compared to people who have not ever cyberbullied (Li, 2006). People who experience online bullying are nine times as likely to become bullies than those who have never experienced cyberbullying (Walrave & Heirman, 2011). Bullying and cyberbullying operate as a vicious cycle in which perpetration and victimization leads to additional cyberbullying.

One final consideration for identifying typical characteristics of cyberbullying is the effect of anonymity on negative communication behaviors. A disinhibition model would suggest
that the inability to see a person's real-time reaction (as would be the case for cyberbullying) and
the hiding of one's identity can have a disinhibiting effect on negative communication behaviors
(Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012). Furthermore, the ability to be anonymous may cause
disinhibition for some communicators who do not believe they will face negative consequences
for their negative communicative behaviors. However, the anonymity provided by online spaces
may not be as important to cyberbullying perpetration as one might suspect. Kowalski and
Limber (2007) reported about half (48%) of people who experience cyberbullying could not
identify their attacker, while the remainder (52%) could. Their finding was supported by
Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja (2010) who found that only 20% of young women who
self-identified as the victim of cyberbullying reported never knowing the identity of their bully.
In other words, victims often know the identity of their attacker (Alvarez, 2012). Knowing and
not knowing the attacker(s)’s identity helps situate cyberbullying attacks contextually, as noted
above, but likely has little effect on a perpetrator's decision to attack others. Because social
media is an essential part of young people's lives, known-attackers can victimize others who are
in turn unable to leave those social media platforms for fear of being excluded from other social
activities (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Wong-lo & Bullock, 2012). Most cyberbullies and targets of
cyberbullying place great value on the Internet, increasing the risk for young people who are
trying to stake out their social identity in digital spaces (Walrave & Heirmann, 2011). Although
cyberbullying is experienced by individuals, it is deeply entrenched in the social systems where
those individuals live.

Cyberbullying is inherently a social activity that is articulated through communication in
our interpersonal relationships. Like face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying researchers can use a
systems approach to understand the relational aspects of cyberbullying (Brody & Vangelisti,
2016; Festl & Quandt, 2013; Heirman et al., 2015; Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014). As the aggression literature shows, one source of aggression is social behavior (Infante, Trebing, Shepard, & Seeds, 1984). Abeele and de Cock (2013) and Festl and Quandt (2013) independently supported the notion of social cache affecting cyberbullying perpetration when describing popular kids. Popularity occurs when a social group or clique operates out of the upper strata of a given social hierarchy system. In the above studies, school-aged children considered to be attractive, athletic, fashionable and to hold leadership qualities were considered popular. (Cyber)bullies are popular, but controversially so. When rated by peers, they score high in both being liked and being disliked. As one becomes more popular, they can tap into their social resources (e.g., cache, position, membership) to (cyber)bully others while maintaining or gaining additional social prominence (Festl & Quandt, 2013). One's network position offline (popular vs. unpopular) can affect whether one is harassed online. Festl and Quandt (2013) found victims of cyberbullying indicated a higher number of out-degree friendships (i.e., the number of people in class they identified as their friend) than in-degree friendships (i.e., the number of people in class that identified the victim as their friend). People who experience cyberbullying must assess their social network, but, unfortunately, social roles are not always clearly defined.

Cliquishness in adolescent classrooms can inform the likelihood of cyberbullying to occur within a social hierarchy. Unsurprisingly, the number and size of social cliques in individual classes was positively correlated with the amount of cybervictimization of the members of that classroom (Heirman et al., 2015). Cyberbullying is less common in classrooms where social power is equitably distributed and less common in strong/close friendships because these relationships are characterized by equitable distributions of power (Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014). Cyberbullying appears to occur more frequently in places where the
atmosphere allows aggression. This suggests a cultural component to cyberbullying's prevalence in communities of practice where social violence is allowed, if not encouraged. Ineffective policies or the outright lack of policies toward bullying and cyberbullying prevention programs can lead to school environments in which one learns to cyberbully as a way to navigate the social structures of their everyday lives (Li, 2006; Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). Although aggression research suggests argumentative skills deficiency as a potential cause for aggressive behavior, this is not the case for all cyberbullies. Indeed, some cyberbullies will be poor communicators, but others have shown high levels of communication skill (Arsenio & Lemerise, 2001; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Wong-lo & Bullock, 2011). Those with high communication skills can manipulate others as a way of maneuvering through the terrain of their social environment. Regardless of whether a cyberbully is a skilled communicator or not, aggressive communication has been shown to be an effective way to traverse upward toward the top of a social hierarchy (Veenstra, Lindenburg, Munniksma, & Dijkstra, 2010; Wegge, Vandebosch, & Eggermont, 2014).

In addition to peer status, cyberbullying may happen because a person is experiencing too much stress or strain. Hinduja and Patchin (2007) use general strain theory to suggest stressful life events may produce negative effects, such as anger, frustration, or sadness, that can lead to delinquent coping strategies. That is, strain may lead to aggression or cyberbullying and vice versa, and some people who experience cyberbullying will lack the communication skill to address their strain pro-socially. Additionally, individuals feel stress when they fail to achieve positively valued goals, when positively valued stimuli are removed, and when negatively valued stimuli are presented (Agnew, 1985). Some individuals who experience cyberbullying may lack the communication skills necessary to avoid strain, which may in turn affect their ability to
navigate social structures and which can lead into a vicious cycle. School climate, and by extension—social climate, may explain some cyberbullying behaviors and messages (Li, 2006; Wegge, Vandeboch, & Eggermont, 2014). One's environment can contribute to stress over one's peer status. Frustration with one's social position and/or the lack of social skills needed to achieve one's goals could lead to cyberbullying as a behavioral outcome.

Contemporary research on cyberbullying has largely focused on cross-sectional prevalence studies of youth populations, especially in middle school and high school settings (Abeele & de Cock, 2013; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Ackers, 2012; Alvarez, 2012; Arslan, Savaser, Hallet, & Balci, 2012; Erdur-Baker, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Li, 2006; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Walrave & Heirman, 2009). Some scholars have deviated from this pattern to conduct research during adulthood, but cyberbullying during emerging adulthood has received surprisingly little attention despite it being an important time in young people's social and mental development (Lindsay & Krysik, 2012). It is at this stage in life (around ages 18-25) that young people graduate high school, begin to leave home for work and college, and break away from the guardianship of their parents (Pew Research, 2016). Emerging adults are left in a difficult position where they are both attempting to grow up and be independent but also might face cyberbullying and other forms of negative communication, which generates a need for help from the guardian from which they are distancing themselves.

The literature on adolescents is informative but incomplete for those beginning adulthood because emerging adults face new challenges. Emerging adults are those who are leaving the rigidity of classrooms and cohort systems in high school that are rife with adult supervision and who enter into spaces with little to no supervision, where the rules may be less clear, if they exist at all. The college classroom is vastly different than those experienced during K-12 education
because it is decentralized (Vogl-Bauer, 2014) and the workplace is no safe haven (Cowan, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Vogl-Bauer, 2014). Young adults may now face cyberaggression in all facets of their lives, including school (Chapell et al., 2004; Lindsay & Krysik, 2012; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011), work (Cowen, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Vogl-Bauer, 2014) and even their interpersonal relationships (Alexy, Burgess, Baker, & Smoyak, 2005; Bennet, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Brody & Vangelisti, 2016; Spitzberg & Hoobler, 2002). Technology plays an important role in the harassment experienced by emerging adults. They are especially tech savvy and use social media near ubiquitously (95%) in the United States (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). Despite their technological prowess, 32% of young men and 22% of young women experience some form of online harassment. Young women disproportionately face more severe forms of harassment (e.g., stalking, sexual harassment) but still face the less severe forms of harassment at about the same rate as young men when harassed (Pew Research Center, 2014). Cyberbullying may even be more pronounced for older teens and emerging adults. Although emerging adults experience cyberbullying on social media platforms like their younger counterparts, there is evidence that more serious cyberaggression is happening to young adults, such as cyberstalking and obsessive communication (Lyndon, Bonds-Raacke, & Cratty, 2011; Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Emerging adults are receiving death threats online, which falls under the purview and definition of cyberbullying, but elicit a different response than unwanted teasing (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). Furthermore, the current body of research shows that cyber-teasing can lead to face-to-face bullying or violence for young adults (Madlock & Westerman, 2011). Finn (2004) reported college students who identified as a sexual minority (i.e., non-heterosexual) received more online harassment than heterosexual students.
This is a challenge for young adults as only a small percentage of college-aged students believed that reporting online harassment to an authority would be helpful (Finn, 2004). Some college-going young adults reported using relationally aggressive communication (of which cyberbullying can be included) as being part of their normal social vernacular (Miller-Ott & Kelly, 2013b). It was acceptable socially because "everyone does it," and it offers an outlet for young adults to vent their frustrations both online and offline. All of these concerns are pertinent to the oldest teens and emerging adults as they are likely to have unmitigated access to ICTs for the purposes of school, work, and social interaction alike, providing ample opportunity for harassers, stalkers, and cyberbullies to target emerging adults. As we can see, young adults share many of the same challenges with cyberbullying as their younger counterparts, but we also see the introduction of new personal, and more dangerous, attacks. For many young adults, hurtful messages, aggression, bullying, and cyberbullying are a fact of life because it is embedded into the cultural systems they live in every day. Cyberbullying is embedded in their activities.

**Activity systems approach to negative communication research.**

Young people are bombarded with messages about how to behave and react to cyberbullying as part of their socialization process (Olweus, 2016; PACER’s National Bullying Prevent Center, 2006; “Prevention at school”, 2017). Due to the large number of possible negative consequences, stamping out cyberbullying behavior is an ideal, but perhaps unrealistic, goal. Despite this limitation, substantive work in combating negative communication patterns can be made by illuminating activity systems in which cyberbullying occurs. The strength of networked/systems analyses is that they address the dire need to move beyond the totalizing effects of compartmentalizing cyberbullying behaviors and messages away from the social systems in which they occur. An episodic focus on instances of cyberbullying fails to recognize
the larger structures that lead to the incident's occurrence. Cyberbullying is not an isolated incident in a young adult’s life. The broad range of negative communicative behaviors that young adults experience need a holistic, systemic analysis to combat the frequent and unnecessary violence that so many young adults experience. The current study used cultural-historical activity theory to analyze cyberbullying and its relationship to systems of activity to explore those nuances. As it stands, cyberbullying research has used too narrow of a lens by focusing on either individuals and their behaviors or organizational systems (i.e., classrooms, the workplace). Doing so obfuscates the “big picture” because cultural systems act upon individuals as much as individuals act upon the system—the two are bound together because they are co-constitutive. By taking the "big picture" view, researchers can discover emergent themes, purposes, and outcomes related to behavior and, by proxy, cultural activities (Waycott, Jones, & Scanlon, 2005). Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT; Engeström, 1987) is apt to bridge the gaps between the behaviors, motivations, messages, technology, and culture that coincide with cyberbullying.

**Theoretical Framework - Cultural-Historical Activity Theory**

Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT or activity theory) traces its roots back to Russian psychologists in the mid-20th century. Its contemporary configuration was popularized by Engeström's (1987) model of expansive learning. In this dissertation, I focus specifically on the idea of expansion, which "consists of the acquisition and assimilation of existing material or symbolic values (commodities, business, power, influence, knowledge)" (see Figure 1; Engeström, 1987, p. 28). Because we are dealing in social and cultural values and norms, there are few concrete positions that are always "in the right" or "in the wrong." However, we can study activity systems to ask how those systems motivate specific modes of behavior and to what
end those behaviors serve. Activity is a broad concept that considers tools, subjects, objects, rules, communities of practice, and divisions of labor that combine and serve to solve a specific problem or achieve a specific goal. Leont'ev (1981) uses the example of hunting. While bush-beating to scare animals away in a specific direction (individual action) may not seem to serve the goal of hunting, it makes more sense if we understand that more hunters are waiting to ambush the animals (another individual action) at the other end of the path. If we look at these two things individually, we miss the macro-level activity system that the individual actions serve. In the end, everyone eats. Engeström and Sannino (2010) explain that "expansive learning is built on this theoretically consequential distinction between action and activity" (emphasis in original). Furthermore, they explain that, although actions are finite, activities have the ability to reproduce themselves by generating similar actions consistently over time. Activity theory provides a descriptive framework for activities, like the one above, as opposed to being used to develop and measure predictive hypotheses for behavior (Kaptelinin, 2012). Activity theory provides a framework for inquiry; it sets the blueprint for fitting the pieces of a puzzle back together.

Activity theory combines micro-level analysis of behavior and discourse with macro-level organizational and cultural analysis to provide a full view of the object of study. "Activity" broadly considers the purposive, developmental interactions between subjects and the world around them (Kaptelinin, 2016). Despite common wisdom suggesting that researchers seek out motivation in the actions of the subject, motivation is intrinsically wrapped-up in the objects that their behaviors leave behind (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Instead of focusing on tasks—the problem-solving behaviors of individual actors to accomplish a specific goal—activity also asks why a person might be motivated to respond to that problem in the first place and what solving
the problem means to that person anyways (Kaptelinin, 2016). Those answers lie in the communication artifacts and relational outcomes that result from that action. The dissertation used activity theory to examine social systems and the cultural activities of those systems. Mapping one's social activity using CHAT could provide a useful framework of sensitizing concepts for future definitional work, communication theory, and prevention programs (Charmaz, 2006). The possibility of shifting fluidly from micro-to-macro-level analysis and back allows CHAT analyses to make sense of cyberbullying and how cyberbullying serves those who do it.

Mapping the activity systems in which cyberbullying has come to occur can further explain how social activity systems and the interpersonal relationships within those systems come together, function, evolve, and break apart. A systems approach understands that actions of individuals within a system (e.g., a system of interpersonal relationships) are reflective of the social, cultural, and organizational values of that system (Engeström, 1987). One strength of activity theory is that cultural systems reach homeostasis over time—that is how they are able to reproduce consistently. We can look at the norms of a given activity and find that the individual behaviors (actions) of subjects within a given system tend to serve the needs of the activity. Despite this, there can be breakdowns in these homeostatic norms. There are times when the actions of an individual within the system do not match the cultural norms of the system (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 2009). For example, when a network of friends communicates in a generally uplifting manner, then labor is distributed so that each member of the network communicates in a pro-social way. However, a breakdown occurs when one or more members deviates from that norm and communicates negatively. Although negative communication may be indicative of a breakdown in a group where positive communication is the norm, it can be
normal in other groups where negative communication (i.e., teasing, hurtful communication, aggression, bullying, cyberbullying) is a normal way to communicate. Normative behaviors, whether pro-social or not pro-social, are protective of the status-quo or homeostatic nature of the system. When negative communicative behaviors like cyberbullying are present and common in a social system, that is an indication that this type of communication has seeped into the core values of the system. Furthermore, it indicates that the cultural value of negative communication is "protected" by the re-iteration of negative communication by members of the system (Engeström, 1987).

If normative behaviors are protective of the system, breakdowns in norms are transgressive to the system. Transgressive behaviors change the core social and cultural values of the system and can be used to confront socio-cultural norms that are deemed undesirable even if those norms have enculturated into the activity system (Engeström, 1987). Activity theory suggests that subjects internalize the cultural practices and problems of a system and in return externalize those problems and practices by generating new cultural concepts, which are then re-integrated back into the system. Whether behaviors are protective or transgressive, over time, they are normalized. The contexts in which negative communication patterns like cyberbullying occur are system-based (with interacting tools, subjects, objects, rules, divisions of labor, and community norms) with each node being mediated by and through digital communication technologies. While the Internet may be a tool used to cyberbully a person, it is also used to form communities, establish/maintain/overthrow socio-cultural norms, and it serves a repository for cultural artifacts of the system (called objects). Each relationship can be examined for its micro-level (individual action) or meso-level interaction (e.g., dyadic interactions like with subject-
tools or subjects-communities), but those interactions must be situated contextually under the macro-level concept of activity.

An activity theory approach to cyberbullying research is necessarily entangled in the deep-rooted issues of pinning down a definition for cyberbullying (Langos, 2012). Because cyberbullying research comes from a variety of fields with different standards, this project cautiously attempts to de-muddle cyberbullying by mapping the extant literature to a CHAT framework and attempting to bridge the gaps that remain. Also, in line with NCA's bullying task force, this project moved that the field of communication is uniquely suited for cyberbullying inquiry both for its strength in analyzing micro-level messages and interactions and the accompanying interpersonal relationships that develop the meso-level and macro-level social contexts in which cyberbullying occurs. The following is a review of how current cyberbullying research maps onto a CHAT framework while also identifying gaps that require additional focus. To do so, this dissertation mapped the major "nodes" of activity theory (see Figure 2) and showed how activity theorists and cyberbullying researchers can use them to understand cyberbullying as part of an activity system. It is important to remember that the nodes of the activity system should be understood as interrelated, always acting upon and being acted upon by each other within an activity system. Activity can never be summarized by only the subjects creating action, the distribution of labor within a community, or the tools that mediate behavior. Activity is all of those things working together to achieve a goal. The nodes co-constructive of each other because one’s identity as a cyberbully is mediated through the tools that enable cyberbullying and a tools usefulness for cyberbullying is bound in the motivation of subjects. The same is true for other nodes as well. At present, existing cyberbullying research tends to
unknowingly isolate the nodes of activity, missing the opportunity to link micro-level data with macro-level cultural activities.

**Tools.**

Activity systems are a part of a larger discourse on models of behavior. One of the mechanisms of activity theory argues that, to learn something new or acquire a new set of behaviors and behavioral expectations, one must first go through the process of externalizing a problem by questioning the practices and tools used by the system (Engeström, 2000; 2011). In activity theory, these external tools are computers, cells phones, and video cameras and other digital communication technologies that mediate action. They are the physical objects that are used toward achieving an end-goal. Many cyberbullying researchers have addressed the role of tools. Digital tools, such as email, cell phones, short-messaging-services (SMS), and websites have all been included as cyberbullying tools in previous research (Li, 2006). Roberto and Eden (2010) note that digital communication tools are an essential part of how cyberbullying is conceptualized. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are vital in the lives of young people (Erdur-Baker, 2010). Alvarez (2012) says cybertools help cyberbullies to gain and maintain control and power over others. Cell phones are the most common tool used by teens who cyberbully (Arslan, Savaser, Hallett, & Balci, 2012). Those with risky ICT usage report higher rates of perpetrating and receiving cyberbullying communication (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Li, 2006). Emerging adults believe digital technologies have a generally negative influence regarding cyberbullying because of factors, such as anonymity, proximity, and availability (Davis, Randall, Ambrose, & Orand, 2015).

The challenge of learning through externalization is understanding the relationship between behavior and motives. For example, tools are going to be effective for mediating change
when the people involved in the activity system are motivated to use them, especially if most members agree to its usefulness (Engeström, 2008; Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995). When a particular tool seems important, such as the Internet, people become interested in introducing that tool into the activity system. Any solution to problematic behavior that only addresses actions (i.e., individual, micro-level interactions) may be successful in the short term but is not durable because it does not address one's motivation to use the tool in a negative way (Engeström, 2011). Although the extant cyberbullying literature has identified what tools are used, it has been insufficient in asking why individuals are motivated by factors like anonymity, proximity, and availability to communicate negatively using digital tools. Cyberbullying research must concern itself with the issues of intent and technological inclination to assess how communication technologies serve individuals and the activities in which they are ensconced. Tools are one means by which subjects are able to externalize the problem and act on their internal motivations.

**Subjects.**

Subjects in an activity system can be identified as the individual actors. Cyberbullying researchers have broadly identified subjects under the categories of people who have cyberbullied, people who have been cyberbullied, people who have witnessed cyberbullying, and people who are viewed as protectors or guardians, such as parents or teachers (i.e., cyberbullies, cybervictims, cyberbystanders, and guardians, respectively; Arntfield, 2015). All four types of cyberbullying communicators are intrinsically engaged with each other in macro-level social activities like the development of friendship or work groups. Many types of communication may occur in those social systems; cyberbullying is but one form of communication that occurs in a complicated web of social interaction.
As with tools, the extant cyberbullying research has focused rigorously on the issue of subjects. Indeed, as much cyberbullying literature exists in the fields of education, psychology, sociology, and communication, there is an intense focus on the human aspects of cyberbullying communication. Some researchers believe there are internal factors that lead toward negative or aggressive communication. Hinduja and Patchin (2007) found that young people are constantly surveying their real and digital environments to safeguard themselves against problematic interpersonal experiences. Using general strain theory, they argue that, when youths see their environment as risky, they are more stressed and can find difficulty in making pro-social decisions. Aggressiveness might also be the result of a lack of communication skills on the part of communicators (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Infante & Wigley, 1986; see also Roberto & Eden 2010 for overview). Infante and Wigley (1986) believed aggression manifests when an individual cannot communicate effectively to achieve their wants and needs. Although activity theory resists the notion that aggressiveness is an internal quality of a person, as in trait theory, it does understand aggression to manifest societally through the behaviors and motivations of an individual (i.e., someone who might be classified as a cyberbully). Activity theory would add to the conversation that goal achievement may be cultivated and enculturated through social processes like the formation of friendship groups and interpersonal interactions between subjects in the system.

Although tools allow for the externalization of a problem, subjects can also internalize a problem through the process of what CHAT calls development (Engeström, 2011). Development suggests growth as the result of one's experiences with many different activity systems and the contradictions between them (Engeström, 2011). Each system changes the person we see today, and each person is the sum total of the processes through which they have gone. However,
development is a tricky process to understand because, in activity theory, the very notion of development is one of forward motion. Activity theory is less capable of dealing with undevelopment and does not have clear-cut answers for why a person might revert to old, undesirable behaviors. Activity theory assumes once a person has gone through an expansive learning cycle that the person is permanently changed as a result of their enculturation into those activity systems. The relationship between enculturation, behavior, and the intent to communicate aggressively is one that deserves attention. When developing models of behavior, you cannot "un-ring the bell" and you cannot "un-experience" cyberbullying once it has happened. Bandura's (1977, 1986, 2001) social cognitive theory (formerly known as "social learning theory") may help to address this issue as it situates behavioral learning within social and environmental contexts, arguing that both positive and negative behaviors can be learned and diffused throughout a culture. Modeling of behavior and behavioral outcome expectancies (i.e., rewards or punishments) helps an individual to understand socio-cultural expectations of behavior (Bandura, 1977). Furthermore, behavioral models can affect one's self-efficacy in regard to their ability and desire to perform a specific kind of behavior (i.e., positive communication, negative communication, aggressive or hurtful communication, cyberbullying) and the symbolic meanings of those behaviors within the socio-cultural system in which they are a part. Social cognition may be informative to studies utilizing activity theory because of its strength in bridging short-term goal-oriented actions, such as sending a cruel message, and longer-term activity systems-interactions like sending cruel messages in attempt to participate in the social system in the first place (Bandura, 1977). The key, Engeström (2011) argues, is that formative interventions must be embedded in meaningful life activities and address the issue of behavioral motivation to make long-lasting, durable change. That is, behavioral change in
activity systems must account for the symbolic meaning of specific behaviors within the cultural
system, as well as how behaviors and outcome expectancies are modeled.

For cyberbullying, learned behaviors can be assessed at both the meso and macro-levels.
At the meso-level, if negative communication is common, then cyberbullying can become a
normal part of that social system. Cyberbullying is more common in formative school
classrooms when members of a given class view cyberbullying more positively, suggesting that
cyberbullying entrenchedness is the result of negative communication patterns becoming the
cultural norm in that classroom (Festl, Scharkow, & Quandt, 2015). The system adapts and
develops to accommodate these new norms (Engeström, 1987). When cyberbullying behaviors
are modeled, and the outcome of those behaviors are generally more worth it than not,
individuals will learn to cyberbully in that cultural system. Presumably, the converse can also be
true. Activity theory would call this changing the community of practice, and this occurs when
subjects "[encounter] differences, entering onto territory in which we are unfamiliar, and . . .
unqualified" (“boundary crossing”; Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995). Introducing
something new can ultimately change the entire superstructure of the activity, resulting in lasting
change as the system re-seeks homeostasis. Establishing positive models and outcome
expectancies will work toward this goal of repairing negative-norm social systems and
establishing of positive-norm social systems.

Change is rooted in motivation. The source of that motivation can be explained by
polycontextuality, or the idea that people are a part of multiple, parallel activity systems, which
they are always affecting upon and affected by (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995).
As subjects learn from their experiences within a given activity system, that change necessarily
becomes a part of other activity systems for that subject. Altering cultural norms of one social
system to include positive-norm communication may solve the problem of cyberbullying entrenchedness in one classroom or one school, but, because individuals exist within many competing activity systems, it is not sufficient to assume development will occur unilaterally. The push and pull of the many activity systems in which a person is a part of demonstrates the dynamic process that influences positive and negative communication patterns. Still, Engeström and colleagues (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995) provide some evidence for micro-level and meso-level change. When subjects change, the systems they are in change around them. With enough micro-level and meso-level development, subjects can change the larger systems around them as the system learns to adapt to their (new) behavior, and they learn to adapt and be a part of that system.

**Objects.**

Objects in an activity system are the artifacts that are produced and left behind as subjects work within the system. In communication studies, objects can be broadly construed as the messages sent during intrapersonal, interpersonal, and group communication and the processes by which those messages are sent. Phone calls, text messages, viral videos, posts on one’s wall all produce artifacts that can be studied communicatively. This could include things like a text message, a viral video, or a phone call. Another of CHAT's strengths comes from its ability to place communication artifacts in the context of an activity system, which helps to address the issue of motivation. It is insufficient to prevent negative messages by simply identifying negative messages. Instead, analysis must be rooted in understanding what motivated its production and the outcomes it produced. It must be rooted in activity, its operations, and the objects the activity produces (Leont'ev, 1979). The macro-level approach to studying communication artifacts allows communication researchers to ask questions about both what was said by an individual
and what motivated the individual to communicate in that way. What activity does that communication serve? If we look at the object with blinders and focus solely on the action, that does not tell us anything about what the subject was trying to do when they produced the object or the problem that they were trying to solve, hyper-contextuality is needed.

**Rules, communities of practice, and the division of labor.**

The final three nodes of the activity theory model require additional research to explicate fully. Rules refer to the “explicit and implicit regulations, norms, conventions, and standards that constrain actions within the activity system” (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 6). Rules reflect the goals of an activity system and dictate acceptable standards for subject’s behaviors. Rules provide the generic constraints that help us to understand if an action is cyberbullying or some other phenomenon. It may be appropriate to call cyberbullying a rules violation. Olweus's (1993; 2016) definition of traditional face-to-face bullying established common strata for most of the cyberbullying research that has followed. Olweus (1993) argued that cyberbullying occurs when individuals or a group are exposed repeatedly and over time to negative or harmful actions by another person or persons and the victim of such negative action has difficulty defending themselves because of an imbalance of power. Cyberbullying has additional constitutive rules that differentiate it from bullying. Roberto and Eden (2010) call cyberbullying the deliberate and repeated misuse of communication technologies to harm others. Many cyberbullying researchers note that cyberbullying has an element of aggressiveness to its communication (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Olweus, 1993; Roberto & Eden, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Rules are not uniform in all activities (nor all studies of cyberbullying). Some researchers include specific behaviors, such as trolling and flaming (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014; Moor, Heuvelman, & Verleur, 2010) and excluded other behaviors, such as death threats (Patchin & Hinduja, 2015).
Implicit and explicit rules help us to understand what messages mean, and thus, whether cyberbullying has occurred. Each of the above definitions include the key elements of subjects/actors, behavior, and the delivery of the message (repeated; via digital tools). Those generic constraints illuminate cyberbullying and let us compare it against other (potentially) negative behaviors.

An activity systems approach must also take a step back to examine rules and how they constitute social norms within the communities of practice in the system. Cyberbullying messages can then be analyzed for themes to determine whether negative communication is protective or transgressive to the system (Engeström, 1987). Communication rules tell us if negative communication is normative or not. The acceptability of behaviors, such as teasing, jokes gone too far, online harassment, stalking, and threats tells us a lot about the communication norms of that activity and the communities within it. When young people learn to cyberbully, it is because they are seeing it modeled and manifested in the world around them (Bandura, 1977). Cyberbullying researchers need to consider whether that learned behavior is common to all subjects in the system, or a glitch in the matrix.

Learning behavioral norms are a part of complex interactions between a community of practice, the subjects and objects in that community, the rules that govern that community, and the ways in which labor is distributed in that community. Like other nodes in activity theory, communities of practice and the division of labor within that community are complex interrelations that move between micro-level behaviors, their interactions in the meso-level dyadic relationships of the subjects involved, and how those behaviors and relationships serve macro-level activities (Engeström, 1987). When considering the division of labor, the internalization and externalization processes articulate the issue of intent and its relationship to
negative communicative behaviors. Extant cyberbullying research assumes intent (i.e., motivation) within individuals, but that perspective ignores the influence that cultural activities have on behavior. CHAT argues that systems of cultural activity distribute labor in ways that are likely to reproduce the norms of the system. That division of labor often allows individuals to participate in shared cultural activities without individuals being fully aware of the system’s objects or it’s motives (Engeström, 1987). Applying this to cyberbullying complicates the existing definitions used by researchers because it calls into question the issue of intent when the extant research assumes motivations are bound within individuals. Instead, CHAT shows that the motivations of individuals and their activity systems are intertwined. Ultimately, motivation must be assessed at the macro-level because actions and objects are indicative of the activity systems from which they come (Engeström, 1987).

**Remaining gaps.**

The above literature suggests that cyberbullying research has grown tremendously in the past two decades, but there are gaps that remain. The evidence on tools and subjects is considerable but needs further expansion into how subjects internalize a problem through socio-cultural processes and how subjects externalize a problem by examining the tools and practices of the activity systems in which they are entangled. Unpacking those entanglements leads to a deep examination of what motivates cyberbullying and how that communication serves the communicator(s) and their activities. Although the extant research examines individual actions and objects (i.e., the communicative features of a message), more depth is needed at the meso-level (i.e., the dyadic and small group relationships between subjects) and macro level (i.e., the socio-cultural systems or activities) to show how individuals and their activities are interrelated. Quantitative research has shown that, in communities in which cyberbullying is viewed
favorably or viewed as normal, cyberbullying occurs more frequently. More qualitative research is needed because it can tell us why cyberbullying is viewed favorably or how labor is distributed among members of the system. Whether cyberbullying communication is distributed equally among members of the system or if it operates in a more hierarchical fashion is of consequential difference for our prevention efforts. Finally, because cyberbullying utilizes a litany of evolving digital technologies and techniques, it is pertinent that cyberbullying researchers continue to think about the rules and definitions we use in our studies. Qualitative research can provide depth to cyberbullying researcher’s understanding of those rules by allowing participants to define what constitutes cyberbullying and what counts as something different. Although the above gaps are considerable, this dissertation modestly suggests that qualitative research using activity theory can provide a more robust understanding of all facets of cyberbullying and its related negative behaviors.

**Research Questions**

Based on the gaps identified above, the following research questions emerged.

Research Question 1: What are the qualitative characteristics of cyberbullying?

Research Question 2: How does cultural-historical activity theory inform cyberbullying research?
CHAPTER 3 - Methods

The findings of this study were derived from 15 semi-structured interviews with young adults who had been cyberbullied, cyberbullied others, or witnessed cyberbullying. This chapter provides detailed information about the methods and procedures used to collect data, as well as participant demographic data. The following pages established justification for qualitative inquiry in cyberbullying research and the procedures used in this study, including the study's recruitment materials, participant characteristics, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Qualitative Inquiry

Cyberbullying is a topic that needs qualitative research. Cyberbullying researchers commonly use surveys to produce quantitative, self-reported data. Quantitative data is useful but lacks the contextual information needed to understand cyberbullying. Thus far, quantitative cyberbullying data is unable to address issues, such as what motivates cyberbullying and to what end cyberbullying serves for communicators. Qualitative methods are more capable of providing detailed retrospective data where participants are able to reflect upon their own experiences and the behavior of others during a cyberbullying episode (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991).

Keyton (2011) argued qualitative research is particularly useful for studying sensitive topics. Despite cyberbullying's frequency, people who have experienced cyberbullying are considered a hard-to-reach population because members of the class of "cyberbullying victims" might not wish to identify themselves as such, nor re-visit their painful past (Marpsat & Razafindratsima, 2010). There is a need for researcher empathy and rapport building when discussing potentially traumatic topics, such as one's experience with cyberbullying (Brown, Walter, & Teichroeb, 2009). Qualitative methods are especially suited to address the needs of hard-to-reach populations.
Qualitative inquiry was chosen for the current study because of its strength for gathering deep, contextual data about peoples' lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Its power comes from its ability to uncover participants' interpretations, feelings, and understandings of what are ultimately subjective experiences in a way that cannot be done with solely quantitative measures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative inquiry allows for more depth (i.e., "thick description"; Geertz, 1973). Using open-ended questions allows participants to expand upon ideas and clarify unclear questions (Appleton, 1995). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to study macro-level forces, such as social norms, in a way that cannot be done as accurately or vividly in quantitative research (Duck, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

Retrospective accounts of participants' experiences are commonly used in the field of communication and have a demonstrated history of providing rich data (Knapp, Stafford, & Daly, 1986; Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981). Asking participants to recall past experiences in a controlled, supportive environment was most appropriate given the impracticality of capturing cyberbullying in real time. Qualitative interviews are exceptionally useful for studying sensitive topics (Abrams, 2010; Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005). Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews allow participants to discuss potentially difficult topics in a safe way as interviewer and interviewee are placed as equals having a conversation, instead of the more formal question-and-answer style of quantitative surveys (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through interviews, the participant and researcher negotiate the meaning of the participant’s words and experiences (Lindlof, 1995).
Recruitment Materials

Recruitment for this study occurred between May and December of 2017. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, recruitment materials were carefully designed to be inclusive of the wide range of negative communication experiences of young adults. Because some participants may have experienced cyberbullying but do not think of themselves as a victim, the recruitment materials encouraged young adults, aged 18-25, who have experienced mean or cruel communication online to contact the researcher to participate in the study. Recruitment materials were posted in various Facebook groups including local community pages and nation-wide pages focused on bullying and cyberbullying, other online cyberbullying-focused forums, on campus bulletin boards, and advertised in several lower-level communication courses. The recruitment materials resulted in interest from 15 participants who completed the interview. Please see Appendix A for the recruitment flyer and Appendix B for the recruitment email. The recruitment email was used for in-class recruitment and recruitment on various digital platforms.

Participant Characteristics

This study was concerned with the cyberbullying experiences of young adults. Young adults were targeted because it is a unique and understudied developmental period (Arnett, 2000). Pew Research (2016) called young adults a hard to reach population. Young adulthood is considered a time of drastic change in the lives of young people. It is a demographically dense period marked by instability as young adults leave their childhood homes to live independently, begin school or a career, and begin their lives after secondary education (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994). As young adults leave their parents' guardianship, they are ensconced in a digital world where there is little consensus on who should monitor negative behavior. Young adults are also the most likely group to experience cyberbullying with 70% having been the
target of at least one form of harassment (Pew Research, 2014). The issue of cyberbullying and negative online communication is particularly salient in the lives of young adults. The final sample for this study included 15. The average age of the participants was 19.8 years (SD = 2.07, range = 18-24). Twelve participants identified as White, non-Hispanic, one identified as Black/African American, one as Latina, and one as mixed race/more than one race. Seven participants self-identified as male and eight participants self-identified as female. Two participants self-identified as primarily being the cyberbully, nine participants identified as primarily being the target of cyberbullying, and four participants identified primarily as bystanders to cyberbullying. Please see Table 1 for demographic data.

Procedures

Prior to any recruitment efforts, this study received Institutional Review Board approval. After receiving approval, the researcher recruited a purposive sample of emerging adults who identified as having received mean, cruel, aggressive, or hurtful messages online for one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Those who had cyberbullied others were also included in the study. Interviews were conducted between May and December of 2017. Eight interviews were conducted face-to-face in a large southeastern city. The remaining interviews were conducted virtually. All but two participants lived in or near the large southeastern city where the face-to-face interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited using a recruitment script posted in online social spaces (e.g., Facebook groups) frequented by young adults, cyberbullying-focused online forums, on campus, and via in-person requests in communication classrooms. After agreeing to a time and location for the interview, participants were provided an informed consent form (see Appendix C) via email for their records. Prior to starting the interview, participants were asked to sign the consent form for in-person interviews or provide verbal consent for digital
interviews. All participants completed a brief, anonymous demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D).

The interviews were audio recorded for transcription. All interview files were stored in a password protected folder on the researcher's computer. Interviews ranged from 28 to 70 minutes with the average interview lasting 49 minutes. To ensure accuracy, the research team listened to the audio multiple times before transcription. After the transcriptions were finished, the primary investigator reviewed all files and edited as needed (Braun & Clark, 2006; Romo, 2013). All interviews were transcribed verbatim, producing 183 pages of single-spaced text (12.2 pages per participant). All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity and the identity of other parties discussed during the interviews.

The interviews schedule was split into four major sections. The first section asked participants to recall details of their experience with cyberbullying. Questions probed topics such as what was said or written, how the participant responded to the cyberbullying message, and the participant's emotional response to the communication. The second section asked about the relational components of the cyberbullying, such as the participant's relationship to the other communicators, communication norms for the dyad or small group, and how the participant's relationship affected and was affected by the communication. Participants were asked about communicative norms of the digital platforms they frequent. Additionally, participants were asked whether others had witnessed the communication or if the communication had been shared with others. Lastly, this section asked whether the participant sought support from others and, if so, which relationships were important for support. The third section of interview questions asked the participant about the general impact the cyberbullying communication had on them and their communicative behaviors. The fourth and final section of the interview asked that
participants to reflect on cyberbullying more broadly. Participants were asked to define cyberbullying in their own terms, differentiate cyberbullying from other forms of negative communication, and to think about appropriate responses to cyberbullying. The interviews were ended by allowing the participant to add any details they felt were missed or to ask any questions of their own. Please see Appendix E for the full interview schedule.

Upon completion of the interview, participants received remuneration for their time. All participants were provided with additional resources relating to mental health should they feel upset by recalling their experience with cyberbullying (see Appendix F).

Data Analysis

To answer this studies research questions, I first collected and analyzed qualitative data for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Doing so allowed me to identify qualitative characteristics of cyberbullying behaviors and messages. Secondly, I determined how cultural-historical activity theory informs cyberbullying research and how activity analysis can contribute to cyberbullying prevention programs (Engeström, 1987). Coding began with the primary researcher listening to the interviews and creating research notes with initial impressions during the data collection process. Ongoing open coding was conducted throughout the study to better refine the interview schedule until theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006). Upon completion of the interviews, the research team (the primary researcher and three assistants) transcribed all interviews verbatim. All transcriptions were reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. The transcripts were then broken down into thought-level units of analysis for coding. The data were coded line-by-line into micro-level themes and descriptive preliminary categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Coding categories were developed inductively based on the features that were most salient in the participant’s response. A
codebook including 10 codes was developed following two rounds of open coding. Categories included: (1) Behaviors performed; (2) the source of conflict; (3) the participant’s perception of what motivated the cyberbullying event; (4) the participant’s response to the cyberbullying event; (5) a person’s role in the communication (both participants and the people they discussed); (6) whether the participant maintains a relationship with the other person(s); (7) reflective communication about the cyberbullying event; (8) whether the message spread to other parties; (9) the participant’s communication climate (generally positive, generally negative, or neither); and a final catch-all category for miscellaneous data. Following open coding, the primary researcher and members of the research team conducted axial coding to identify the analytical themes in the data that are discussed in the next chapter (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

A separate round of coding was conducted to determine CHAT’s salience for cyberbullying research. The primary researcher and one trained research assistant identified specific features of cultural-historical activity theory as they appeared in the data. In line with the major tenets of CHAT the codebook included the major nodes of an activity system (Tools, Subjects, Objects, Rules, Communities of Practice, and Divisions of Labor) as a sensitizing framework (Charmaz, 2006). Two additional categories were added to the codebook, one concerned with language that describes one’s motivation to use a particular tool and a second miscellaneous category for data that did not fit into CHAT. Again, after initial coding was completed, axial coding was conducted to develop the analytical themes highlighted in the next chapter.

Following data analysis, and comparing against prior research on cyberbullying, the researcher determined that the current study had both face and content validity. Though the findings of the
study challenge extant research, the experiences of the young adults in this study matched the
experiences of participants in other cyberbullying studies. Additionally, the primary researcher
contacted five participants after analyzing their data to perform member checks. During member
checks, participants were given a summary of the study’s findings to ensure the participant
agreed their experience was reflected accurately in the analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All five
participants agreed with the study’s findings. The results of the data analysis are detailed in the
next chapter.
CHAPTER 4 - Results

The goal of this study was to examine how young adults perceive, experience, and participate in activities where cyberbullying occurs. To accomplish this goal, I conducted a thematic analysis of 15 semi-structured interviews to identify salient phenomena experienced by people who perform, endure, and witness cyberbullying. Themes were considered significant if they were repeated multiple times in a single interview, recurrent throughout multiple interviews, and were forceful in their impact on the participant (Owen, 1984; Romo, 2013). The analytical themes developed during coding were used to answer two research questions related to qualitative features of cyberbullying and the appropriateness of cultural-historical activity theory as a framework for understanding cyberbullying. Consistent with the extant literature, the current study found that many of the experiences with cyberbullying expressed in younger samples (Abeele & de Cock, 2013; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Ackers, 2012; Alvarez, 2012; Arslan, Savaser, Hallet, & Balci, 2012; Erdur-Baker, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Li, 2006; Vandebosch & van Cleemput, 2009; Walrave & Heirman, 2009) and older samples (Cowen, 2013; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010; Vogl-Bauer, 2014) are shared with young adults.

Research Question One – What are the Qualitative Characteristics of Cyberbullying?

As has been noted in the cyberbullying literature, a clear definition of cyberbullying has been a necessary but evasive goal for researchers (Langos, 2012). Even the participants in the current study noted the difficulty in defining objective criteria for what they felt was a subjective phenomenon. Therefore, it was necessary to ask a series of questions to each participant in the current study to help them define cyberbullying in their own words and to compare this study’s qualitative data with the (mostly) quantitative data available. Participants’ personal experiences
with cyberbullying were used to discover the qualitative nuances of cyberbullying. The following themes were found:

**Idiosyncrasies: Hard lines and soft lines.**

The subjectivity of the cyberbullying experiences of this study’s participants highlights the idiosyncrasies of cyberbullying messages. As we attempt to produce “big tent” criteria for defining, observing, reporting, and deterring cyberbullying, we run the risk of missing out on new and emerging forms of cyberbullying. In this sample, objective evaluation standards remained elusive; target’s subjective evaluations of cyberbullying messages mattered. When evaluating a message, the participants in the current study used hard line and soft line criteria to assess what constitutes cyberbullying. Young adults evaluated the negative messages they receive and chose to respond to those messages based on their personal interpretations of the communication. Those responses were deeply individual, based on the participant’s perception of their own personality, their relationship to the sender, and other outside factors that buffer against or exacerbate injurious communication.

**Hard lines: Boundaries that should not be crossed.**

The term hard line was used to describe behaviors that were clearly unacceptable. Although participants felt they knew what those hard-line criteria were, they were only able to identify them after being prompted to reflect on stalking behaviors and death threats or rape threats sent via digital media. Without the prompt, participants spoke more generally about egregious violations using the terms harassment and threats, indicating a turn to the legal realm. Messages that were both overt and malicious were most likely to be considered hard line-crossing communication. Participants indicated increasing threats of offline, physical violence drew a behavior closer to the hard line, even if the threat could not be substantiated. David used
the term “cyberterrorism” to describe the potential of offline violence because it moved from causing emotional harm (his defining characteristic of cyberbullying) to physical harm. Certain types of unsavory language crossed the hard line and constituted cyberbullying, such as language that attacked one’s identity. The use of racial or sexualized language was viewed negatively by participants. For Sofia, watching her friend be called a litany of racist names was incredibly disturbing. Clint continues to be hurt deeply when people call him “a faggot.” For each of these hard line-crossing messages, it is clear that the language chosen is meant to instill fear and pain in the target by surpassing the limits of acceptable behavior. For soft line-crossing messages, those limits were more difficult to describe.

**Soft lines: Shifting boundaries.**

Soft lines required more nuance in their interpretation and showed high levels of individualized evaluation by participants. Soft line boundaries are unclear and shift based on the perceptions of the target. With soft line evaluations, participants must infer whether the message was malicious or accidental, a gray area where participants found it difficult to say whether a message was cyberbullying or not. Name-calling can be construed as mean or cruel, but certain names are more mean and cruel than others. In online video games, unskilled or new players are called “noobs” to separate them from the elite, veteran players (Virgil). In other settings, attacks on one’s competence were done by calling people “stupid” (Dawn). Gendered insults appeared, as well; women were called “bitches” and “sluts” by their cyberbullies in this study (Dawn; Krystal). Those words did not constitute cyberbullying in and of themselves, but contextual clues, such as tone, whether the message was repeated, and the relationship between sender and receiver affected whether a message was called friendly banter or cyberbullying. Crude and hateful messaging also occupied a murky space. Uncouth language is a type of negative
communication, but one that is sometimes accepted by those who hear it. Cussing is a common form of uncouth language that crossed boundaries at times, but did not always do so. Other factors, like whether the message was targeted or laden with additional meaning are what determined whether foul language was cyberbullying or not.

Although all of the above examples explicate the varying degrees of severity and contexts in which cyberbullying occurs, they all remain dependent on individual determinations of whether a message crossed the participant’s hard and soft lines. The data shows patterns where participants both adamantly agree and disagree with the same criteria when defining cyberbullying, meaning hard lines may not be as clear as professed. Although young adults “understand” what cyberbullying is and how it affects others, they do not agree on what cyberbullying is and how it affects others. Objective, big-tent criteria for defining and deterring cyberbullying may serve as a useful baseline, but must remain open to the many subjective, complicating factors that drive cyberbullying. Though the acceptability of messages is based on individual evaluations, those evaluations come from the constitutive features of cyberbullying behaviors and messages.

**Cyberbullying is a communication phenomenon.**

Cyberbullying is performed and experienced through communicative behaviors and written messages. Extant research has alluded to but failed to capture the communicative nature of cyberbullying. Instead, researchers have opted to describe cyberbullying’s communicative features but fail to call it a communication problem. Cyberbullying is decidedly a communication phenomenon. Participants in the current study showed cyberbullying is communication with three common strata: the message, the media through which the message
was sent, and how cyberbullying messages affect one’s proximal and distal evaluations of the communication.

**Message matters: Variations of intent and harm.**

In line with existing cyberbullying research, participants described the form of cyberbullying by the specific content of the message and an individual’s perceptions of the purpose behind the message. The literature suggests that negative messages can be interpreted as intentionally negative or unintentionally negative based on the recipient’s perception of the communication and their relationship to the message sender (McLaren & Solomon, 2008; 2010; 2014a; 2014b). Here, the perception of harm was also an important factor for many participants. Although each participant’s experience varied, recipients described three types of messages: overt-malicious, inferred-malicious, and inferred-accidental.

Overt-malicious cyberbullying messages were those that were clearly intended to hurt the recipient, and were aggressive in nature. Infante and Wigley (1986) describe aggressive messages as those that attack a person’s self-concept. Aggressive messages include communication laden with profanity, threats, character attacks, and attacks on one’s background, competence/ability, and appearance. The data in the current study supported Infante and Wigley (1986). Overt messages were explicit in both form and function. One participant, Allen used cussing and explicit language to disturb his target. Various derogatory names were used, such as calling someone an “arrogant punk” (Sierra) or “noob” (Ron). Gendered and sexualized insults were common for female participants. Dawn was called a “slut” and Krystal was called “an ugly, fat bitch” both for denying the romantic advances of their cyberbullies. The only male participant to describe a sexualized attack was Clint, who was called a “faggot” because he is a gay man. Sofia’s friend was also targeted for his ethnicity, with people calling him “spic,” “beaner,” and
“nigger” and telling him that they would send him into the slave trade. Many participants struggled to remember the exact content of the messages they sent and received but were able to reflect on the message’s intention and impact. In cases where exact content was forgotten, participants described the communication as overly and inappropriately aggressive, with cases like personal attacks on one’s competence (Abby), cyberstalking (Allen; Amir; Dawn), and jokes gone too far (Ron).

Inferred messages are the implied meanings participants interpret from the messages they receive. The participants described inferred-malicious messages as those where harm was implied by the cyberbullying and understood by the target. Again, research on aggression shows messages can cause harm even when the aggression is implied or innocuous (Heisel, 2010). Patti experienced inferred-malicious cyberbullying when she was socially excluded by her classmates. She said of her exclusion, “I didn’t fit in anywhere, so I was seen as an easy target.” Social exclusion was the most common form of implied cyberbullying and often left participants wondering what they had done to cause their banishment. Exclusion included behaviors, such as private group messages that spoke poorly of the participant behind their back, planned ignoring, and “othering” behaviors that made the participant feel as part of an out-group. In this study’s sample, inferred-malicious messages were exclusively in the domain of messages that were meant to attack one’s self-worth. Virgil described his experience as his “first exposure to people just not giving a shit about you or what you stand for. . . [the message was] you’re trash, your work is trash. I don’t value it, so I’m going to get rid of it.” For Virgil, inferred-malicious actions were more hurtful than the overt-malicious messages that accompanied them. Inferred-malicious cyberbullying messages were meant to make the recipient feel less valuable as a human being and to convey threats through the means of digital tools where intention or maliciousness could
be obfuscated or hidden entirely. Ultimately, malicious messages whether overt or inferred were considered cyberbullying by participants because they were aggressive in ways that were both unwanted and unwarranted.

Participants also discussed a third type of cyberbullying message, inferred-accidental. Inferred-accidental cyberbullying occurred when the target of the message perceived injury but did not believe there was malicious intent behind the message. Messages perceived as accidentally hurtful were similar to those found in the helpful but hurtful communication literature. Cathy was the target of inferred-accidental cyberbullying when her family and close friends began talking about her extreme weight loss behind her back. She currently lives away from family but described the messages she received on social media: “Some of them were in a voice that was kind of positive, but kind of not. I couldn’t really tell if they were positive or not or if someone was saying something that was passively negative.” A comment like, “Oh, you’ve lost a lot of weight,” seemed to be a compliment on the surface to Cathy, but when she later found out her parents and brothers had been discussing her weight behind her back in a group text, she came to find the weight comments hurtful. She asked, “Why didn’t they come to me directly?” In her case, Cathy knew her family members did not intend to cause emotional injury but, regardless, the comments caused similar or worse pain than the overt-malicious messages she had received from others about the same issue. As Vangelisti (1994) noted, hurtful messages cause emotional injury for the recipient, even if the sender did not mean harm. Inferred-accidental cyberbullying is a large departure from how cyberbullying researchers operationalize cyberbullying phenomena. Intent to harm may not be a necessary condition in the mind of some cyberbullying targets. Indeed, we can identify messages that are clearly cyberbullying, but more attention is needed on communication messages that are nuanced or ambiguous, as well as how
relational ties might influence one’s perceptions of intent and harm. Intent may not be the best word to describe cyberbullying; instead, I suggest we call it targeted and willful.

One of the major struggles participants in this study faced when defining cyberbullying was to separate cyberbullying messages from other types of negative communication. Participants discussed levels of negativity, targeted-ness of comments, and “lines” that should not be crossed as differentiating factors; however, the boundaries of acceptable/unacceptable communication remained ambiguous. Intent is commonly used when defining cyberbullying but requires further explanation. The word “intent” suggests purpose, resolve, and determination to perform an action (“Intent”, 2017), but previous research has spent little effort explaining what they mean by intent, instead treating it as an understood concept. Here I explicate how cyberbullying is targeted and willful.

Variations of intent and harm: The targeted-ness of cyberbullying.

The participants in the current study showed that the cyberbullying messages they received were both targeted toward a specific person and were willful in how they harmed the target. For a message to be targeted, the communication required precision to ensure it was received by the correct person. Negative talk that was blurted out might be purposefully hurtful, but participants felt for a message to be considered cyberbullying that it must include the element of targeted communication (Abby). Ron described the shift from generally negative comments to directed cyberbullying that happened over voice chat during a game of League of Legends, “Once the mistakes started happening, the talk went from the game to how this guy messed up and like it was all his fault. It got more personal. It got more personal.” The fact that the messages were so personal is what some participants felt gave cyberbullying messages their impact (Sofia; Virgil). To Virgil, the vandalism of his online creative works sent a personal
message that he and his work were worthless. The targeted-ness of the communication contributed to cyberbullying’s other defining feature: Willful malice.

**Variations of intent and harm: Maliciousness and willful ignorance.**

Borrowing from the legal realm, a willful act is one that is “intentional, conscious, and directed toward achieving a purpose” (Willful, 2016). Additionally, willful acts include malicious behaviors, intentional disregard, and indifference. The term deliberate can be used to denote a level of premeditation to the willful act. The most common theme across the participant’s experiences was the maliciousness of the communication. Allen described what he said to an ex-friend:

> So essentially, I would say things like “fuck you.” So basically, I’d swear at her a lot. I would tell her I was fucking with her for the hell of it. I would try and send mean and very demeaning messages to her. Just generally, my goal was to piss her off as much as humanly possible, so I said things to that end. Because in the really warped view that I had, I had to piss her off to get her to talk to me. . . .I guess cyberbullying just invites a certain maliciousness to it. I’m not sure how else to define it.

Dawn described her cyberbullying experience as an attempt to make her feel less valuable as a human being. While intent is a key component of a willful act, a message being intentional does not grasp the full extent of the harm caused by willfully malicious messages. Maliciousness was the deciding factor in how some participants defined cyberbullying (Allen; David; Simon; Sofia). For the participants in this study, when they described a message as malicious, they meant specifically that a message intended to cause harm, as seen in overt-malicious and inferred-malicious messaging. However, maliciousness can also come from willful neglect of how the message hurts others. Both forms of maliciousness need consideration. The term “malicious” is
not common in researcher definitions of cyberbullying, but it does appear in the extant literature as a descriptor of cyberbullying behavior and aggressive messaging (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Hinduja & Patchin, 2011; Jang, Kim, & Jung, 2015; Langos, 2012). Perhaps defining cyberbullying as targeted and willful would be more accurate than describing it as intentional.

*Media matters? For researchers, yes. For participants, maybe.*

By definition, cyberbullying occurs by means of digital communication tools. Previous research has studied cyberbullying that occurred via social media, telephone, email, and chat rooms (e.g., Abeele & de Cock, 2013; Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Ackers, 2012; Arslan, 2012; Barlett & Gentile, 2012; Li, 2006; Lindsay & Krysik, 2012; Tanrikulu, Kinay, & Aricak, 2013; Walker & Koehn, 2011). The majority of participants who cyberbullied or were cyberbullied were on social media platforms and messaging applications. Facebook was most common (Allen; Abby; Cathy; Clint; Dan; Dawn; Sofia; Patti; Sierra; Simon), but Instagram (Amir), GroupMe (Amir), Kik (Amir; Krystal; Virgil), and Tinder (Krystal) were used in at least one case. Other electronic media were used, as well. Email (Patti), voicemail (Agnes; Clint; Patti), and voice calls (Agnes; Cathy; Dan; Ron) all were used to cyberbully participants. Video games were another arena for bullying for Amir, Ron, and Virgil, all of whom were bullied on different games, but who expressed that online gaming environments are generally toxic. The lone departure from previous cyberbullying research was a single participant who was bullied on her Youtube channel.

Digital media are essential in the lives of young adults, but in some ways were less important to this study’s participants when they thought about cyberbullying. When questioned about why a particular medium platform was chosen for cyberbullying, the participants did not have a clear answer. Although participants could describe the affordances of technology, a point
that will be discussed in further detail in the subsequent research question, no participant indicated that a cyberbullying event had to have happened on the platform that it did. In that sense, the medium did not matter. The platform used for cyberbullying was more of a result of happenstance than the features of the media because cyberbullying happens everywhere. Virgil said, “It could be any online platform, whether text or social media.” Sofia added “I think you see it on all platforms. I don’t think anyone is free of that kind of hate.” Participants pointed to the ease of use and familiarity with platforms as contributing factors to their cyberbullying experience, but nothing inherent to a given platform stood out. It appears that cyberbullying simply happens in the spaces the target tends to occupy; those spaces just so happen to be popular digital hangouts, such as Facebook.

Platforms did matter to participants in some ways. Participants expressed consternation about the digital/physical divide in relation to their cyberbullying experiences. Digital media can extend the amount of access bullies have to their targets. For many young people, their online bullying experiences can lead to offline consequences, including face-to-face bullying. The converse is also true. Ron, a bystander to cyberbullying, witnessed his classmates pull photos from other students’ Facebook pages as an act of digital vandalism. The cyberbullies used those photos to label the targets as out-group members, or “others,” which damaged the target’s online reputation and their reputation at school. The cyber/bullying became so extensive that his school was shut down for an entire day because of an anonymous, false report that a student was going to “shoot up the school” (Ron). Ron later found out the report had been filed as a form of social exclusion, where an affluent local student wanted to make it known that he did not approve of the school bussing in students from other, less affluent neighborhoods. Ron said of the attitude of the locals, “We know who lives here and we know who doesn’t live here. And if you don’t live
here, you’re different than us.” Digital tools were one route by which the cyberbullies at Ron’s school made their stance known. Similarly, many participants were concerned with how cyberbullying can move beyond the digital realm and potentially lead to physical harm (Agnes; Amir; Clint; Dawn; Sofia). To them, cyberbullying did not happen in a vacuum.

Although the participants in this study did not place a lot of emphasis on how digital media contributed to their cyberbullying event, cyberbullying researchers should remain concerned with how digital tools facilitate communication and, by extension, cyberbullying. Digital tools giving cyberbullies access to their target’s social circle can be problematic because those cyberbullies can make those spaces so uncomfortable that their targets leave. For example, all of the participants who were cyberbullied while playing video games chose to stop online competitive play or moved on to a different game. It was easier for them to remove themselves from the gaming environments where their friends played and move on to other games than to continue to be harassed online. The same was not true on other platforms. In terms of conceptualizing and operationalizing cyberbullying, perhaps specific media platforms have been given too much credit. The affordances of technology contribute to cyberbullying perpetuation, surely, but that is not as salient in the minds of young adults who experience cyberbullying. In this study, participants put little thought into the affordances and challenges of the media but were more concerned with how the cyberbullying may impede valued social functions within these platforms. Media matter, but only insofar in how they facilitate communication in the social lives of young adults, even if that means also facilitating communication between cyberbullies and their targets.
Mind matters: Proximal and distal evaluations affecting relationships.

Cyberbullying can happen in any relationship, including close relationships. Through the course of the current study, it became apparent that many participants struggled with cyberbullying experiences affecting their relationship to their cyberbullies, and to others around them. To explain cyberbullying’s effect on relationships and the communicative practices of those relationships, an examination of the proximal and distal effects of cyberbullying was necessary.

As seen in the helpful, but hurtful communication literature, proximal effects include a person’s thoughts and feelings about an interaction and are often interaction specific (Bradbury & Fincham, 1998). Because proximal evaluations are interaction specific, the evaluations are highly individual (i.e., driven by intrapersonal communication) and volatile. Every participant in this study reflected on their reactions to their experience with cyberbullying to determine whether they had responded appropriately given the hurtfulness of the message, their relationship to the sender, and the frequency of hurtful messages. Sierra and her brother placed a high value on the interpersonal relationships they had developed with friends. Because of that bond, the cruel messages sent to her brother had a lasting effect. Sierra reflected about a friend who sent mean messages about her brother, “One of my friends said something and after that I didn’t want to talk to her.” In Sierra’s mind, her proximal evaluation of the cyberbullying left the relationship too damaged to continue. Simon had a friend remove him from her social media after he made a comment that offended her. She sent him a private message questioning how he could say what he did before ultimately deciding that the message was too hurtful to continue the relationship. McLaren and Solomon (2014a) suggest people who received hurtful messages use proximal evaluations to determine whether they should continue their relationship with the message.
sender. The findings in this study indicate that only half of the participants maintained a relationship with the person or people who had cyberbullied them; every one of those cases were long-time friends or family members who had delivered the hurtful message. Clint’s grandparents would frequently ask him when he would be bringing his girlfriend to family gatherings. As an openly gay man, it hurt Clint that his grandparents did not accept him. Despite their hurtful words, Clint felt maintaining a relationship with his grandparents was most important, “At the end of the day, they’re still my family.” In support of the helpful, but hurtful literature, close relationships and those that were marked by small power distances were better capable of moving beyond the instance of cyberbullying. An otherwise healthy relationship provided buffering against the negative interaction.

The distal effects of cyberbullying raise more concern for those who experience cyberbullying. Distal effects are long-term psychological variables, which proscribe and predict communication and other relational behaviors. Because they are relatively stable over time, cyberbullying having a negative impact on one’s distal evaluations can be exceptionally dangerous for future interactions. For example, Simon described himself as having a predisposition toward argumentativeness because he felt he thrived on controversy, conflict, and debate. He did not feel online communication should be able to produce strongly negative proximal evaluations because “it is almost like a low blow to people who have dealt with real bullying.” It was only after he had permanently damaged and ended two friendships that Simon began to realize his argumentative nature had transitioned into aggressive communication, hurting his interpersonal relationships.

Distal effects were also an important element in affecting personal relationships. Some participants described participating in their social systems as war. As participants navigated their
social terrain, they were worried about identifying enemies (i.e., those who will cyberbully them, among other negative behaviors), negotiating peace, and going to war when faced with injustice. David described the battlefield he witnessed on social media:

> There was the division of friends that were on there to defend. And then the enemies who were there to attack, sort of thing. And it was just a whole mess of war between, if you went from each picture it was just a different group of subjects that were fighting over someone’s morals.

The data suggest that, even when participants did not view themselves at war with their social network, they are internalizing negative messages as normative. It appeared that negative proximal evaluations, if consistent over time, turned into long-term distal predispositions. Ron noticed the effect of being surrounded by negative messages when he started to lash out at his girlfriend over arguments he had with friends. He described how he felt after an intense argument with his girlfriend about her not wanting to be around him after he fought with his friends, “That’s when I realized it’s like seriously changing my mood. And everything, I mean how some four other random people across the country played the game affected my daily life and how I felt about the day.” Although Ron was primarily a bystander to the cyberbullying, repeated exposure to cyberbullying messages was enough that, in Ron’s mind, it changed his entire disposition. For him, aggression began to become his distal response to all negative stimuli across his relationships. Social exclusion produced a similar effect for other participants, who described themselves as having trouble forming and maintaining relationships because their distal evaluations were generally negative (Agnes; Cathy; Dawn; Patti).

As described in the paragraphs above, one’s psychological response to cyberbullying matters and it affects future communication efforts. Cyberbullying is more than a one-off
experience and its impact can be felt in both proximal and distal evaluations of cyberbullying. For cyberbullying, the message matters, technology matters, and the effect cyberbullying has on people matters. Immediate hurt can turn into long-term suffering if the people involved with cyberbullying fail to recognize the impact of their communication. Moving forward, both quantitative and qualitative researchers must be cognizant of the aforementioned communicative features of cyberbullying.

**Cyberbullying is repetitive.**

Cyberbullying is something that tends to be repeated over time. Indeed, our most basic definitions of cyberbullying include repetition as a key component (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Olweus, 1993, 2016; Roberto & Eden, 2010). While a quantitative exploration can explain frequency as repetition, a qualitative analysis was needed to explore how repetition manifested in the cyberbullying experiences of young adults. Not all participants agreed on what repetition meant when cyberbullying occurred, the results showed repetition is a complex problem in the digital age.

Frequency of cyberbullying events did play a role for the participants in this study. Participants were concerned with how often they received negative remarks across time. Participants noted that cyberbullying should be more than a “single, off-hand remark” (Virgil) and that repeating negative messages across multiple conversations was the defining feature of cyberbullying versus some other form of mean or cruel communication (Krystal). After Clint came out as a gay man, he described the ensuing cyberbullying he received as “constant” and “ongoing.” Repetition across conversations was salient for most of the participants in this study, which supports how repetition is operationalized in extant cyberbullying research.
Repetition appeared in other forms that challenge our traditional understanding of repetitive cyberbullying, as well. If repetition by frequency is defined by the volume of negative comments from a single source, aggregate repetition can be defined by volume of sources that make negative comments. Patti faced aggregate bullying when she was systematically ignored by her classmates. Large social groups at Patti’s school engaged in planned ignoring both on campus and on social media. Abby’s Youtube channel was another exemplar of aggregate cyberbullying. For Abby, singular remarks were easily ignored but the sheer magnitude of negative comments from many different posters caused her distress. Aggregation can occur in both organized (Patti) and unorganized (Abby) ways depending on if the cyberbullying was planned by the group or not. Public posts are a third form of aggregation because the target of the message has little to no control over the size of audience. Although no participants indicated concern of publicly available posts, Dawn felt her cyberbully chose private messages as a way to avoid censure from the friends he shared with Dawn if he were to have cyberbullied her publicly. Public messages can stretch a single message across a potentially massive and amorphous audience, something Dawn’s cyberbully wanted to avoid so that he would not become known to that audience.

The final form of repetition in this study was self-imposed repetition that occurred when targets of cyberbullying chose to save the cyberbullying artifacts. Many participants saved messages after being cyberbullied, but motivations for keeping messages varied. Some participants kept the messages to help them recall the events (Agnes; Patti), while others kept records to report the cyberbullying to an authority (Allen; Dawn; Virgil). Regardless of one’s reason for saving the message, saving and re-reading cruel messages led to self-imposed reliving
of the cyberbullying experience. The ability to save messages is a unique feature that is seldom discussed in the cyberbullying literature.

Now that some of the qualitative characteristics of cyberbullying have been explored, the study shifts its focus to assess how CHAT can expand our understanding of cyberbullying research by examining individuals and their behaviors alongside their cultural activities. The holistic perspective provided by doing so provides insight not gained by looking at either individuals or social practices individually.

**Research Question Two**

The second research question for this study asked how cultural-historical activity theory informs cyberbullying research. By assessing the macro-level forces (i.e., the tools, subjects, objects, rules, communities of practice, divisions of labor, and outcomes) of the activities in which the participants experienced cyberbullying, current and future researchers can more easily identify actors, actions, and activities in which cyberbullying occurs. Furthermore, it opens the possibility for dialogue about the co-constructive relationship between individuals and their activities. How tools are used or the means by which one organizes into meaningful social arrangements are constructive elements of one’s identity. Consideration of those relationships is necessary in cyberbullying research because cyberbullying is the byproduct of cultural norms, behaviors, and structures that allow and sometimes promote or prohibit negative communication behaviors. By examining the interrelations between nodes in an activity network, the following analysis illuminated how cyberbullying protects and transgresses against the homeostatic norms of the activity systems in which it occurs. That information better prepares cyberbullying researchers and policymakers to identify when, where, and why cyberbullying happens—a boon to prevention efforts. Cultural-historical activity theory produced four distinct node-level
analyses: The first analysis was an examination of subjects, their work, and the objects that work produced. The second analysis included communities of practice and the relationships subjects form within those communities. The third analysis examined the affordances of digital tools and those tools’ relationship to subjects. Finally, the fourth analysis examined rules and rules violations. The following themes were found:

**Subjects at work: Actors, labor, and artifacts.**

Subjects, the division of labor within their communities, and the objects that labor produced spoke to the physical and emotional work related to one’s experience with cyberbullying. There are conceptual differences in how communication scholars and CHAT theorists describe labor. For the current study, the words “work” and “labor” are used interchangeably to describe uncompensated effort put in by a subject to manage and regulate emotions and behaviors (Hochschild, 1979). Looked at individually, CHAT theorists would call work the actions of an individual but when placed in the context of activity, we see similar actions (and activities) reproduced over time. Subjects and their work are the driving forces of activity. In order to categorize and define subjects, we must first analyze their work and how it contributes to or prevents the mechanisms of activity. Indeed, we often conceptualize a subject’s role in cyberbullying communication by the type of work an individual contributes.

Cyberbullying is a unique case because, as it is conceptualized, it is rarely the desired outcome of activity. For example, young adulthood is a time when many choose to go to college. The assumed outcome of participating in that activity is that the labor produced over one’s undergraduate career will result in a wide base of liberal arts education and industry-specific skills training. To cyberbully or be cyberbullied is not the end-goal, nor does it serve the end-goal. But yet, cyberbullying remains a common experience for college-goers (Lindsay & Krysik, 2020).
2012). The same is true outside of college, as well (Cowen, 2013). Therefore, it became necessary to analyze and discuss the participant’s labor and how it related to cyberbullying behaviors. Two types of labor were produced: Physical work and emotional work.

**Physical work: Record keeping, routine changes, and tangible support.**

Physical work includes the mechanical and kinesthetic components of cyberbullying. One’s role (i.e., cyberbully, target, bystander, or guardian) was tied to the physical work the participant contributed to the cyberbullying event. For cyberbullying to occur, cyberbullies must distribute negative and aggressive messages in a targeted fashion. That message must also be received by its target and potential bystanders, even if the communication occurs asynchronously. In that sense, cyberbullying’s physical output is that of a mechanical and transactional communication process; a message sender must produce a negative communication artifact, which must also be received and/or witnessed by others. At the outset of the current study, cyberbullying objects and artifacts were perceived as messages that are sent during the process of negative communication. Though words still mattered, it became increasingly apparent throughout the course of the study that participants were also concerned with the manual labor that cyberbullying created.

One form of physical work was the organizing and storage of cyberbullying messages. Record keeping was a task primarily assigned to targets and bystanders who chose to store public and private cyberbullying messages for various reasons. Patti chose to store the messages she received because it helped her to recall the events. Re-reading and re-living her cyberbullying experiences helped Patti make sense of who was treating her poorly and why they chose to do so. Krystal kept aggressive messages on Tinder both for recall and because keeping the cyberbully linked to her account increased her total number of friends on the application. She said:
I think some people on Tinder, they like the number. I know I like the number. I almost have six hundred matches and it’s like I just want to keep getting them. So, I won’t unmatch people a ton unless someone is like a really big jerk and I’m like it’s not worth getting upset over it, bye. But I think some people are into having the number, so they don’t always unmatch even if they’re a douchebag.

The intrinsic value gained by increasing her number of Tinder friends made storing and sharing cyberbullying messages worth the work to Krystal. As a result, she kept the messages and her cyberbully on her Tinder profile and shared the messages with friends, even though the messages had hurt her feelings. The most common reason for goal-oriented record-keeping was to report the cyberbullying to an authority figure. In Virgil’s case, that meant reporting harassment in Minecraft to a server administrator, but for other participants, that meant reporting the incident to the police. Four participants had police involvement in their cyberbullying experience with two of the aggressors being arrested for cyberstalking. In both cases of arrest, the target’s record-keeping served as the material evidence to file a restraining order. In addition to keeping records, the orders of protection required other types of labor from cyberbullying targets, such as physically reporting the cyberbullying to the police, filing paperwork, and appearing in court to support their case (Allen; Dawn).

It was also up to targets to seek out social support after a cyberbullying event (cf. Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Craig & Johnson, 2010; Cutrona & Russel, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Leach & Braithwaite, 1996). There are many types of support, but action-facilitating support (informational and instrumental support) fell under the physical work produced by cyberbullying in the current study. Action-facilitating support includes messages and actions that are meant to assist a stressed individual by solving or eliminating the problem.
that is distressing that individual (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). After Dawn expressed the extent to which she was cyberstalked to her parents, her mother and father began to provide her with instrumental support. Her father told her, “Call me and I’ll come.” Her mother too provided instrumental support by messaging Dawn’s harasser telling him to leave Dawn alone and even appearing alongside Dawn in the court when Dawn filed for a protective order. Sofia and others provided informational support to her friend who was the target of racist messages. Although she was not specific about the content of the informational messages, Sofia described what she said to her friend, “We tried to counsel him. Tried to say like, ‘What happened? How did it happen? Why would that happen?’ Tried to figure it out. Figure out who it was and why it was happening.” Sofia’s goal was to help her friend gather and assess information so that he could better understand why he was being cyberbullied, and potentially develop a coping strategy to deal with the pain the negative messages had caused. The legal system too provided informational and tangible support by assisting Dawn, and Allen’s target, in producing the necessary forms, assessing evidence, and ultimately granting restraining orders to the targets. For the participants in this study, all of those who received action-facilitating support had to first seek out others who would give them the support they needed.

Another task that participants described having to perform was altering their routine behaviors and physical spaces. For many, cyberbullying cannot be completely disassociated with offline interactions or other online spaces. Those who would encounter their cyberbullies at school, work, or shared social spaces had to change their own behaviors to avoid further bullying. For Patti, that meant finding new social groups, eating lunch at a different table, and sometimes avoiding social situations where she worried she would say the wrong thing both online and offline. All three gamers chose to move onto other games or stop playing games
entirely, indicating a substantial shift in their routine behaviors. Dawn changed jobs twice and moved three times to avoid her former co-worker who continued to harass her despite a restraining order. She lamented the difficulty of having to break her lease, lose her security deposit, and then still have enough money to pay first and last month’s rent at her new residence. Targets were continually tasked with changing dwellings, jobs, and social groups to actively avoiding cyberbullying, which cost them time, energy, and money. In addition to the physical work involved, cyberbullying also produced significant emotional work.

*Emotion work: Seeking help and nurturing support.*

Aggressive messages can cause emotional pain for their recipients, whether intended or unintended, which in turned produced emotional work for targets (Hochschild, 1979). Targets endured negative communication about them, both true and untrue. Additionally, targets were tasked with developing appropriate (and sometimes inappropriate) strategies to cope with their abuse. Target’s emotional work calls on them to manage interpersonal relationships with the people who bullied them. Most of the participants in this study spoke directly about the emotional toll cyberbullying had had on them (Abby; Agnes; Amir; Cathy; Clint; Dawn; Krystal; Patti; Virgil). For example, Abby described her feelings on online commenters telling others to kill themselves; “I think you definitely need to seek out help because that would impact you in a very emotional and mental way.” Extant cyberbullying literature has little, if anything, to say on work distribution; however, the data in the current study suggested those who cyberbully send their negative message and move on until the next cyberbullying event, while targets of cyberbullying carry the weight of the interaction with them between events. Targets are also tasked with seeking support from others, when needed.
Social support also occurs through the emotional work of those involved with cyberbullying. Emotion work produced a second type of social support, nurturing support. Nurturing support includes efforts that are meant to comfort or console a stressed individual, but which do not directly attempt to solve the problem that is causing stress (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Nurturant support includes emotional support, network support, and esteem support. Friends and family are often tasked with providing nurturant support to young adults; the same is true when cyberbullying occurs. Participants spoke of a desire for reassurance of their value as a human being (esteem support) following their cyberbullying experience. Nine participants sought emotional guidance from friends and family (Abby; Allen; Cathy; Clint; Dawn; Krystal; Patti; Ron; Simon) and two participants were asked for emotional support from a friend or family member who was cyberbullied (Sierra; Sofia).

Nurturant support came from various sources within the participant’s social network. Sofia discussed a private text group targeted for people of color on her campus as an excellent source for emotional support, esteem support, and network support. For Sofia, having others around her who shared her experiences as a person of color on campus helped her to regain her confidence after witnessing her friend’s racially charged cyberbullying. After receiving crude and cruel comments on Tinder, Krystal shared the private messages with friends to garner nurturant support. Krystal wanted confirmation that what she was seeing was uncalled for (esteem support), but also that it was a common experience with others (networking support). In that sense, commiseration made the personal insults Krystal received sting less, because “that’s just something that happens.” Ron too appreciated having a positive outlet to vent his frustrations, noting that talking to his girlfriend helped him to “get a level head.” Nurturing support was highly valued by the participants in this study.
Emotional support was the most sought-after type of nurturing support by the participants in this study. Participants expressed a desire for empathetic communication with other parties who would understand the emotional impact cyberbullying can have on targets. In fact, some participants initially chose not to seek emotional support for fear of being misunderstood. Virgil, Ron, and Amir shared similar experiences in online gaming environments. All three took the approach of retreating from the situation before seeking support from others. When they eventually sought support, Virgil and Amir consulted with other gamers. Having someone who shared the experience of video game cyberbullying was important to them because they did not feel like others would be able to understand why they were upset. Clint credits his burgeoning LGBT community as the “key” for coping with cyberbullying because that community understood the challenges he faced after coming out as a gay man.

Parents and grandparents were the most commonly discussed adults as potential sources of nurturing support. Indeed, some participants went to their primary caregivers for the emotional and esteem support they desperately needed (Abby; Clint; Dawn; Simon). Abby sought support from her mother and sister noting, “If I had gone to my dad, he wouldn’t have understood what this meant. He didn’t understand what I did.” To Abby, the emotional support she received from her mother included more than reading the negative comments on her Youtube channel and choosing which to delete, it was having someone who shared her negative experiences and understood how she felt about it that mattered. Simon felt the same when receiving support for his politically conservative views. His experience on his college campus caused him to feel ostracized, but, because of his mother’s support and empathy, he gained the confidence needed to speak out on social issues.
Not all caregivers in the current sample were able to provide support to their children. Some participants were afraid to talk to their parents out of fear of punishment (Amir; Krystal), while others were being cyberbullied by their primary caregivers, precluding them from being a source of support (Agnes; Cathy). Agnes described the inconsistent emotional support she received from her father:

Being bullied at my school started around the time when my father was horrible and emotionally abusive. The guy can be really nice to me and spoil me like a princess. Then, at other times he wants to scream at me over everything. Screaming, needy, controlling, sexist tyrant. And then oftentimes, I’m told I’m stupid or nothing without my parents. No one likes me. Or it’s easy to take advantage of or rape me, or sexually assault [me] because of my autism.

Agnes’s relationship with her parents remains strained due to their continued cyberbullying of their daughter and their lack of understanding in why it hurts her emotionally that they ridicule her for being autistic. Despite the troubled relationship, Agnes continues to seek their approval. She said,

[I] confronted my parents about how I felt so many times. I needed them to care. But they respond with, “Oh, it’s part of your autism, and you take things too literally and [need to] learn to understand figurative language more. You’re just being too sensitive.”

In the current study, the participants who indicated a desire for nurturant support from their primary caregivers but who failed to receive the needed support indicated additional negative feelings. Cyberbullying messages are frequently targeted to individuals, but more specifically, those messages frequently attack the emotional well-being of the target. Emotional work is necessary in the wake of cyberbullying and providing comfort when it is requested is paramount.
Culture at work: Communities of practice.

Communities of practice are marked by the shared objects and outcomes of its subjects (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Young adults are embedded within a constellation of practices as they are involved in many types of activities and communities of practice, which overlap, intertwine, and knot together (Engeström, 2007). Communication scholars may conceive of communities of practice through the habitats in which subjects tend to congregate and where they share interests and goals. Arntfield (2015) suggests the routine spaces cyberbullies and targets of cyberbullying occupy may contribute to cyberbullying predation. Ubiquitous technology means young adults must face the possibility of cyberbullying everywhere they go. Digital communication technologies are embedded into our communities. We can see communal activity throughout this analysis of cyberbullying behaviors and messages, but two levels of communal activity require special attention. The first is in the macro-level of communal communicative practices in which aggression and other forms of negative talk are normalized throughout the community. The second is in the meso-level relationships between targets and cyberbullies, which exemplifies issues of uncertainty and power. To provide nuance to this discussion of community, the current study recognizes but did not focus its investigation on identifying the communities of practice where cyberbullying occurs (i.e., schools, the workplace, at home, in friendship groups) and instead analyzed the communicative features of those communities and the relationships young adults form within them. This novel approach better answers questions about why cyberbullying occurs in those specific communities and how the communicative practices of young adults contribute to or buffer against cyberbullying perpetuation.
Aggressive communication is normalized.

Aggressive communication was common in the communities of practice for this study. The negative nature of the communities may have contributed to the occurrence of cyberbullying because positive attitudes toward negative behaviors leads to negative behaviors becoming cultural norms (Festl, Scharkow, & Quandt, 2015). When asked if negative talk was normal in online video games, Amir described his experience:

I want to say it all depends on the person, but normal, yes. . . .I would say yes because the game is kind of hostile. And when people end up in hostile environments, they get frustrated. . . .So it’s kind of normal for people to be negative on there.

Those who experienced cyberbullying by schoolmates described an environment filled with negativity, such as Patti, who moved from clique-to-clique after being socially excluded by multiple friend groups, and Virgil, who said that some of his schoolmates were just mean. Agnes was fearful of returning to her parent’s home because of the boorish behavior of her father. She worried that if she started living with her parents again that her father might eventually harm her physically, in addition to the emotional harm his cyberbullying had caused. Ron felt that his generation of digital natives are a community whose relationship to technology encourages bad behavior:

I said earlier about the internet being like a wall you kind of hide behind. . . .I think that kind of encourages, especially in my generation, to take things to extremes. Because if one thing is fun for a little bit, it eventually gets not fun, and you move on to the next thing that is more fun. And the cycle continues until the cycle goes to that super extreme.

In each of the above cases, and many others within the sample, negative talk was a normative feature of the participants’ communities. Entrenchedness of negativity begets negativity, but
there are ways to change that norm. The participants who sought out more pro-social environments after having experienced cyberbullying also reported a reduction in overall negative communication experiences (Abby; Agnes; Cathy; Clint; Ron; Sofia). Cathy turned to communities outside those where she was cyberbullied to cope with her cyberbullying. She said,

The way I coped with it was I got really involved in other people and my relationship with God. . . .I got really involved in church groups and things like that. I started volunteering. So, I started using my passions of cooking and exercise that people were making [negative] comments about. I started training people that needed help to lose weight and adapt healthier lifestyles. . . .I tried to turn it around and make it a positive thing.

Having positive outlets to combat the negative comments she received helped Cathy to move forward despite her ongoing cyberbullying. The climate of one’s communication in one’s community can have intense impact on the objects and outcomes that community produces.

**Cyberbullying can introduce relational turbulence into communities.**

Cyberbullying’s social nature can contribute to emotional and relational turmoil. In the current study, three meso-level relationships that exist within the communities of practice where cyberbullying occurs displayed relational turbulence as an outcome of cyberbullying: the relationship between cyberbully and target, the relationship among participants and friends, and the relationship among participants and their family. Relational turbulence stems from uncertainty surrounding a relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Although primarily used to study romantic relationships (e.g., Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016), recent updates to the relational turbulence model have called for broader examinations of all types of
relationships, romantic and platonic (Solomon, 2015). The current study provides evidence for relational turbulence in both dyadic and community relationships.

Self-uncertainty happened when participants questioned their own investment in the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). At some level, every participant questioned whether experiencing cyberbullying was worth the social benefits of maintaining their relationship with their cyberbully and continuing participation in the community where it happened. Participants’ self-uncertainty was sufficient to end relationships, but not when negative messages came from family or long-time friends. When Virgil was cyberbullied in Minecraft, he chose to change servers continually after each experience. He had little investment in his interpersonal relationships on his server, and, despite making some friends on each server, it was easier to start over and rebuild than to cope with continued griefing (i.e., the act of harassing others in online video games). Partner-uncertainty occurred when individuals questioned their relationship partners’ commitment to the relationship (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001). Sierra experienced partner-uncertainty in her long-term friendships after receiving hurtful comments about herself and her brother. The name-calling and general non-support Sierra felt from people that she considered close friends caused her to question her friends’ investment in their relationship. Dawn shared this standpoint. When Dawn’s friend gave her cyberstalker her new address, not only did she question that individual’s commitment to their friendship, she began to question her entire social network’s commitment. When relationship-uncertainty emerged participants began to question the nature and expectations of the relationship. Cathy imagined she had a close relationship with her immediate family. When Cathy found out they had been talking negatively about her behind her back, she began to mistrust all communication. What Cathy once conceived as an open and honest relationship was marred by questions of impropriety and mistrust.
Regardless of type or source of uncertainty, uncertainty was present at all levels. More importantly, turbulence continued over time as uncertainty caused participants to question their interpersonal relationships.

Solomon (2015) argued continued negative experiences with turbulence can lead to hyper-vigilance, heightened emotional awareness, and extreme exhibition of caution in future interactions—all of which can chill future communication. Dawn’s experience with her friends encapsulates the relational turbulence that occurs alongside cyberbullying and the co-occurring social exchange evaluations that helped her determine whether continuing along with her friendship community was worth the struggle. For Dawn, it was not worth the effort. Dawn chose to end nearly all of her friendships, even those who were not involved in her cyberbullying experience. She instead chose to leave most of her communities of practice in an effort to gain a clean break from her cyberbullying experience. Explaining herself to her former communities was so emotionally taxing that Dawn questioned her investment in all her friendships. She said, “It was just too much to handle. . . .I don’t have enough energy to deal with that, so it was just too much to handle for everybody, not just me.” Cathy too has chosen to end some of her friendships after receiving well-meant comments online. Despite the positive tone of the messages, her friend’s “supportive communication” created more uncertainty because Cathy did not feel she nor the friends were as invested in their relationship as they once were. At times, these participants described relationship termination as the only viable choice.

The current study showed a range of communicative community practices that contribute to and result from cyberbullying. Although it is important to understand the communities in which cyberbullying occurs, such as schools, at home, and in the workplace, qualitative examination of the communicative features showed the constitutive nature of activity. How
people experience their communities is the result of communal activities, which, in turn, reify themselves through cultural practice. Analyzing the communication that occurs within community practices showed two overarching themes: Aggressive and hurtful communication can pervade the cultural norms of an activity system and cause relational upheaval, and positive communication can combat negative outcomes by improving communicative support both prior to and following a cyberbullying event. Positivity begets positivity.

**Tools: Using the affordances of technology.**

Digital communication tools are the media through which cyberbullying occurs. Research question one explicated the range of tools used to cyberbully but did not examine the technological affordances of those tools. Tools only succeed in an activity system if they are deemed useful for mediating activity. As shown in usage statistics, digital communication tools have proven themselves effective in mediating a broad range of activities (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2011). It is important to differentiate between technological affordances and technological inclination. Technological inclination suggests certain technologies might gravitate toward the specific activities where they are most useful. Despite gravitating, technology is not in itself motivated and therefore does not have goals. Affordances of technology are borne in how technology is useful to individuals who are motivated to use technology to accomplish specific goals (Conole & Dyke, 2004). The current study was concerned with the affordances of digital communication tools in how they facilitated cyberbullying behaviors. Therefore, it was necessary to ask participants why specific tools were chosen for cyberbullying communication and what features of those tools made those tools useful for cyberbullies and cyberbullying targets. Ease of use and the tool being popular among
community members contributed, but more importantly, the affordance of anonymity appeared time and again.

**Types of anonymity: Known and unknown attackers.**

Participants in this study were asked about the affordances of digital tools that allow cyberbullies to choose whether their identity would be known or hidden. Allen chose Facebook as his platform to cyberbully a friend because of the ease of creating new, anonymous accounts so that his identity would remain unknown. After setting up a new, free email address, he was able to create six Facebook pages to continually harass his target. Anonymous messaging apps like Kik served as an arena where negative communication was common. Participants who were bullied on Kik assumed anonymity had a disinhibiting effect on cyberbullies because they did not have to have their name attached to their negative communication behaviors (Amir; Krystal; Virgil). Of additional interest is that known attackers were equally frequent as unknown attackers in the sample of this study. Known attackers did not feel the need to obfuscate their behaviors. Simon wanted to be known as controversial on Facebook, relishing in his argumentativeness (or really his aggressiveness). Whether the cyberbully was known to the target or not was not the only type of anonymity present in the current study; public versus private communication added an additional layer.

**Types of anonymity: Public and private messages.**

Cyberbullying can occur in any online forum, but public and private cyberbullying messages have different implications for senders and receivers. A public message can have far-reaching effects but also risks making the cyberbully known. Private messages reduce that risk. One’s Facebook wall or Twitter feed are examples of public spaces where cyberbullying occurs whereas text messages on one’s cell phone or a direct message on Facebook would constitute
private spaces. In the current study, public messages were used against some participants (Abby; Amir; Simon; Sofia; Virgil), but private messages were more common. Private messages were used in both cases of cyberstalking in this study. Allen reflected on disinhibition he experienced in the cruel private messages he sent, “It’s a lot easier to be mean online. . . . You don’t see their reaction to the words. . . . We can’t visibly understand if, oh am I hurting them?” Dawn’s cyberbully too chose to use private messages. When asked why she thought he didn’t send the message publicly, Dawn said, “He didn’t want people to know he was crazy.” Private messages also contributed to the targeted-ness of the message. Not only was private cyberbullying targeted at an individual, it left targets to make the sometimes-painful decision to keep the cyberbullying a secret (Amir; Krystal) or the sometimes painful decision to share with others (Patti). Even for known attackers, private messages offered a level of cyberbullying anonymity when the target chose not to tell others of their experience, as was the case with Dawn when her experience first started. If targets do not choose to reveal the cyberbullying to others, a known attacker is functionally anonymous to the rest of the world.

**Community rules and rules violations.**

Rules refers to “explicit and implicit regulations, norms, conventions, and standards that constrain actions within the activity system” (Engeström & Sannino, 2010, p. 6). Rules serve to establish codes of conduct and to limit acceptable behaviors within a given community (and the activity that surrounds that community). Rules support the homeostatic nature of activity systems by constraining subject’s labor to those behaviors that reproduce the activity system. Rules can prescribe communicative norms, proscribe banned behaviors, and help to predict how subjects will act within the activity system (Burgoon, 1978). If this is true and the desired outcome of the system is not to cyberbully others, cyberbullying must be conceived of as a rules violation.
Cyberbullying is the byproduct and outcome of glitches in a system that occur when rules are violated.

**Explicit rules and implicit rules: Crossing limits.**

Rules are meant to set boundaries, but sometimes messages cross those limits. In the same sense that there are explicit barriers that form hard lines, there are implicit barriers that form soft lines. Implicit rules leave room for interpretation. Many activities are laden with explicit expectations of what members should and should not do, but much of the communication of the young adults in this study surrounded social gray-areas where the same messages could be considered positive or negative given the context. Explicit and implicit rules were surprisingly unclear for the participants in this study. Although participants shared viewpoints on unacceptable behaviors (e.g., threatening offline violence, racist language), communicative standards and practices varied with each individual interview. The content of acceptable and unacceptable messages depended heavily on how the participant decoded the message. Explicit rules may be more implied than once thought.

Participating in any community of practice comes laden with rules and expectations about behavior, language, and conduct. We, as individuals and as members of a community, develop predictive and prescriptive expectations based on their interpretations of the hardiness of system-level rules and regulations (Burgoon, 1979). Explicit system-level rules are also hardy—no interpretation is needed. Implicit rules, like the expectation that communication should be friendly, are system-level rules that are left for interpretation by individuals and which will produce different results based on an individual’s comfortability with a given message. Those implicit rules expectations are the metaphorical dirt that muddies the waters. The jovial banter of video game players is an expected and oftentimes welcomed feature of video game
communication. However, Ron’s League of Legends team showed that there are implicit limits to the content and volume of messages that can shift communication from friendly to oppositional. Amir’s online gaming experience was similar. Telling another player to “check out [his] Instagram” was meant to be a small jab at an opposing player, but, when the other player checked out his Instagram and then began using that information to locate Amir outside of the game, the tone of the communication shifted. Virgil describes his different playstyles in Minecraft based on the explicit and implicit rules of the server:

If someone is being a jerk, you just turn it off and you can’t see them, and everything is fine. It gets complicated because they can still attack you. And a lot of servers would have player-versus-player (PVP) battling turned off, so they couldn’t damage you, but they could still touch your blocks. . . . I only retaliated where it was allowed on the server, but that wasn’t really bullying because it was expected that everyone do that on those. When asked if was normal for other players to communicate negatively on his Minecraft servers, he added:

[It] depends on the server. On some, absolutely. Generally, yes, player-to-player hostility is expected because the objective of that game on that server is to go out and fight and kill. But on a building server, where it is just on build mode, and player-versus-player is turned off, that wouldn’t be expected.

What Virgil was describing was the differences in his own behavior based on the explicit rules expectations of a server. Furthermore, his reason for joining the current study was that other players had violated his implicit expectations about destroying others’ work on building servers. Doing so was a clear violation of the server’s (and by extension the activity’s) goals. Limits sometimes require negotiation but crossing limits whether negotiated or not is a violation of
community rules. Explicit rules make clearer the limitations of communication by reducing ambiguity and helping interlocutors avoid limit-crossing behaviors.
CHAPTER 5 - Discussion

Communication Studies is a powerful field for its ability to analyze contextual data about cyberbullying behaviors and messages and to apply that contextual data to the social lives of young adults. Cyberbullying is communicative in its very nature; it is defined by messages, digital communication tools, and the social functions related to those tools. Although cyberbullying remains a common problem for young people in the United States (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011), cyberbullying research has direly lacked in qualitative approaches. Given the evidence collected in this study, it is odd that so little qualitative research has been conducted thus far. It is not clear why quantitative data has been preferred when cyberbullying is such a personal and individualized violation. People who cyberbully, people targeted by cyberbullying, bystanders to cyberbullying, and people who serve as guardians all need a stronger voice in the cyberbullying literature. It has been a mistake that, thus far, we largely have failed to let those participants define their experiences in their own words. The current study sought to remedy that problem by adding qualitative substance to the extant research; the qualitative data provided in this study were rich. Moving forward, communication scholars should take a larger role in defining cyberbullying, analyzing its features, and developing prevention programs.

The Qualitative Approach to Cyberbullying Research: Parsing Out the Idiosyncrasies

The current study analyzed data through two lenses—that of individual participants and that of their activities. The idiosyncrasies of individuals are important to consider because cyberbullying is an incredibly complex topic. Qualitative interviews allowed participants to give nuanced responses to questions about their working definitions of cyberbullying and their own experiences with cyberbullying. Although participants did not always agree on what constituted
cyberbullying, they remained confident that they would be able to recognize it if they saw it in action. Even within individual interviews, participant’s own connotative descriptions of their experiences with cyberbullying did not match uniformly with the denotative definitions they provided when asked to define cyberbullying. The answer really depends on a participant’s proximal and distal evaluations of the communication.

For example, cyberstalking had degrees of severity for the participants. “Facebook stalking” and “Google stalking” have become common practices for young adults, especially as they make new friends on college campuses and begin dating people whom they have met online (Fife, Nelson, & Bayles, 2009; Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2010). Krystal and Abby shared this sentiment. Covert stalking was assessed as benign but stalking that led to explicit contact between parties could lead to more serious, negative evaluations. The soft line remains unclear. For Dawn, her co-worker began to stalk her both online and offline. Dawn felt unable to separate her stalker harassing her at work from the cyberstalking she experienced at home. Again, explicit contact between parties mattered, but the severity of the incident led Dawn to equate her experience as more akin to domestic violence than her other experiences with cyberbullying. The determination of where invasions of privacy crossed the threshold into unacceptable behavior was cemented in individual assessments of the intrusion and how the intrusion was communicated to the message recipient.

Opting out of the digital spaces where cyberbullying occurs was another idiosyncratic response to cyberbullying. Amir and Simon felt cyberbullying was not a real problem because leaving the digital spaces where it happens is as simple as “clicking x.” However, research shows only 32% of targets leave the space in which they were cyberbullied and only 20% avoid going online all-together (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007). Although some participants had modified their
online (and offline) behaviors after their cyberbullying experience, no participants indicated that they would stop using the social media platforms and phone applications by which they were bullied because doing so would force them to miss out on the important social functions social media provides (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). For most people, “just clicking x” is not a viable solution as it can lead to other negative social consequences. Forcing young adults to exclude themselves socially from the digital spaces occupied by all of one’s friends is just another form of cyberbullying. The fear of missing out was too strong. In terms of conceptualizing and operationalizing cyberbullying, perhaps specific media platforms have been given too much credit. The affordances of technology contribute to cyberbullying perpetuation, surely, but that is not as salient in the minds of young adults who experience cyberbullying. In this study, participants put little thought into the affordances and challenges of the media but were more concerned with the how the cyberbullying may impede valued social functions within those platforms. Media matter, but only insofar in how they facilitate communication in the social lives of young adults, even if that means also facilitating communication between cyberbullies and their targets.

The hard lines, the objectively negative behaviors like threatening offline violence or invasion of digital privacy, are useful to conceptually define what constitutes cyberbullying from a research and policy standpoint; however, researchers and policymakers must remain open to cyberbullying’s idiosyncratic possibilities. Even if a message does not meet the objective criteria of cyberbullying definitions, an individual’s subjective response to that message can be just as damaging. If an individual feels they have been cyberbullied, they need resources to cope with cyberbullying even if their experience does not meet our objective guidelines.
The Qualitative Approach to Cyberbullying Research: Rethinking Definitions

As communication scholars continue to study cyberbullying, they should remain aware of how the types and features of messages and behaviors affect our definitions and descriptions of cyberbullying. There were three terms commonly used to define and describe cyberbullying that gained depth that was only possible through qualitative analysis: intent, repetition, and anonymity.

Reconfiguring cyberbullying definitions to use the descriptors targeted and willful instead of intentional gives weight to the harm that cyberbullying messages cause for targets. Though it is likely the extant literature aims to say cyberbullying intends to harm, it does not sufficiently do so. Describing cyberbullying as targeted and willful provides depth to what cyberbullying researchers mean by intent. Overt-malicious, inferred-malicious, and inferred-accidental messages each have their own forms, but all are targeted and willful, even if the maliciousness comes from one’s ignorance of the pain they cause in the case of inferred-accidental messages. Ultimately, malicious messages whether overt or inferred were considered cyberbullying by participants because they were aggressive in ways that were both unwanted and unwarranted.

Repetition has been a key element of how bullying and cyberbullying have been defined for many years (Olweus, 1993). The data in the current study showed that repetition too can take on many forms. As it has been conceived in this study and in past studies, repetition has meant cyberbullying messages are repeated frequently over time. However, that is not the only form of repetition the participants in this study faced. Volume from a single source or volume through sheer number of sources both were ways that cyberbullying messages were repeated. A single message made public on Facebook or Twitter can spread virally, leading to aggregate-form repetition. Not only that, repetition also occurred through self-imposed re-reading and re-living
of one’s cyberbullying experience, something made possible by the permanence of digital communications. These new ways of thinking about repetition better situate the digital nature of cyberbullying.

Anonymity too was challenged by the current study. The possibility of anonymity when using digital communication tools has received considerable attention in cyberbullying research (e.g., Accordino & Accordino, 2011; Alvarez, 2012; Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Despite the common assumption that anonymity is a key feature that promotes cyberbullying, there is also ample evidence to both support and refute the role that anonymity plays (Festl & Quandt, 2013). Pew Research (2014) asked participants whether they knew the person who cyberbullied them; the results were roughly half knew their cyberbully and half did not. The way anonymity is described in the extant literature suggests the authors mean to note the difference between known and unknown attackers (cf. Accordino & Accordino, 2011), but that was not the only form of anonymity in the current study. Further complicating the notion of anonymity is that the digital nature of cyberbullying allows for both public and private messages. To account for both known and unknown attackers and public and private messages, the anonymity types model was created (see Figure 3). The current study saw all four types of anonymity: Open (known/public), confidential (unknown/public), hidden (known/private), and anonymous (unknown/private). Cyberbullying researchers should take care to note the type of anonymity present in a cyberbullying event because it has material impact on the target’s ability to process and cope with their experience.

The above data highlights the struggle between objective and subjective criteria when defining cyberbullying. Difficulty in defining cyberbullying has implications on anti-bullying policy. Having codified laws means that certain messages are not allowed to be sent in certain
communities of practice, but the participants in this study were unsure in how they are protected legally when cyberbullied. No participants indicated that they were aware of specific laws against cyberbullying and, instead, spoke in broader terms about how cyberbullying is a violation that should be punishable by law. Currently, there are no federal laws against cyberbullying, but the federal government does mandate each state to have anti-bullying legislation (StopBullying.gov, 2017). There are federal laws that do protect against specific types of negative communication. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 combine to protects against discrimination based on race, color, creed, national origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, and disability in any federally funded or public program. Title IX can also be invoked in cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence. Thirteen of fifteen participants in this dissertation were currently students at three different, federally-funded universities, affording them protection under federal law. The law is imperfect. Clint, a university student, reported his cyberbully for having left a voicemail threatening to stab him for being a faggot, but was told there is no recourse available because the cyberbully did not present imminent danger. The threat of online harassment turning into physical violence was a point where participants drew separation, but which was not enforceable by law. Further discussion is needed to challenge our understanding of cyberbullying definitions because policymakers rely on objective criteria when developing laws and prevention programs. Any law will inevitably be insufficient in covering all possible forms of cyberbullying, however, by improving our understanding what cyberbullying researchers mean by intent, repetition, and anonymity, we can better refine our bullying prevention efforts.
Examinining the interrelations between nodes in an activity network illuminated how cyberbullying protects and transgresses against the homeostatic norms of the activity systems in which it occurs. Understanding that individuals and their behaviors cannot be divorced from shared cultural activities has major implications for cyberbullying research and policy. For example, though the participants in this study did not indicate concern over what digital communication tools were used for cyberbullying, they were concerned about their relationship to the tools that mediated the communication (i.e. ease of use, social functions) and how those tools can be used to perpetuate or violate community standards. From a policymaking standpoint, that indicates that less attention is needed identifying the platforms used for cyberbullying, and more time should be spent addressing communication practices within the communities that congregate on those platforms (and across other communities of practice, as well). System-level analyses better prepares cyberbullying researchers and policymakers to identify when, where, and why cyberbullying happens—a boon to prevention efforts. In the current study, CHAT produced four primary takeaways: the rhizomatic nature of shared cultural activities, the inequitable distribution of labor when cyberbullying occurs, the consubstantiation of subjects and their tools, and a path forward for cyberbullying prevention.

**Activity as rhizome, activity analysis as method.**

In the same sense that individuals are embedded within activities, activities intertwine with one another as well. Engestrom’s (2000) knotworking metaphor suggests the need for qualitative understandings of activities and may provide a conceptual model for how subjects and their work interface with activities. Though academic research lends itself to compartmentalizing the nodes of activity as workable units, activity theory rejects that notion.
and instead considers the interrelations of those nodes as its molar unit of analysis (Engeström, 1999). Subordinate units of analysis are only fully understandable when interpreted against the backdrop of entire systems of activity (Engeström, 1999). Knotworking is characterized by referring to “rapidly pulsating, distributed, and partially improvised orchestration[s] of collaborative performance between . . . connected actors and activity systems” (Engeström, 2000, p. 972). The ways in which subjects, their work, and their activities tie together, untie, and re-tie shows that activities have neither a central locus of control (i.e., in the subject) nor can they be described as the summation of their parts. In that sense, activity might be better understood as a rhizome, a system with deeply entangled roots both within singular activities and across multiple activities. Agnes’s story serves as an example of how activity analysis uncovers the entangled-ness of activity in her cyberbullying experience. The intermingling of “roots” or nodes of activity provided interesting data about how she internalized complex problems like family-making, community-building, and being educated.

Agnes’s cyberbullying story was one that expanded across the many facets of her life. She believed she was targeted by others because she has autism. Agnes had been cyberbullied at school, and in her local community, but Agnes found it hardest to cope with the (cyber)bullying she received from her parents. Agnes said it difficult to manage her interpersonal relationships within her family because she disagreed with many family rules and the ways in which the labor of family-making were distributed between family members. For example, Agnes spoke at length about her desire to join her family on an upcoming vacation to which she was not invited so that she could stay home and care for the family cat. The unfair distribution of labor surrounding this event, among others, contributed to Agnes feeling cyberbullied by her parents. Agnes’s experience cannot be summarized by isolating a single instance of cyberbullying because it does
not speak to the cruel messages her father sent her about her (in)ability to complete her education, live by herself on campus, or eventually find a life partner—it ignores how Agnes internalized the process of family-making because it fails to capture the relationships between Agnes and all of her meaningful activities. Furthermore, it ignores that subjects are embedded within many activities, some of which overlap one another. When her father sent her a text message chastising her for staying up late to study in the library, conflict arose between Agnes’s identity as a student and her identity as a daughter. Agnes’s school and home activities were linked at their very root, and thus, the cruel messages sent by her parents were intrinsically tied to her behaviors in both arenas. As much as Agnes acted within her activities, her activities (and everything that came along with them) shaped and acted upon her as well. As a result of that negative communication, Agnes expressed her desire for more positive communication in her family because she felt it would change the norms of communication in her communities.

Activity theory would suggest she is correct because contradictions are the source of change in activities. Over time, the contradictions within and between activity systems provide opportunity for change, but that development must occur through the disentangling and re-tying of knots that occurs through expanded learning and development. Cyberbullying is but one problem that is deeply rooted within shared cultural activities. Only through activity-level analysis can researchers address how cyberbullying messages realize and reproduce a culture where cyberbullying is both frequent and near-ubiquitous.

Cyberbullying is a lot of work. . . for targets.

What is perhaps most telling about the labor produced by cyberbullying is that most of the required work is performed by targets. As discussed in the section on labor, physical and emotional support are needed following incidences of cyberbullying, but are not always
provided, even when requested. The labor provided during support spoke broadly to participants’ ability to cope with their cyberbullying experience. It was nigh impossible to disassociate subjects, the labels placed on those subjects, and the work those subjects contributed to their activities. What is clear is that targets of cyberbullying are engaged in a lot of work; both physical and emotional.

Another surprising finding of the study was a lack of work on the part of bystanders. The bystanders in this study viewed themselves as recorders of the event who served to watch for posterity’s sake. More troubling is that no bystanders chose to intervene, defend their friends against cyberbullying, or report the cyberbullying to a guardian. Although bystanders had opportunity to witness and report, none of them chose to report the cyberbullying to an authority. Perhaps this finding should not be surprising, though. In the same sense that cyberbullies and targets were defined by the type of work they contributed to the event, bystanders too were defined by their function. They stood by and watched, which was exactly the labor you would expect from a bystander. Changing the language of how we define bystanders may alleviate this problem. The legal system uses the term witness to describe someone who witnesses an event and who is willing to testify under oath about what they saw (“Witness”, 2017). Calling bystanders to cyberbullying witnesses invokes an additional duty to report the incident to a person of authority.

Usefulness: Subjects, their tools and their artifacts.

Studying the relationship between cyberbullying and the activities in which cyberbullying occurs revealed interesting relationships between cyberbullying messages and the people who experienced them. Digital communication tools served as conduits for cyberbullying. In the same sense that research question one found participants to be unconcerned about the platform by
which they were cyberbullied, research question two found that participants remain relatively unconcerned with the affordances of those platforms.

Certain tools, especially social media tools, were conducive for cyberbullying messages because of their affordances. Because their usefulness, the young adults in this study were unconcerned with how the affordances of digital communication tools contributed to cyberbullying. There are too many benefits to social media to stop using it. The effects of community-level data proved illuminating. Participants recognized social media environments are rife with negativity and expect to experience negative communication on social media because cyberbullying is a normalized behavior in those spaces. Cyberbullying can introduce turbulence across relationships, showing that despite cyberbullying being expected, it still causes relational strain. That strain may also affect wider communities, but, social support buffered against the effects of negative strain. The varied communities of practice where cyberbullying occurred for participants showed that young adults face negative communication in all arenas of life. Technological creep into all facets of young adult’s lives provides many benefits, but also opens the door for negative communication anytime, anywhere. Future research must consider how the features that make social media easy to use contribute to cyberbullying.

**Fixing the glitches.**

This study modeled how cultural-historical activity theory assists in identifying cyberbullying more proactively. Prior research on cyberbullying has been hyper-focused on reactive discourse to objects that are revealed to be cyberbullying messages. However, the current study shifts the focus of analysis to the types and features of digital tools, the communicative nature of cyberbullying, and the activities in which cyberbullying occurs as more fruitful points of focus. Analysis of subjects, their labor, and cyberbullying object presents two
dire needs: First, communicative competence training is necessary as a proactive preventative measure that will help young adults to develop the emotional intelligence necessary to empathize with those with whom they communicate. Second, in the event that communication skills training is absent or fails, additional training in providing support is needed for buffering against and coping with cyberbullying messages. Cyberbullying requires an immense amount of labor but distributing that labor more wisely could lead to better outcomes.

Furthermore, this examination showed how rules violations affect subjects, their relationships, and their activities. In that sense, the current study calls for expanded use of CHAT to study the activities of young people because it will help to identify glitches in the system where cyberbullying is likely to occur. Established rules and sanctions, cooperative learning, and jointly performed positive activities are all system-level solutions that combat entrenched negativity and promote pro-social behaviors (Heirman et al., 2015). The first step toward pro-social homeostatic norms in an activity system is to continuously re-introduce pro-social behaviors into the system. Positivity begets positivity as well.
CHAPTER 6 - Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a fact of life for many young adults. These participants experienced cyberbullying across all facets of their life including school, their digital spaces, work, and their homes. Previous research has shown that experiencing cyberbullying can have serious consequences for one’s physical and mental health (Gladstone, Parker, & Mahli, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) and can lead to delinquent behaviors in other facets of young people’s lives (Junger-Tas & van Kesteren, 1999; Sinclair et al., 2012). Cyberbullying is clearly detrimental and more cyberbullying research can help limit cyberbullying’s impact on society at large.

Despite a growing body of quantitative literature on cyberbullying, qualitative interview data that allowed participants to define and describe cyberbullying in their own words was sorely lacking. This study addressed that gap by allowing participants to speak about their connotative personal experiences with cyberbullying alongside their denotative definitions of cyberbullying. The qualitative features of cyberbullying were revealed through the participant’s experiences.

Furthermore, this dissertation elucidated how cultural-historical activity theory can be used to examine the activities in which cyberbullying occurs to refine both proactive and reactive responses to cyberbullying incidents. Revealing the qualitative features of cyberbullying alongside illuminating how cyberbullying invades systems of activities showed not only is cyberbullying a problem, it is one that we can combat by examining our everyday activities.

Contributions

Support for prior research.

The current study supported much of extant literature on cyberbullying, showing that previous, quantitative data has helped immensely. It supported the notion that cyberbullying involves negative communication that tends to be repeated over time and which misuses
technology to harm the recipient (Olweus, 2016; Roberto & Eden, 2010). Participants in the current study described the torment they received at the hands of their cyberbullies with one participant calling egregious messages “cyberterrorism.” Although not the focus of this study, participants did describe experiencing negative physical health outcomes (e.g., Dawn feeling physically ill; Cathy binge eating to prove she was not anorexic) and mental health outcomes (e.g., Clint and Agnes having suicidal ideations; Amir and Clint feeling fearful their cyberbullies would attack them in their neighborhood). Experiencing cyberbullying led to social problems for participants who were unable to concentrate on their work (Dawn; Ron; Virgil) and who struggled to form and maintain healthy relationships (Cathy; Dawn; Patti).

Participants displayed both proximal and distal responses (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988). Relational quality with the sender of the message, frequency of hurtful messages, and perceived intensity of hurtfulness all determined whether a participant was disturbed by the communication. Distal effects were present in participant evaluations of their communication environment. Negativity had come to be expected in digital social spaces. Regardless of whether the proximal or distal context was most salient for each participant, perception of intent helped participants to determine whether they should integrate or distance themselves from the other communicator, and whether to use aggressive, distributive communication in response.

Participants in the study expected negative communication in their social spaces, perhaps even endorsing cyberbullying as part of the social order (Duck, 2011). The light ribbing turned cyberbullying in the present study supports Eder (1991), who differentiated jokes from bullying based on whether the target of the joke was a part of the in-group telling the joke. Existing research has shown that aggressive communication is linked with negative outcomes even in relationships where it is expected (Kassing & Infante, 1999). The previous research was
informative, but there were considerable gaps that required bridging. This dissertation addressed some of those concerns.

**Additions to cyberbullying research.**

The current study made meaningful contributions to the extant literature. The qualitative features of cyberbullying are woefully understudied. Through qualitative analysis, this dissertation makes the potentially seminal claim that cyberbullying is in fact a communication phenomenon. Though cyberbullying has been studied for its psychological and social impacts, cyberbullying is communication in both its forms and its function. Qualitative analysis revealed some distinguishing features that have thus far been lacking in quantitative examinations. Repetition and intent are long-standing inclusion criteria for cyberbullying researchers. This dissertation showed there are many ways cyberbullying is repeated, and that intent is a misnomer in our definitions—maliciousness is more appropriate. Finally, cyberbullying is a deeply individual experience. Quantitative studies allow researchers to generalize about cyberbullying experiences but each participant in this study had a unique experience. Cyberbullying research needs to place more value on the contextual information that inform individuals and their personal experiences with cyberbullying. More qualitative research is needed because cyberbullying is ultimately an individualized experience. This dissertation has opened many lines for future research as we explore more qualitative features of cyberbullying.

The second contribution to this study is the inclusion of cultural-historical activity theory to the field of communication. Though it is a descriptive framework, CHAT is apt for describing communication systems and the activities that contribute to those systems. As this dissertation revealed, studying the interrelations between major nodes produced deep, contextual data about participant’s experience with cyberbullying. That is the strength of conceptualizing
cyberbullying as something that happens as part of activity. Cyberbullying is not isolated. It is not a single message, it is not removed from the participant’s other social experiences, and it is not something that can be stopped overnight. Cyberbullying has pervaded our social systems, it has pervaded our activities, and it has become normalized. The good news is that, although activity systems are resistant to change, they are amenable to it. We now have a workable framework that allows researchers to attack cyberbullying prevention from the viewpoint of a single node (e.g., communication skills training for subjects, establishing explicit communication rules in a community, or adjusting the affordances of a given technology) and the interrelations among many nodes in the activity system. Holistic change is possible. Knowing what tools are used, who is using them, what communities of practice young adults participate in, how labor is divided in those activities, how rules are violated, and the objects activities should produce versus objects produced when cyberbullying occurs gives researchers an immensely expanded toolset for developing anti-bullying resources and prevention campaigns. In practice, preventing all cyberbullying is an unrealistic goal, however, enhancing (cyber)bullying prevention tools is both possible and desirable.

Limitations

As with all research, this dissertation faced limitations. The population in the study was largely homogenous. The nature of the study called for young adults (aged 18-25) but did not require participants to be of a particular race/ethnicity nor did it require them to be students. Twelve participants were white and all but two were students. The racial makeup of the sample did not match the racial makeup of the local community or university where most participants were recruited. The current study had an even split based on self-identified gender with seven men and eight women and the content of cyberbullying messages was gendered in some cases.
Further exploration into the cyberbullying experiences of women, minority populations, and non-students is needed.

Recruitment was exceedingly difficult in this study. The ample body of quantitative research shows cyberbullying is common, but the researcher faced immense difficulty finding participants wanting to engage in interviews. The researcher explored many avenues for recruitment including posting in Facebook groups, cyberbullying forums, flyers on campus, snowball sampling, and direct recruiting in lower-level communication courses. The researcher believes this to be a result of face-threat presented by semi-structured interviews on a difficult topic, even when the interview is conducted digitally. In the same way that anonymity provided a veil for some cyberbullies to communicate negatively, anonymous surveys protect participants who share details about their cyberbullying experiences. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews allowed intense recall of the cyberbullying experience, causing painful memories for some participants. Although all participants expressed satisfaction with the interview and offered to assist in snowball sampling, no new participants were gained as a result of snowball sampling. All participants were self-selected, leading to the possibility of social desirability and interviewer effects (Babbie, 2007). Participants may have willfully failed to disclose certain details about the cyberbullying experience to protect their image.

**Directions for Future Research**

This dissertation opened many directions for future research. The National Communication Association has developed a task force to enhance Communication Studies’ contributions to cyberbullying research. Establishing cyberbullying as a communication phenomenon was a foundational step needed to enhance those efforts. Moving forward, cyberbullying research needs to be tied to established communication theory. The data from this
study suggest a few useful theories to begin with: Communication climate, communication accommodation and its link to negative-norm communicative spaces, Knapp’s relational model, uncertainty management theory, face-negotiation theory, expectancy violations theory, and the coordinated management of meaning all may be useful for cyberbullying research. These theories could benefit cyberbullying research and cyberbullying researcher can enhance the theories’ heuristic value.

The inclusion of cultural-historical activity theory in communication research is new. CHAT has primarily been used to examine organizational structures, but cyberbullying presents a unique challenge to CHAT theorists. Activity theory is founded on the consequential differences between actions and the activities those actions serve (Engeström & Sannino, 2010). Those consequential differences are discovered when analysis can shift between behaviors and the systems that motivate individuals to behave in a particular way (Engeström, 2008; Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995). The existing cyberbullying research is powerful in its ability to identify tools used in individual cases of cyberbullying, but more research remains needed to answer questions about what motivates individuals toward using those tools and how the technological inclination of those tools contributes to the activities where cyberbullying occurs. The answer may be explained through polycontextuality, which says that the tools are used to navigate a multitude of activities systems, all which are always affecting upon each other (Engeström, Engeström, & Kärkkäinen, 1995). Simplicity was the motivating factor in the present study, perhaps that is because those tools are needed in so many different facets of young people’s lives. Future studies can ask explicitly how subjects are entangled into activity systems when they internalize the problems of an activity and use digital tools to solve those problems. Any activity system will have a normal and desirable outcome, but this study has shown that
undesirable outcomes are possible when the system does not work perfectly. Activity systems are durable in nature, they develop norms over time and are relatively resilient when change occurs. This dissertation has opened the possibility of using activity theory to identify homeostatic norms of a system or activity and then reverse engineer where glitches can occur in that system. Those glitches are the likely source of the undesirable outcomes, like cyberbullying. Further consideration of undesirable outcomes, the possibility of undesirable outcomes during expansive learning, and the effect those learning expansions have on the homeostatic norms of the system are all fruitful paths for CHAT research.

Finally, cyberbullying research is needed for effective policy making. The lack of federal laws on cyberbullying leads to wildly inconsistent legal definitions and enforcement of anti-bullying initiatives. Having research-based, codified federal laws could assist in prevention program development and enforcement. People who experience cyberbullying are nine times as likely to become cyberbullies (Walrave & Heirman, 2011), making effective policy needed. Local-level policies have proven effective in K-12 school systems with a 20-23% reduction in bullying behaviors and 17-20% reduction in bullying victimization (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; McCallion & Feder, 2013). It is reasonable to believe similar results can be achieved on college campuses, in the workforce, and through local and state policies.

Conclusion

Cyberbullying is a difficult phenomenon faced by far too many young adults. The 15 semi-structured interviews in this dissertation allowed the participants to speak directly to their experiences and knowledge about cyberbullying to allow them to define their own experiences. This study provided a unique view that challenged some norms in cyberbullying research, such as examining an understudied population and using an underutilized method. The results suggest
Communication-based studies are direly needed to expand cyberbullying research because of its ability to link micro-level behaviors and messages to meso-level relationships and macro-level activities. This investigation suggests objective criteria for examining cyberbullying are useful, but subjective understanding of cyberbullying will lead to a more robust body of research. Cyberbullying is dangerous at any age, but young adults are especially vulnerable to its effects. More work is needed.
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**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

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<th>Year</th>
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</table>

*Interview length is in minutes.*
Appendix A – Recruitment Flyer

Researchers at NCSU are seeking participants for a study about young adults’ experiences with negative online communication and cyberbullying. If you have ever experienced mean or cruel communication with someone online, please join our study!

To participate in this study you must be:

- Between the ages of 18-25.
- Have experienced mean or cruel communication

For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact Geoffrey Luurs at gdluurs@ncsu.edu or 763-843-9833. Thank you so much for your consideration!
Appendix B – Recruitment Email

Researchers at North Carolina State University are seeking participants for a study about young adult’s experiences with negative online communication and cyberbullying. If you have ever experienced mean or cruel communication with someone online or by phone, please contact Geoffrey Luurs at NCSU.

Participants must be between 18-25 years old and have experienced or been involved with mean or cruel communication online or by phone. We encourage people who are willing to share and talk about their experiences to apply. The confidential interview will last about 30-45 minutes and will take place on campus or via Skype at your convenience. You will receive $5 in return for your time.

For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact Geoffrey Luurs at gdluurs@ncsu.edu. Thank you so much for your consideration!
Appendix C – Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: CHATting about cyberbullying: An activity theory approach to cyberbullying research
Principal Investigator: Dr. Elizabeth Craig  Co-Principal Investigator: Geoffrey Luurs

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may start, stop, or choose not to participate any longer at any time without penalty. No benefits are guaranteed with this study. Additionally, all research poses some risk to participants. This consent form will provide you specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the research team.

What is the purpose of this study?
The study seeks to learn more about young adults' experiences with negative communication online. It wants to know what mean or cruel communication 18-25 year olds experience when they are communicating with others in digital spaces.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in a recorded one-on-one interview in person. Following the interview, you will be asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire. Total time will last about 30 minutes and the interview can be conducted at a time and place of your choosing.

Risks
Possible risks include psychological discomfort and possible breaches of confidentiality. The likelihood of psychological distress is minimal because you’ve chosen to participate and may end your participation at any time. The likelihood of breaches in confidentiality is also minimal because no identifying information will be collected. To further protect your privacy, you will create a pseudonym so that your real name is not used during analysis. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, feel free to skip the question or stop the interview completely.

Benefits
Participation in this study offers the benefit of being able to share your experiences with others. The knowledge gained may help yourself or others prevent future negative outcomes as we learn more about negative communication online.

Confidentiality
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely in password protected folder. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

**Compensation**
You will receive $5 for your participation.

**What if you are a NCSU student?**
Participation in this study is not a course requirement and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your class standing or grades at NC State

**What if you are a NCSU employee?**
Participation in this study is not a requirement of your employment at NCSU, and your participation or lack thereof, will not affect your job.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the research team:
Mr. Geoffrey Luurs       Dr. Elizabeth Craig
gdluurs@ncsu.edu         eacraig@ncsu.edu
763.843.9833

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919-515-4514).

**Consent To Participate**
“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled.”

Subject's signature_______________________________________ Date _________________
Investigator's signature___________________________________
Appendix D – Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. What is your gender?
4. Are you currently a student?
   4a. If yes, what is your current year in school?
Appendix E – Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me! Just as a quick reminder, feel free to skip any questions and stop at any time. Everything you say will be confidential. Let’s start with a few background questions.

**Background Questions**

Note: The following are proposed questions. It is unlikely that every question will be asked but these include the general topics that are likely to come up during the course of the interview.

Thanks so much for agreeing to talk with me! Just as a quick reminder, feel free to skip any questions and stop at any time. Everything you say will be confidential. Let’s start with you talking about why you are here today.

1a. What's the story that made you want to come talk to me?
1b. Can you recall for me what the exchange went like? What was said?

2a. Did you immediately delete the message?
2b. Why did you decide to do that?

3a. What about the message was hurtful to you?
3b. Were any parts of it worse than others?

4. What do you think motivates people to say stuff like that?

5. Now that you can think back about it, do you think you should have done anything differently?

6a. Tell me about the other people involved. Who were they?
6b. What is their relationship to you?
6c. Do you have a relationship with them now?
6d. Where did you meet them?
6e. Is it normal for people who meet there to communicate with each other negatively?
6f. Do people communicate negatively in groups you are in?
6g. Would the same message be hurtful from a different person?

7a. You said your experience happened on [Facebook]?
7b. How did they send these messages to you? (i.e., text message, PM, on Facebook wall)
7c. Why do you think they chose that method?
7d. Is there something about [Facebook] that lets stuff like this happen?
7e. Have you ever experienced mean or cruel communication on other platforms?
7f. Are your online experiences similar to your offline experiences?

8a. Did anyone else see the message or did you share it with anyone else?
8b. Did they do anything or respond to the person?
8c. Why do you think people responded/didn't respond?
9a. Did you go to anyone for help after this experience?
9b. Who?
9c. Why did you choose that person?
9d. Were they helpful?
9e. Is there someone or somewhere you wish you could have gone to to talk about it?

10a. To what extent has your experience affected you?
10b. Was it impactful?
10c. Has it changed how you act online?
10d. Has it affected your behavior offline?

General Cyberbullying Questions
I want to talk more generally about cyberbullying and how people like you think about cyberbullying.

11a. How do you think you would define cyberbullying?
11b. How would you differentiate that from someone who is just saying something aggressive or hurtful?
11c. Is there certain things that might fall under your definition of cyberbullying but should be defined as something else? (If no answer, probe further with examples of death threats, or cyberstalking).
11d. Do these things require a different response?
11e. Does it have to be a certain level of severity for it to be considered cyberbullying instead of something else? Where is that limit?

That about wraps up everything I can think of. I want to stop for a second and give you the opportunity to talk about anything we haven't brought up yet that you think you want to talk about.

12. Is there anything else you have on your mind or anything I'm missing here?
13. What are your closing thoughts?
Appendix F – Mental Health Resources

Counseling Resources for Young Adults

For NCSU Students

Campus Counseling Center:
Phone: 919-515-2423
Website: https://counseling.dasa.ncsu.edu/services/personal-counseling/

The NCSU Counseling Center is located in the Health Center building on the second floor. They have both counseling and psychiatric care available for all of life's stresses. They offer both individual and group counseling services and many services will be covered by the student health insurance plan. Students not on the university health insurance plan can still visit the health center.

If you desire, I can walk with you to the counseling center and/or help you get in contact with the right people.

For Everyone:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
Phone: 1-800-273-8255 - Available 24 hours every day.
Website: http://chat.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/GetHelp/LifelineChat.aspx
Twitter: @800273TALK
Available 24 hours a day, every day.

Crisis Call Center
Phone: 800-273-8255
Text Message: Text ANSWER to 839863
Website: http://crisiscallcenter.org/crisis-services
Available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

National Institute of Mental Health Information Center
Phone: 866-615-6464
Website: http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml
Available 8 AM - 8 PM EST Monday-Friday.
Figure 1. Visual representation of expansive learning cycles.
Figure 2. Traditional model for cultural-historical activity theory.
### Anonymity Types

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<th>Identity of Cyberbully</th>
<th>Domain of Message</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Confidential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anonymous</td>
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</table>

Figure 3. Types of anonymity that occur during cyberbullying.