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The psychosocial impacts of cybervictimisation and barriers to seeking social support: Young people's perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The negative impact of cyberbullying on the mental health of victims is well established. However, qualitative research related to the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation and how these are experienced by young people is scarce. In particular, little is known about young people's perceptions of the association between cyberbullying and suicidal behaviours. This paper reports findings on the mental health impacts of cyberbullying, and barriers to seeking social support, from eleven focus groups with 64 young people aged fourteen to seventeen (53% female), across four secondary schools. Thematic analysis identified two central themes: The Psychological Nature of Cyberbullying (sub-themes include Trapped by the Omni-Presence of Cyber Technology; Negative Overthinking; The Impacts of Negative Overthinking on Young People's Lives; and Suicide as a Means of Escape) and Barriers to Help-Seeking (including sub-themes Needing Help Regarded as Sign of Weakness; Young People Unable to Identify and Express Feelings; Lack of Confidence in Parents Ability to Provide Support; and Inappropriate School Intervention). Cyberbullying was described as more psychological in nature and impact than traditional bullying with increased deleterious effect on the mental health and wellbeing of victims. Victims experience rumination and worry fuelled by the omni-present, pervasive, and permanent nature of cyber interactions. Young people's inability to seek support maintains and exacerbates victims' distress. Participants perceived suicide as a viable escape route for young victims defeated and entrapped by cybervictimisation and their own negative thoughts. Interventions should address emotional competence and mental health literacy in young people, as well as empowering support networks including parents, peers, and school personnel, to foster an environment that promotes help-seeking.

1. Introduction

Traditionally bullying, defined as intentional aggressive behaviour, carried out repeatedly in peer relationships characterised by an imbalance of power, has been confined to the physical spaces frequented by young people such as schools (Olweus, 1997). However, in recent years the proliferation of information and communication technology (ICT), including smart phones and social media, has created a new arena for bullying behaviour, the cyber world (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006).

Cyberbullying is now well established as a public health problem (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2007). Research indicates that 10–40% of young people experience cybervictimisation (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). It is a serious issue for young people whose lives are increasingly immersed in technology and presents complex challenges for parents, teachers, and policy-makers (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013; Deschamps & McNutt, 2016; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011; Marées, 2012; Sigal, Tali, & Dorit, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The debate regarding conceptual and operational definitions of cyberbullying is ongoing. However, it is commonly defined using the traditional bullying criteria of repeated intentional harm and a power imbalance between victims and perpetrators with the addition that aggression is conveyed through electronic media (Kowalski et al., 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). Several studies report overlapping characteristics between the two phenomena, however, cyberbullying has a number of unique factors stemming from the features of the cyber world and the sometimes complex and ambiguous nature of the communications which take place within it (Cassidy et al., 2013; Dennehy et al., 2020). Cyber technology is integral to young people's interactions and their

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relationships (Dennehy et al., 2020; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Continual engagement with social media increases young people's accessibility to perpetrators potentially facilitating relentless victimisation beyond the reach of traditional bullying which is largely confined to the school day (Dennehy et al., 2020; Tokunaga, 2010). Another distinguishing feature of cyberbullying is the potential for anonymous perpetration. Approximately 50% of victims do not know the identity of their aggressor (Kowalski & Limber, 2007) and research with young people indicates that this contributes to fear, distress, and feelings of powerlessness in cyber victims (Dennehy et al., 2020; Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). Further, evidence of victimisation can remain online indefinitely as a permanent reminder to victims while the global reach of cyber technology enables an infinite number of witnesses (Campbell, 2012; Dennehy et al., 2020; Langos, 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008).

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently demonstrate the negative impact of cyberbullying on the mental health and wellbeing of victims (Fisher, Gardella, & Teurbe-Tolon, 2016; John et al., 2018; Katsaras et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). Cybervictimisation is linked with psychosomatic symptoms and internalising problems. It is associated with sleep disturbances, school avoidance, reduced confidence and self-esteem, worry, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviour; fatal and non-fatal (Fisher et al., 2016; Hamm et al., 2015; Katsaras et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014). A number of studies report stronger associations between cyberbullying and anxiety, depressive symptomology, and suicidal ideation than traditional bullying (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Bottino, Bottino, Regina, Correia, & Ribeiro, 2015; Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012; Gini & Espelage, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; John et al., 2018; van Geel et al., 2014). The reasons for the negative impact on young people's mental health have not been clearly established. It has been suggested that the persistent, pervasive, and sometimes anonymous nature of cyberbullying contributes to feelings of hopelessness which are in turn associated with anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviours (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Chu, Fan, Liu, & Zhou, 2018; Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; John et al., 2018).

Seeking social support is consistently identified as an effective strategy in response to cybervictimisation (Perren, Corcoran, Cowie, Dehue, Garcia, Mc Guckin, & Vollink, 2012; Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015). This refers to actively seeking help from other people including family, peers, teachers, or health professionals. It involves communicating with others to gain understanding, advice, information, and support in response to a distressing experience (Rickwood, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2005). Young people themselves have suggested seeking support as a way of coping with cyberbullying, however, evidence shows that cybervictimisation goes largely unreported (Cassidy et al., 2013; Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012; Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Further, research indicates that cyber victims are less likely than victims of traditional bullying to disclose victimisation (Dooley, Gradinger, Strohmeier, Cross, & Spiel, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Young people's reluctance to report cyberbullying has been attributed to difficulty in proving cybervictimisation, fear of loss of access to cyber technology, fear of retaliation or intensification of bullying, lack of confidence in adults' ability to help, and a belief that little can be done to stop cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2013; Dennehy et al., 2020; Hamm et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2012; Šléglová & Černá, 2011).

Young people are vulnerable to mental health difficulties as they experience biological and social change during the transition from childhood to adulthood (Kessler et al., 2005). The risk to the mental health and wellbeing of young people exposed to cybervictimisation requires action to address this issue and systematic reviews of cyberbullying interventions highlight a need for evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to tackle cyberbullying (Della Cioppa, O'Neil, & Craig, 2015; Hutson, Kelly, & Militello, 2017; Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, & MacFadden, 2010; Walker & Sleath, 2017). Adults do not have first-hand experience of using cyber technology in their youth and, therefore, the development of appropriate prevention and intervention strategies can benefit from youth engagement (Spears, Slee, Campbell, & Cross, 2011; Spears, Taddeo, Daly, Stretton, & Karklins, 2015). Young people are experts in their technology-rich lives and as such can provide unique insights (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). Cyberbullying research has been dominated by quantitative research methods which have provided information on the characteristics, prevalence, behaviours, attitudes, and impacts related to cyberbullying (Espinoza & Juvonen, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Smith, 2019). While these approaches make a useful contribution to the evidence-base on cyberbullying, it must be acknowledged that young people's experiences of this contemporary and ever evolving phenomenon are embedded with a social context that cannot always be analysed objectively (Broom & Willis, 2007; Spears & Kofoed, 2013). Qualitative research involving young people allows researchers to step outside the bounds of adult thinking (Mishna, Antle, & Regehr, 2004). It offers the opportunity to gain rich insights into young people's thoughts and feelings, allowing for their subjective definitions, meanings and experiences to be brought to the fore (Mishna & Van Wert, 2013). Qualitative studies have explored young people's perceptions and experiences of cyberbullying as well as motivations for involvement and coping strategies (Dennehy et al., 2020; Parris et al., 2012; Šléglová & Černá, 2011; Varjas, Talley, Meyers, Parris, & Cutts, 2010). However, qualitative research on cyberbullying is relatively scarce (Smith, 2019). In particular, there is little qualitative research related to the mental health and psychosocial impacts of cybervictimisation and how these are experienced by young people (Kwan et al., 2020). Omitting young people's perspectives risks misinterpretation of their needs and misguided prevention and intervention strategies (Bennett et al., 2008; Cross, Lester, Barnes, Cardoso, & Hadwen, 2015; Mishna & Van Wert, 2013; Spears & Zeederberg, 2013). With this in mind, and with a view to informing the development of relevant and appropriate interventions, a qualitative study was conducted with young people to explore their perspectives on the nature, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying as well as coping strategies. This paper reports study findings relating to young people's perceptions of the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation and contributes to the existing literature on the barriers that deter cyber victims from engaging in help-seeking behaviour.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

In collaboration with a purposefully formed Young Person's Advisory Group, a qualitative study was conducted in all four secondary schools in a large town in the Republic of Ireland (ROI). Focus groups were used in data collection and data were analysed thematically.

2.2. The adult research team

The multidisciplinary adult research team comprised clinical and social researchers with experience of working with young people in school and youth work settings, in mental health and suicide research, and in participatory and qualitative research methods. The research, including focus group facilitation and analysis, was led by the first author, a Ph.D. candidate. These activities were supported by a Master of Public Health student. Engaged in reflexive research, researchers were mindful of their position in the research process, the complexity of undertaking research with young people, and of the power relations between adult researchers and the young people involved (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Morrow & Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002). Consequently, and as described below, efforts were made throughout this

study to ensure that the research process and outputs were representative of young people's interests, needs, and experiences.

2.3. Young Person's Advisory Group

Authentic research with young people gives power and voice to participants and provides insights into young people's subjective world (Grover, 2004). In efforts to facilitate the ethical, appropriate, and meaningful involvement of young people, as well as addressing the power imbalance in the adult-child relationship, this study was conducted in collaboration with a purposefully formed Young Person's Advisory Group (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Punch, 2002). The group comprised of 16 students (ten female, six male; all aged 16), four from each participating school, provided a unique perspective on the design, conduct, and interpretation of the research. The collaborative methodology, informed by Lundy's rights based model of youth participation (Lundy, 2007), is described in detail elsewhere (Reference: undisclosed for review purposes).

The safety and wellbeing of participants was a priority throughout the research process. Child protection and ethical guidelines were adhered to at all times (Alderson & Morrow, 2011; Banks et al., 2013; Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011, 2012; Felzmann, Sixsmith, O'Higgins, Ni Chonnachtaigh, & Nic Gabhainn, 2010; Hill, 2005; Mishna et al., 2004). Ethical approval was granted by the University Clinical Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ECM3 (uuu)). Written consent for young people's participation was obtained from schools, parents/guardians and young people. A protocol for reporting concerns regarding participant welfare was agreed with each participating school in keeping with local standard operating procedures.

2.4. Participants

Supported by the local youth service, this study was conducted with all four secondary schools in a large town in (ROI). Participating schools included a non-fee-paying all-female voluntary secondary school (School A), a non-fee-paying all-male voluntary secondary school (School B), a non-fee-paying co-educational vocational school in receipt of additional supports to address educational disadvantage and social exclusion (School C) (Department of Education and Science, 2005), and a fee-paying co-educational private school with a mix of day students and boarders (School D).

Sampling and recruitment decisions were made in collaboration with the Advisory Group (Reference: undisclosed for review purposes). Secondary education in ROI consists of a junior cycle (first-third year, age 13–15) and a senior cycle (fourth-sixth year, age 16–18). Second (aged 14), fourth (aged 16), and fifth-year (aged 16–17) students were purposively sampled. Those preparing for state examinations (third and sixth-year) were excluded due to constraints on their time. Advisory group members felt that first year students new to the school would be intimidated by the research process and so this group were also excluded. The study was introduced to all students in their individual class groups and information sheets were distributed by the first author and Advisory group members in their respective schools. Students were advised that the Advisory Group would not be aware of the identity of participants. Consent forms signed by young people and parents/guardians were returned to the schools and collected by the first author. Seventy-two students self-selected to take part. Eight of these students (fourth-year students in School D) were unable to participate as they were undertaking work experience outside of school when focus groups were conducted and efforts to reschedule were unsuccessful. Ultimately, in Spring 2017 eleven focus groups were conducted with 64 participants across the four schools; and just over half of the participants were female (53%).

2.5. Data collection

A topic guide developed by Mishna et al. (2016) was adapted for this study and piloted with the Advisory Group. Focus groups were conducted in schools in the format agreed with the Advisory Group (Reference: undisclosed for review purposes). Members favoured focus groups, and the absence of school staff, to generate open and honest dialogue among participants. Research supports this approach indicating that the presence of peers reduces the emphasis on the adult-child relationship between the participant and the researcher (Heary & Hennessy, 2002). As the merits of single or mixed-sex groupings are not established, focus groups included participants from the same year group, and were single or mixed-sex based on the population of the respective school (Gibson, 2007; Heary & Hennessy, 2002; Shaw, Brady, & Davey, 2011).

At the outset of each session, an icebreaker was conducted and a group contract was developed to establish the accepted conditions of participation (Organisation, 2020). The remit and limits of confidentiality were outlined, researchers reiterated that reports of the discussion would be anonymised and that participants could withdraw from the study at any point without consequence (Hill, 2006; Morrow & Richards, 1996). Exploratory, open-ended questions centred on the nature, causes, and consequences of cyberbullying as well as coping mechanisms. In attempts to avoid socially desirable responses, participants were not asked to share their personal experiences (Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). However, if participants volunteered personal accounts they were not restricted from doing so. Name-tags were provided to all participants, and to researchers, allowing the facilitator to invite by name those that were less vocal than others to comment. A debriefing was conducted with participants at the end of each focus group to ensure their wellbeing prior to cessation. Participants were reminded that school guidance counsellors and the local youth service were available for support if needed, the first author's contact details and relevant helplines were also provided. Focus groups lasted an average of 94 min, with a range from 66 to 112 min. Discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised.

2.6. Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed researchers to analyse the data systematically in a manner which was accessible to the members of the Advisory Group (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Transcripts were imported to NVivo 12 (2016) and read repeatedly. The first author open-coded each transcript to organise data into meaningful groupings and similar codes were categorised. A second-researcher coded four transcripts. Differing interpretations and assumptions were considered through peer debriefing (Long & Johnson, 2000), discussion, and the use of mind maps before related categories were grouped and the multidisciplinary research team reached consensus on potential themes. Preliminary themes were presented to the Advisory Group to assess the validity and reliability of the findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Participatory enabling techniques were used to generate discussion among advisory group members and researchers (Ref: undisclosed for review purposes). Discussion focused on the extent to which the identified themes were reflective of young people's experience of cyberbullying. The members identified the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation as an important finding and a priority area for intervention. Subsequently, researchers refined the categories and themes associated with this domain which are presented here.

3. Findings

Thematic analysis identified two core themes: The Psychological Nature of Cyberbullying and Barriers to Help-Seeking. Cyberbullying was described by participants as *"more psychological"* in its nature and

Table 1
Illustrative quotes.

Themes and Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 1: The Psychological Nature of Cyberbullying	
I would say that [cyberbullying] would definitely be worse mentally, having to put up with it like in your head (School A, female, aged 17)	
Like, if someone hits you, you're obviously going to get better from that, but like, if someone like, scarred you mentally like, you'll always be thinking about it. It's always lingering in the back of your mind like. (School B, male, aged 17)	
It's [cyberbullying] constantly in your head. It's way more psychological. (School C, female, aged 16)	
Like normal, well not normal, but traditional bullying is, kind of like…you can say it's kind of, 50 physical, 50 mental, you know, and so you almost have that half-and-half… but with cyberbullying like, they can't hurt you, so they just 100% have to go through your mind, and your mind is what controls your emotions, you know. They might break your body [with traditional bullying], but at least you can, kind of, think straight. (School D, male, aged 14)	
Trapped by the Omni-Presence of Cyber Technology	I think with the old types of bullying like if you were being bullied in school you would go home and know you were safe whereas with cyber bullying you have your phone on you all the time, like you take it to bed. So like if someone was getting bullied like there is no way unless you turned off your phone that you can escape from it so I think that's why it is so dangerous and it effects so many people…there is no way out like you know (School A, female, aged 17)
	If it [bullying] was happening in school, I could just move to another school but if it's cyberbullying, then it's going to always be there. (School B, male, aged 14)
	Like when I was in primary school, I wouldn't say I was bullied, but I was picked on for a while, and I feel like there was a moment where I was like I can either let this really affect me or I can just let it go over my head, whereas with like cyberbullying, it is constantly there like. Like I can choose to interact with those people, but I can't help it if something pops up on my phone (School C, female, aged 16)
	P2: Cyberbullying is, from my experience, an extension of traditional bullying and it's when the person goes home, it's a way to still get at them. P3: Because you always have your phone on you, really, so it's like they're always with you, I guess. P2: I just think it means there's no escape, really. P4: Yeah. For cyberbullying, it's a lot more dangerous because… P2: Because they're always there, like. P4: Now we always have, like, our phones on us or a computer or something. Like, there's always something, you know. So, it's a bit harder to escape. P3: You're always going to feel like it's there, just like it doesn't go away. Like, even if it's normal bullying, like, you're going to get a chance after school or at school if that's what the case is, but, like, with cyberbullying, it's so hard. P2: As easily as you can block someone, they can make a new account. And I think that's the worst bit of it because you block someone and then, hey, they have a new account and they get at you from Viber, from WhatsApp and Skype, and they just find every kind of pinprick to get at you. P4: Like, if they want to get at you on social media, they will. Like, they'll go for you. And, like, I've seen accounts of people that are, like, literally making up fake identities of the person that they're bullying, saying that's like a new account or something like that, and then saying just a bunch of terrible stuff. Like, if somebody really wants to destroy you, they can. Like, if somebody has that hate in them… (School D, male and female participants, aged 14)
Negative Overthinking	P8: …whenever people say things to me online like I tend to kind of like relive, I don't know like, I read the message and I kind of relive the pain I went through like, if I read the message it just hurts… P5: Ya over and over and over and over like overthinking about it like why did they say that about me what did I do to make them say that stuff P6: But like, you would be thinking like I don't even talk to them like so why would they say it P4: And like if they were saying it face to face you could just try and avoid them and keep away from them but like you always have your phone with you like and its always there P8: Ya it's there forever P5: Ya like even though you can delete it's still like there kind of (School A, females, aged 14)
	Ya your just like 'oh it's not nothing I am overthinking it, it's making me sad but it shouldn't make me sad' (School A, female, aged 16)
	It's worse because you're thinking 'what did I do wrong', is it something I did?' And it's in your brain, like you're distracted. (School B, male, aged 14)
	You don't have anyone really to talk to…you just think about it by yourself and like you keep thinking about it and like you overthink everything and like you start thinking that like 'oh, one person said this like maybe everyone is thinking this?' (School C, female, aged 14)
	P4: Like, you're constantly thinking, like, who's here trying to hurt me, you know? What did I do to get this person to try and, like, ruin me? P2: It's the fear of the unknown (School D, male participants, aged 14)
	When you don't know who it is like you just have the worst thoughts like, oh my God, that could be say my best friend like that's saying that to me. You don't know so you're automatically thinking the worst. (School D, female, aged 17)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Themes and Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
The Impact of Negative Overthinking on Victims Lives	I think you overthink everything like not even on the subject of bullying but even if you are in a shop and you bought something then you are like 'oh I should have bought something else'…it's just part of your life (School A, female, aged 14)
	You probably wouldn't be able to sleep at night because you wouldn't stop thinking about it and you would be like tired… I will just keep thinking about it and I won't sleep or anything (School A, female, 16)
	If someone is saying something to you like constantly and it like is repetitive then you are going to start believing it is true yourself so like you probably shut yourself off from everybody because you feel like that is the best thing to do. You know you are nearly in their way or like a burden if you are around like you know (School A, female, aged 16)
	Yeah, and like the person that they're bullying is like, they're going to feel like more insecure about themselves because they don't know who's saying it about them. Like if it's like one person or like a whole group of people and like they might be like scared to go to like school the next day or something because they might not think that – they might think that people might not like them and stuff (School C, male, aged 17)
	Well, I guess they want to remain inconspicuous, kind of, like they don't want to be in the spotlight. And if their bully has been telling them that they're, like, small and they're not relevant and that kind of thing, like, they're going to believe that. Like, you're going to start eventually believing what your bully has been telling you. (School D, male, aged 14)
	Lose their self-confidence by like a huge amount and their self-image. And like they'd find it really hard to make friends because like they'd been hurt before by people and they wouldn't trust people. They wouldn't really go out of their comfort zone, I'd say. (School D, female, aged 17)
Suicide as a Means of Escape	The people who have committed suicide you would see it on Facebook that they have hung themselves and killed themselves, so like it must be from [cyber] bullying (School A, female, aged 14)
	And like it's so common with suicides like and young people…if you hear that someone has died from suicide you just automatically think that it was [cyber] bullying (School A, female, aged 16)
	They're thinking all day, oh, did he actually mean it, did he not, and then it gets stuck in your head the whole day. It's going around and around, and it might stay there for a week and then you might forget about it for a day and it'll come back and you're just - after a while it just gets too much. (School B, male, aged 14)
	Like if it was really bad, some people could commit suicide and stuff (School B, male, aged 14)
	If you say like kill yourself and you don't know he's suffering from depression then they could actually have been considering it before and that could reinforce that like (School B, male, aged 16)
	All three of them are linked, like, the cyberbullying and depression and suicide like, because like we said, cyberbullying, like, they don't know when to stop and like, they say depression is like a dark tunnel with no light, so basically, it just keeps getting worse and worse, like you can't find a way out, like and then, do you know, like, it might get so bad that the person might just, like, worst case scenario, like is…[suicide] (School B, male, aged 17)
	There are so many horrific actions like suicide and depression occurring from [cyberbullying] so we need to try and help that, you know (School B, male, aged 17)
	I've seen one there before, she took a picture of her in her underwear in front of the mirror and a load of the lads started sharing it around on Facebook and her dad's seen and then she just took her life because her dad's seen (School C, male, aged 16)
	P3: People always say when someone dies, when something like that happens, it comes out people are saying, "Oh, he killed himself because he was being bullied," and they don't look at home life, his mental state, how – they don't look at anything else bar what someone said on the internet. It might even have been one isolated taken out context situation that is completely and utterly taken out of context and they blame that even though it might have been something completely different P6: Their dad might have been beating them, they might have been depressed, they might have had suicidal thoughts other than that one time someone said on the internet. P4: But they need to have blame, it's pinned on that, and there's the big, you know, committee "oh the internet is evil we need to censor it". (School C, males, aged 17)
	Yeah, some people don't even mean half the stuff online…they'll just go at you and like basically try to say stuff to get you rattled up, but online they keep on doing it, bit by bit, until you just burst practically. (School C, male, aged 16)
	P4 (male): Like, if you're going to go out, go with a bang, I guess. Make sure everybody knows, everybody can see. Like, see what you've done to me. See what you've made me do P3 (female): So, really, maybe letting everyone else have a look at the pain that she's [cyber victim] felt. Like, how much everything's-how mean everyone's been to her and now she's gone (School D, aged 14)

(*continued on next page*)

Table 1 (*continued*)

Themes and Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Theme 2: Barriers to Help-Seeking	
Like I just feel like they just put it behind them and feel that they can get rid of it themselves and that there is no point in telling people because it is not really a big deal (School A, female, age 16)	
You need to tell someone but at the same time you can't (School B, male aged 14).	
That's the scary thing though when people won't talk to you about it and they're scared to talk about it and then that's when depression and you know, all that (School D, female, aged 17)	
Needing Help Regarded as a Sign of Weakness	P5: Because you don't want to be known that you are weak or that you have been bullied or stuff RD: So if you admit that you are feeling hurt by it you see that as a weakness, why? P6: Because like you can't cope with it, you're not dealing with it, you have to get adults into it (School A, females, age 14)
	I think the fear of telling someone is like what mostly stops people from coping with it. There is a fear of being judged (School A, female, age 16)
	P4: It's like a whole weight on your shoulders until you tell someone. Like it would be really hard to tell someone. RD: Why is it so hard? P6: Because you're meant to deal with it yourself. It's almost like you're kind of weak if you can't sort something out like this. P1: It's just the initial thing of saying 'I am being bullied'. It's just that initial sentence, going to your parents. P6: It's embarrassing as well. P1: It kind of hurts you because it's become like a real reality, you know (School B, male, aged 14)
	Yeah, because there's no protection. There's nobody there – well, your parents are there but you don't want to go to them and say you're being bullied because then you sound – you don't want your parents to know you're not capable of defending yourself, I guess, you know. (School B, male, aged 14)
	P2: Yeah, they [boys] put on a brave face, like. RD: Why do you think boys do that? P4: You just act the hard man, like. P1: It's the way we were brought up. P4: Do not show emotion, like. P2: It's just you're seen as, like, weak if you do, like, it is the status of men, kind of, like… P4: So society has looked at it for so long like that, if men show emotion like that like, it shows them as weak and just 'oh, he's not really as much of a man as this person' like that. You could go through the same thing, like. (School B, males, aged 17)
	It is kind of embarrassing with your family as well like because your brother has probably seen it as well like, and they're kind of awkward around you. You're embarrassed in that way as well. And they'd, like, be telling you to stand up for yourself, like, and do something like but, if you know he's bigger or stronger and he has more friends that he can just bring in all this kind of stuff, like, it's kind of… (School B, male, aged 17)
	But you've also been putting on this face, like the big, macho person for the last how many years? And now, all of a sudden, you just expect them to drop it and say, 'Oh, I actually have depression' (School B, male, aged 17)
	You don't want to be damaged…You don't want people to think you're small or you're weak or you're insecure or you're easy to attack. You want to look big, you want to look strong (School D, female, aged 17)
	I'd say you'd tell your friends but you'd be kind of like messing. You'd be like oh, look what your man said to me and you'd try and like make it light and make it funny but even if it's… you wouldn't let your friends know how much it had hurt you. (School D, female, aged 17)
Young People Unable to Label and Express Feelings	Or like a lot of people can't put into words how they feel, like express how they feel (School A, female, age 16)
	Like I don't exactly know how to know if I have anxiety or how you know you have something. Like no one knows if they have anxiety or not (School A, female, age 16)
	It is very hard to put it into words like you may be feeling a certain way and it is hard to describe how you are feeling to someone else because they are not going through what you are going through so I think that it is important that people learn how to be able to express their feelings (School A, female, age 16)
	Like, I don't really know, like, depression, is it different, like? I don't, like, understand, like, is it different, like, for everyone else? I don't even know how to ask the question, like (School B, male, age 17)
	People our age don't know what depression is (School B, male, age 17)
	It's hard to know if someone is depressed though, if there were symptoms or signs, I just wish there were, I don't know like. We should know, like, the symptoms or the signs of someone with depression. If a person's hand was broken, you could see it, like, but if their mind was, kind of, broken, you'd never see it, like. It just doesn't work like that (School B, male, age 17)
	Or even like because mental health is such a huge thing at the moment, for the past few months so I think that like even for us to learn about signs you know the signs, you know on social media, a lot of people can be like, you know, Tweet things [about mental health] and you're kind of like 'oh my God'. And then you'd say to someone and they're like, no, I think they're okay. It's just probably spur of the moment. Like signs like that (School D, female, 17)

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Themes and Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Lack of Confidence in Parents' Ability to Provide Appropriate Support	I feel like they could nearly judge, not from their own because of how they are brought up about it and they don't understand the reality of it because OK like my mother might be on Facebook but she has like ten friends like you know, but they don't see the reality of it whereas that is our life. My life is on social media (School A, female, aged 17)
	And if you told your parents it would make them feel bad that they didn't protect you from it like (School B, male, age 14)
	And the thing about depression, people… obviously depression is like severe depression. They don't think about moderate depression and mild depression. So, you could go to your parents and say, "Oh, I feel like I am depressed," and they're like, "No, you're not depressed. Depression is when you can't get out of bed". It's not always! (School C, female, aged 16)
	We grew up through it all and they didn't really. They didn't have cyberbullying when they were young. They don't know the extent of that, like (School B, male, aged 17)
	I don't think people have realised the effect of cyberbullying yet, like, older people, how bad it actually is. Like, we sort of understand more because we might not have experienced it, but we've seen, like, aspects around it. I don't think older people realise it's happening as bad as it actually is, because, like, every day we could just go on Facebook and we see these things happening, but the older generation wouldn't really, like (School B, male, aged 17)
	Some parents would just be like, "Oh, just put your phone away so, like, just don't look at it." (School B, male, aged 17)
	When it affects you, like when [parents] do something that actually has an impact on you and what people think of you. You're like 'okay, no. Please don't do this'. It's like I don't want my mum to like take my phone and that affect me, I'd be bored (School C, female, aged 17)
	P5: I think like even if you were to be bullied or if you were like upset about a comment or something from someone and then like you went to sit down with your mum or whoever, your dad, whatever, and talked about it, I think like my mum would be very like, 'oh, you're so stupid. Why would you be upset about something like that? Why would that affect you?' And then – P3: That really makes it worse then. P5: They wouldn't get to the point that like they won't realise that you're really upset about this. They kind of dismiss it and just be kind of like 'why would you be so stupid enough to let that affect you?' P5: They don't understand. P1: My mum would always say, 'Oh, you should be focussing on your school and on your studies and shouldn't be like – ' P1: Take your phone then like. (School D, male and female participants, aged 14)
	And you, kind of, don't want your parents to know that you're in terrible pain. Like, no parent wants to hear that… that their child is being bullied and is struggling mentally and it's, like, crippling depression. Like, you know that that would probably ruin them (School D, male, aged 14)
	Yeah, like I know that like if I told my mum or something, she'd go ballistic and absolutely take my phone away from me and all that. And I'm like no, that's my phone (School D, female, aged 17)
Inappropriate School Interventions	Because in like all these talks [in schools] they make it sound so easy like that just tell someone like it so easy but it is not that easy (School A, female, aged 14)
	It [educational talk] was like if you're being bullied go straight to your teacher, and tell your parents. It was misinformative like it made it seem like it was that easy…It's not that simple (School B, male, aged 14)
	P1: [Mental health] is just like an elephant in the room and no one wants to address it so they just leave it and sugar coat it and no one sees how much of a big deal it actually is P2: And it's becoming a big problem P1: It's so common P2: Everyone is talking about how bad it is but no one is doing anything about it. RD: Who talks about how bad it is? P1: Like even in politics and stuff you would at least hear someone say 'there is so much suicides'. P2: On the news it would be like 'oh this person' P1: And there's so much bullying and mental health and like people being down in themselves and so much teenagers on anti-depressants and stuff because they are being bullied. RD: So you are kind of hearing it in the news, in the media that mental health is a big issue but then at the same time you feel like no one is doing anything about it? P8: But there was like a tweet, I read it and it was like am teachers are more concerned about, because we have like a week for World Book Day but when mental health day comes along no one did anything about it. P2: And you have a week for like, what is it Irish week, Seachtain na Gaeilge [Irish language week] and then it's just then there is nothing on bullying or anything P1: All they care about is our Irish language, they are trying to get back all the 'culchies' and stuff but yet there are people that are feeling so down in themselves and people are like 'oh you will be grand.' (School A, females, aged 16)

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Table 1 (*continued*)

Themes and Sub-Themes	Illustrative Quotes
	P3: I'd be afraid in case that [teachers] went off and told people…In case if the teachers started gossiping because you wouldn't know like because if it was kind of serious she would obviously have to tell someone. P1: I don't know I think the guidance counsellor in the school, she is a teacher also so P3: Ya I feel like it should be someone outside the school. P2: I would rather if it was someone from outside the school. P3: It's hard to talk to a teacher who is also a guidance counsellor (School A, aged 16)
	Yeah. I feel like a lot of the time [victims] keep it to themselves until it's too bad and then you tell the teacher. Like I feel like sometimes like teachers don't know what to do about it. Like they just – like they tell the person stop but like it never really stops (School C, female, aged 14)
	I feel like they try to move the situation like on fast like get it over like in a day and like just say like okay, guys. They just hear the story and honestly, it's okay guys. You guys should be friends. They don't really say what like what this person should have done. They just say be friends. (School C, female, aged 14)
	[Cyberbullying] is just one of those things that like is always going to happen like, that's why it's only going to get worse in a way because technology's always building, so I think coping, and like teaching people the effects of what can help people and outcomes and what can actually happen to you (School C, female, aged 16)
	You need the coping skills need to be taught, not like in the way that we were told about cyberbullying which was basically, 'It's bad, don't do it'…You need to teach people, 'This is how you cope with it, this is how you talk to people' (School C, male, age 17)
	P4: I want somebody to talk to me like you're [focus group facilitators] talking to us, like, you're letting us speak and you're letting us speak maturely. Like, I don't have to listen to you, like, giving me a whole lecture on how to, like… we're talking one-to-one, like, we're in a small room. We can just talk and it's simple (School D, male, aged 14)
	P2: Yeah, we need someone to talk to us instead of someone saying, "This is Fa-ce-book. Fa-ce-book is bad." (Group laughing) P4: It's true, though. It's true. P3: That's actually true (School D, male and female participants, aged 14)
	P2: It was, kind of, patronising, kind of assuming that we didn't know anything about technology, and it was going over the basics when we already learned that when we were five, you know? P4: Yeah, like, I knew all of that from a young age. P3: It was the exact same one as last year. RD: So, what would you have preferred? P2: Something more adult. P4: Yeah. P2: Like, actually treat us the way we are and realise that we actually know a lot more than you think we do. P4: Yeah, like, it's a serious problem. P3: It's like they were showing us like Snapchat and Instagram and we were like we all have it so we know how to block somebody. (School D, male and female participants, aged 14)
	Like if this was a teacher here now we wouldn't say half the stuff we are saying to you now (School A, female, aged 16)

impact and more harmful than traditional bullying. While participants perceived that victims of traditional bullying can recover and move on, cyberbullying was viewed as a *"dangerous"* and *"constant burden"* that infiltrates victims' *"brains"*. Core themes are presented in bold with sub-themes highlighted in italics. Text in italics conveys participants own words and illustrative quotes are presented in Table 1.

3.1. The psychological nature of cyberbullying

3.1.1. Trapped by the omni-presence of cyber technology

A majority of participants perceived that while victims of traditional bullying can choose to avoid perpetrators, find some respite in their homes after school, or even move school if necessary, the omni-presence of cyber technology in young people's lives means that victims of cyberbullying are exposed to relentless and invasive victimisation with, they believe, no means of *"escape"*. Some participants described cyberbullying as an *"extension of traditional bullying"* with cyber technology allowing perpetrators to access victims even after the school day and that for victims it feels like their abuser is always with them leaving them with *"no safe place to go"*.

Participants discussed how young people, motivated by a fear of missing out *("FOMO")* on peer interactions, use smartphones (internet enabled mobile phones) *"constantly"* to engage with peers through *"social media"* applications, primarily Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. They indicated that although young people carry their phones with them at all times social media is mostly used at home in the evenings where there is free access to Wi-Fi and little restriction on phone use. They revealed that it is in this context, at "*home*", at "*night*", and when "*alone*" in the "*dark*" that young people are most vulnerable to cyberbullying.

3.1.2. Negative overthinking

Analysis indicated that young people exposed to cybervictimisation are considered to be consumed by thoughts of their victimisation. Participants described this as *"overthinking"*, an ongoing and negative internal dialogue which intensifies when victims are alone. They explained that without the distraction of school, and in the absence of family or peers to provide perspective or a sense of protection, victims can anguish over the causes and consequences of their victimisation and nervously anticipate the next episode of aggression.

Participants depicted victims being *"taunt[ed]"* by negative thoughts long after the cessation of cyberbullying, as perpetrators words and actions remain *"stuck in [their] heads"*. Further, they indicated that while young people are likely to forget the intricate details of hurtful comments made during face-to-face interactions, online content serves as a *"typed"* and *"constant reminder"* of victimisation thereby maintaining its position at the forefront of victims minds. It was highlighted that cyber victims repeatedly read and analyse perpetrators' disparaging posts and that each engagement with the content causes victims to *"re-live the pain"* experienced on initial receipt.

It was believed that perpetrators post ambiguous comments on social media with the intention of hurting a certain individual while evading accountability. Victims were described as spending considerable time "*analysing"* ambiguous social media content in attempts to decipher if disparaging messages were in fact directed at them or if they were *"over-reacting"* and making a *"big-deal"* out of nothing. Participants highlighted that victims also agonise over anonymous messages, particularly those which threaten victims or their families, in attempts to discern perpetrators identity and the sincerity of their threats. They indicated that, consequently, victims exist in a state of anxious expectation as without evidence to the contrary, they anticipate that threats will be followed through.

The public nature of social media content serves to increase the humiliation experienced by victims and fuel negative thoughts. Participants articulated that while it was unlikely that remarks made in a face-to-face interaction would be brought to the attention of others, the often public nature of social media content means that there are almost always witnesses to perpetrators' comments. Victims were believed to be preoccupied with the possibility that perpetrators' views were supported by others and that, consequently, they would be ostracised by their peers. Participants highlighted that the ability for others to engage with perpetrators' comments, such as the ability to *"like"* or *"comment"* on a post, increases victims' concerns regarding consensus.

3.1.3. The impacts of negative overthinking on victims lives

Female participants in particular discussed the impact of enduring victimisation and negative overthinking on young people. They articulated that victims' negative thought process often extended beyond thoughts of cyberbullying to other aspects of their lives. Worn down by negative thoughts, victims were thought to be at risk of eventually believing perpetrators' claims with negative consequences for their *"confidence"* and *"self-esteem"*. Victims were described as over-analysing day-to-day experiences and interactions and assuming negative intent in the words and actions of others. Participants remarked that victims "*fear being judged"* and worry excessively about saying or doing the wrong thing or dressing in a way that might provoke perpetrators. They indicated that ultimately victims with low *"self-worth"* will *"close themselves off"* from their peers.

Additionally, negative overthinking was believed to interfere with victims' sleep leading to chronic tiredness. Participants perceived that fatigue and a preoccupation with thoughts of cyberbullying make it difficult for victims to concentrate in school. It was noted that some victims of cyberbullying avoid attending school altogether because they fear meeting perpetrators, anticipate the next cyber-attack, and/or worry that their peers *"might not like them"* having witnessed perpetrators' public and disparaging comments.

3.1.4. Suicide as a means of escape

Participants believed that *"omni-present"* cyberbullying and incessant overthinking, which often continues long after the direct actions of the perpetrator, generate a deepening *"depression"* in victims until it becomes *"too much"* for victims to cope with. They emphasised that the burden of cyberbullying increases *"bit by bit"* until victims cannot *"take it anymore"*. Participants perceived that there is *"no way out"* for victims and they articulated that for some, the *"only escape is to just commit suicide"*. Some participants believed that victims used suicide as a way to express to others the *"pain"* they had experienced as a result of cyberbullying and to convey the damage that their perpetrators had caused.

Many participants viewed cyberbullying as an additional burden for young people who also struggled in other areas of their lives and that the accumulated impact on victims' mental health pushed them toward suicide. Further, they believed that in some cases cyberbullying exacerbated existing mental health problems such as anxiety and depression thereby increasing victims' vulnerability and reducing resilience. Participants articulated that it was common for perpetrators to tell victims to kill themselves, and some perceived that this had the potential to "*reinforce*" suicidal thoughts in victims already at risk of suicide.

On the other hand, a small minority of male participants, aged 17, perceived that youth suicide is often incorrectly attributed to cyberbullying. They believed that other factors contributing to suicide are ignored while cyber technology is villainised by those looking for something to blame for young people's deaths. In contrast, a majority of participants perceived that suicide among victims of cyberbullying was common, particularly among young women. They referred to the recent suicide of a female peer in their locality with sadness and disbelief and many attributed this and the suicides of other young people to cyber-victimisation. Information about cyberbullying and suicide was garnered from schools, the news, television talk shows, and also through social media. Participants articulated how they had seen details of the motives and methods for cyberbullying-related suicide on Facebook and they also discussed the live-streaming of suicides on this social media platform. Some female participants in School A, aged 16, discussed the suicide of a young female in response to the non-consensual distribution of her explicit images on Facebook remarking that this type of cyberbullying was particularly harmful to females as *"they get really badly abused over it"*. Many participants referred specifically to the well-publicised cases of Phoebe Prince and Amanda Todd, young females from the United States of America and Canada respectively, who experienced cyberbullying before taking their own lives. Some participants perceived that the media's tendency to focus on the more serious cases of cyberbullying, those resulting in suicide, caused victims to question the validity of their cyberbullying experience and contributing to feelings of paranoia.

3.2. Barriers to Help-Seeking

Participants highlighted that although young people are instructed to *"tell someone"* if they are affected by cyberbullying, "*it is not that easy*" to ask for help. While they demonstrated a desire among young people to seek support, they identified a number of barriers that constrain them from doing so. They articulated that, therefore, victims are forced to carry the burden of cyberbullying alone with negative consequences for their mental health and wellbeing.

3.2.1. Needing help regarded as a sign of weakness

Analysis indicated that victims of cyberbullying experience a deep sense of shame which discourages them from seeking support. Participants stated that it is *"embarrassing"* for young people to admit that they have been targeted and *"upset"* by perpetrators of cyberbullying as this is viewed as an admission and disclosure of personal insecurities. They remarked that in spite of being hurt, victims often make light of perpetrators' actions in the company of their peers in attempts to give the impression that they are unconcerned. Participants demonstrated a belief that young people should be able to cope with such problems independently. Needing adult intervention to deal with cyberbullying was viewed as a sign of *"weakness"*.

Participants articulated that it was especially difficult for young males to admit that they struggled with victimisation. They indicated that young males put on a *"brave face"* and acted *"the hard man"* in

response to cyberbullying as they were expected to appear capable and *"strong"*. Some male participants stated that as young males were raised to convey a *"macho"* persona it was unfair and unrealistic to expect them to *"drop it"* and show emotion or admit to a struggling with their mental health. They specifically mentioned feeling too embarrassed to initiate discussions about cyberbullying or mental health with male family members as they feared being perceived as *"soft"* or as a *"pussy"*.

3.2.2. Young people unable to identify and express feelings

Older participants, those aged 16–17, indicated that young people are unable to recognise or *"express"* the impact that cyberbullying has on their mental health. They admitted that they did not have the knowledge to make sense of or to articulate the negative thoughts and feelings that they experienced as a result of cybervictimisation. Participants revealed that they were aware of mental health terms such as *"anxiety"* and *"depression"* but struggled with defining them and with identifying the associated *"symptoms and signs"*. They described how this lack of understanding generated fear in young people as they worried whether their feelings were normal, were in fact something more serious, or if they were overreacting. Further, many participants expressed concern about the wellbeing of their peers, and a desire to offer support. However, they indicated that young people did not have the capacity to recognise signs of distress in others, to broach the subject of mental health if necessary, or to respond appropriately to peers' requests for help.

3.2.3. Lack of confidence in parents' ability to provide appropriate support

A lack of confidence in parents' ability to provide appropriate support to victims was expressed. Given that parents did not have first-hand experience of growing up with cyber technology, it was perceived that they could not comprehend the significant role it played in young people's lives. Participants remarked that parents could not *"empathise"* with young people's experience of cyberbullying and often dismissed the *"reality"* and *"extent"* of cybervictimisation and its impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. Participants indicated that in response to young people's attempts to discuss cyberbullying parents advised young people "*not to look at it*" or to *"just put [their] phone away"*. They also highlighted that young people fear confiscation of their mobile phones by parents in attempts to resolve cyberbullying and that this deterred young people from disclosing to them.

Many participants perceived that parents were disinclined to discuss mental health and as a result were dismissive of young people's attempts to voice concerns. They articulated that their parents were not *"sympathetic"* to young people's day-to-day struggles with mental health as they only considered the extremes of mental illness to be an issue. Participants attributed this *"old-fashioned"* approach to their parents' upbringing during a time when mental health struggles were *"brushed over"*.

A minority of participants expressed a desire to protect their parents from the pain of knowing that their child was in *"terrible pain"* as a result of cyberbullying. These participants were reluctant to report cyberbullying to their parents as they perceived that their lack of knowledge about the cyber world and inability to protect their child would cause them undue upset and worry.

3.2.4. Inappropriate school intervention

Participants anticipated that cyberbullying will worsen with the expansion of technology and expressed a desire to "*learn how to cope*" and talk about their experiences and feelings *"more openly*". The majority of participants articulated that young people look to their school for support and guidance with regard to cyberbullying and mental health as this is the setting where their day-to-day lives play out; however, they did not believe that young people's needs were being met in this context. In particular, participants aged 16–17 were frustrated that schools focused on topics which they perceive as irrelevant to their lives while ignoring those considered of importance to young people including *"sex education, mental health, and cyberbullying"*. They were disillusioned that in spite of discussions about cyberbullying and suicide in the *"news"* and in *"politics",* in schools, where young people had an expectation of support, mental health was the *"elephant in the room"*. Participants expressed disbelief at their schools lack of action to support young people with their mental health particularly following the suicide of their female peer. They indicated that silence on these issues contributed to young people's paranoia that they were *"overreacting"* and *"making a big deal"* out of nothing.

Across the different schools and year groups, participants indicated that the education they received on cyberbullying in school was inadequate and unhelpful as it focused on cyber security and covered *"the same boring thing over and over again"*. They experienced this process as *"patronising"* as it ignored young people's proficiency in technology and social media. They argued that advice to *"block"* perpetrators or not to *"add people you don't know"* was inconsistent with and ignorant of young people's use of social media. Further, many articulated that school efforts to address cyberbullying were *"awkward"* as in-class discussions were often delivered by teachers or by guidance counsellors who also had a teaching role. Participants indicated that they did not feel comfortable discussing personal or sensitive issues with someone who would be teaching them at another time and emphasised that their openness in the focus group discussion was facilitated by the absence of school staff.

Teachers' efforts to intervene in episodes of cyberbullying were described as "*quick-fix*" and superficial. Participants expressed little confidence in the sincerity of their offers of help or their ability to provide meaningful support. The majority highlighted that in attempts to *"move the situation on fast"* teachers were likely to encourage young people to *"be friends"* in response to a disclosure of cyberbullying. Participants emphasised that this is an unfair and unrealistic expectation which belittles victims' experiences. Further, they also highlighted that this form of intervention often results in victims being labelled as *"rats"* for reporting cyberbullying to an adult and leads to an intensification of victimisation when the disclosure is brought to the attention of perpetrators.

4. Discussion

This study contributes to the limited qualitative research on cyberbullying. Specifically, it gives voice to young people's perceptions of the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation and the barriers that prevent victims from seeking social support. Young people's perspectives on the impact of cybervictimisation vary in the literature (Cassidy et al., 2013). This study supports the view that the unique features the of cyber world increase the severity of cyberbullying over and above that of traditional bullying and contribute to considerable psychological distress in victims (Dooley et al., 2009; Langos, 2015; Mishna et al., 2009; Nocentini et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Cyberbullying was described by participants as more psychological in its nature and impact than traditional bullying with increased deleterious effect on the mental health and wellbeing of victims. Findings indicate that the negative impact of cyberbullying on young people's mental health manifests as a negative and enduring internal dialogue fuelled by the omni-present, pervasive, and permanent nature of cyber interactions. Participants reported a lack of confidence among young people regarding their ability to cope and identified a number of perceived barriers to seeking social support. They believed that suicide is a viable escape route for cyber victims entrapped by cybervictimisation and the ensuing negative thought process. Findings are considered in the context of existing evidence and theory and recommendations are made for research, policy, and practice.

The Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping provides a framework to understand young people's experience as described in this study (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). This theory suggests that when faced with a stressor, such as cybervictimisation, an individual first

evaluates the situation to ascertain if it is a threat and second assesses the changeability of the situation and their coping resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Decisions made at each stage determine the implementation of either problem-focused or emotion-focused coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Problem-focused strategies, such as seeking support, address the problem and prevent it from reoccurring while emotion-focused approaches direct the issue inward and can take the form of avoidance, escape, or feelings of helplessness (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987; Parris et al., 2012; Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015; Völlink, Bolman, Dehue, & Jacobs, 2013). Active or problem-focused strategies have been shown to mitigate the negative impacts of cybervictimisation while passive or emotion related coping is associated with depressive symptoms and is detrimental to victims health and wellbeing (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Parris et al., 2012; Perren et al., 2012). In line with previous research, findings from this study indicate that victims of cyberbullying experience hopelessness in the face of cybervictimisation. Feeling powerless to change their situation they commonly internalise problems and engage in ineffective emotion related coping (Völlink et al., 2013). It is of note that young people in this study described negative emotional reactions in response to the receipt of ambiguous messages online. Due to uncertainty regarding the intent of the sender, young people are unable to establish if the situation is threatening. It is possible, therefore, that they remain stuck at the evaluation stage of the Stress and Coping framework and are restricted from engaging effective coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Further, participants perceived that parents, school staff, and the media are primarily concerned with extreme cases of cyberbullying and are, therefore, dismissive of episodes considered less serious. The absence of validation appears to encourage rumination in victims as they try to determine if they are right to be upset or are just overreacting. The literature supports the notion that adults lack of validation regarding young people's bullying experiences contributes to their distress (Mishna & Alaggia, 2005)

This study indicates that cyber victims perceived inability to seek support maintains and exacerbates feelings of distress, hopelessness, and entrapment. Seeking social support is consistently identified as an effective strategy in response to cybervictimisation (Hellfeldt, López-Romero, & Andershed, 2019; Perren et al., 2012; Raskauskas & Huynh, 2015). However, in support of previous research, this study demonstrates cyber victims reluctance to report cyberbullying (Dooley et al., 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). Participants reiterated a number of barriers to help-seeking behaviour previously identified in the literature (Betts & Spenser, 2017; Cassidy et al., 2013; Hamm et al., 2015; Jacobs, Goossens, Dehue, Völlink, & Lechner, 2015; Mishna et al., 2009; Parris et al., 2012; Šléglová & Černá, 2011; Smith et al., 2008). Of note, this study's findings indicate that embarrassment at being targeted by cyberbullying and shame due to needing mental health support discourage young people from disclosing victimisation. Young males in particular were viewed as unlikely to report victimisation as male expressions of vulnerability were perceived to be in contrast with societal ideals of masculinity. Stigma is widely reported in the literature as a barrier to help seeking for mental health (Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2010; Rickwood et al., 2005).

An important contribution of this study is its identification that a lack of emotional competence may prevent help-seeking in victims of cyberbullying. Emotional competence is the ability to identify, describe, understand, and manage emotions in an effective way (Rickwood et al., 2005). Reflecting the experience of participants in this study, young people with low emotional competence are unlikely to have the language and skills to recognise, interpret, and disclose emotional experiences thereby restricting opportunities for the provision of support and maintaining negative effect (Rickwood, Deane, & Wilson, 2007).

In previous studies young people reported that they delete, avoid, or block disparaging messages as a way of coping with cyberbullying and these coping strategies are recommended by young people and researchers alike (Cassidy et al., 2013; Jacobs et al., 2015; Parris et al., 2012; Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010). In contrast, findings from this study indicate that young people are unlikely to avoid social media due to their *"fear of missing out"* on peer interactions. Disengaging from social media in response to cybervictimisation was not raised as a potential coping strategy in any of the focus groups. This highlights the integral role of cyber technology in young people's lives and the influence that it has on their health and wellbeing. This study suggests that rather than distance themselves from harmful content, cyber victims revisit it obsessively in attempts to establish the causes and consequences of their victimisation. This behaviour is facilitated by the omni-present, pervasive, and permanent nature of cyber interactions.

Findings indicate that cyber victims internalise their problems in the form of both rumination and worry, unproductive and negative thought processes which exacerbate and maintain negative effect (Hong, 2007; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, 1987). Rumination involves repetitively and passively going over past events, wondering why they happened, and trying to establish meaning; it serves to convince the individual that they are in a hopeless position and so they remain in a negative state unable to take action to address the issue (Hong, 2007; Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Rumination is considered to be a significant factor in the onset and maintenance of depression. The literature suggests that a focus on negative thoughts prevents problem solving in stressful situations and as such sustains a depressed mood (Hong, 2007). Cyberbullying is strongly associated with depression (Bottino et al., 2015) and findings from this study support research with college-age adults which found that rumination mediates the association between cybervictimisation and depressive symptoms (Feinstein, Bhatia, & Davila, 2014). Participants in the current study described a *"deepening depression"* in adolescent cyber victims in response to inescapable negative thoughts fuelled by the features of cyber technology.

Worry, although a similar process to rumination, is future oriented, and is described as a negative chain of thoughts focused on anticipated negative outcomes (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008); it is a defining feature of anxiety disorders which are common in victims of cyberbullying (Fisher et al., 2016; Hong, 2007; Kowalski et al., 2014). Worrying unearths ways to avoid or cope with future negative occurrences, such as the realisation of threats made by anonymous perpetrators or the potential negative outcomes of seeking social support as identified in this study. In concurrence with established symptoms of of social anxiety, participants in the current study also indicated that cyber victims worry about inciting criticism by saying or doing the wrong thing and alter their behaviour accordingly or withdraw from their peers to avoid making mistakes (Pabian & Vandebosch, 2016). In line with previous research, this study indicates cyber victims experience sleep disturbances, concentration difficulties, and school avoidance in victims of cyberbullying (Hamm et al., 2015; Sourander, Brunstein Klomek, & Ikonen, 2010). According to the evidence, sleep plays a crucial role in the regulation of emotion among adolescents (Shochat, Cohen-Zion, & Tzischinsky, 2014); it is possible, therefore, that sleep disturbances, caused by rumination and worry, exacerbate psychological distress in victims of cyberbullying. It is of note that previous research demonstrates increased suicide attempts in young people who sleep less than eight hours per night (McMahon et al., 2017).

The association between cyberbullying and suicidal behaviours is well established in the literature (John et al., 2018; Katsaras et al., 2018; Kowalski et al., 2014; van Geel et al., 2014). This is a serious concern as suicide is the second most common cause of death in young people worldwide (Hawton et al., 2012). Research shows that depressive symptoms mediate the relationship between cyberbullying and suicidal ideation, particularly in females who are more likely to internalise negative situations than their male peers (Medrano, Lopez Rosales, & Gámez-Guadix, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2016). This study highlights young people's perception that suicide becomes a viable option for cyber victims who experience depression in response to internal entrapment in the form of incessant rumination and worry and external entrapment in the form of inescapable victimisation (Gilbert & Allan, 1998). According to

the integrated motivational–volitional model of suicidal behaviour (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018) entrapment drives the emergence of suicidal ideation and intent. Using this theory as a framework, findings from the current study suggest that defeat and humiliation in response to cybervictimisation are maintained by the emotion focused coping strategies adopted by cyber victims. Relentless victimisation, facilitated by the omni-presence of cyber technology, and incessant rumination and worry, fuelled by the ambiguous, pervasive and permeant nature of cyber interactions, contribute to feelings of entrapment. The sense of entrapment is bolstered by cyber victims' sensitivity to the perceived social evaluation of others and their inability to seek social support. With no prospect of escape, cyber victims perceive suicide as the only way out. O'Connor and Kirtley (2018) hypothesise that exposure to inappropriate representations of suicide via traditional and new media channels may increase the likelihood that suicidal ideation will escalate to suicidal behaviour. Of note, findings from this study indicate that young people are frequently exposed to accounts of suicide in young victims of cyberbullying via the media including news outlets, television talk shows, and social media platforms. This may contribute to modelling or imitation of suicidal behaviour in cyber victims (Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012; O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018).

4.1. Strengths and limitations

Qualitative research on cyberbullying is relatively scarce (Smith, 2019). In particular, there is little qualitative research related to the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation and how these are experienced by young people (Kwan et al., 2020). This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature as it provides insight into young people's perception of the psychosocial impact of cybervictimisation and identifies barriers which prevent cyber victims from seeking social support. The involvement of young people as co-researchers is an important and novel strength of this research. The Advisory Group provided a unique perspective on the design, conduct, and interpretation of this study thereby facilitating the appropriate and meaningful participation of their peers as research participants.

This paper reports findings from an exploratory study which explored post-primary school students' perspectives on cyberbullying in general, not their own experiences, and so we did not assess history or frequency of cyberbullying or participants psychological state prior to participation. Research indicates that depression, anxiety and low self-esteem may be both consequences of and precursors to bullying (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). It is possible that pre-existing psychological conditions may have influenced participant views on the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation and the experiences of those victimised. To avoid socially desirable responses in the focus group setting, participants were not asked about their personal experiences of cybervictimisation although many participants volunteered this information. It is possible that this was a direct result of the safe physical and social space created through the involvement of the Advisory Group. However, as a result it was not explicitly known if participants were victims of cyberbullying, therefore, findings should be interpreted as representing young people's general perceptions of the mental health impacts of cybervictimisation. One-to-one interviews with cybervictims, although not favoured by the young involved in this study (Ref: undisclosed for review purposes), may produce different results.

It is important to note that participants in this study had experienced the suicide of a female peer in the months prior to data collection. It is possible that this influenced the strong focus on suicide during the focus groups and so related findings should be interpreted with this in mind. However, the link between cybervictimisation and suicide is well established in the literature and this study provides insight into young people's perceptions of the pathways leading to this outcome. As with all qualitative studies, the generalisability of our findings is limited. However, as the findings of this study concur with much of the related literature it suggests that they are not unique to this location.

4.2. Implications

Even though most victims of bullying do not engage in suicidal behaviour, and it is unlikely that cyberbullying alone leads to suicide (Cassidy et al., 2013), the potential harm to young people necessitates that more be done in research, policy, and practice to protect those who are vulnerable (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). Findings from this study suggest that schools are not meeting young people's needs with regard to cyberbullying and mental health, highlighting instead inappropriate and ineffective cyberbullying intervention efforts. There is a need for school-based interventions which improve young people's coping skills and reduce feelings of entrapment. Interventions should focus on the removal of barriers which prevent young people from engaging in help-seeking behaviours. The young people involved in this study expressed a need for mental health education, specifically, to learn more effective ways of coping with distress. Strategies to increase young people's emotional competence should be implemented within the school setting to empower young people to identify, describe, understand, and manage their emotions (Rickwood et al., 2005). Further, efforts should be made to improve young people's mental health literacy, that is their "*knowledge and beliefs about mental disorders which aid their recognition, management, or prevention*" (Jorm et al., 1997). The literature recommends that these skills should be taught before the need for them arises (Rickwood et al., 2005). As findings from this study indicate that young people in the junior cycle are vulnerable to cyberbullying, efforts should be initiated at primary school level.

Popular anti-bullying programmes involve components delivered by school staff (Salmivalli & Poskiparta, 2012). However, in support of previous research (McMahon, 2017), findings from this study indicate that this approach may discourage the meaningful participation of young people. Future research should explore the role and impact of the facilitator in the implementation of school-based interventions. Utilising external facilitators, rather than teachers or guidance counsellors, in their delivery may enhance existing efforts. In addition, young people indicated a preference for non-judgemental participatory initiatives involving peer discussion groups, accessible language, and in which young people are treated with respect.

Interventions should also be targeted at potential support networks particularly peers, parents, and school staff to foster an environment that encourages help-seeking and to ensure appropriate and effective responses to disclosures of cyberbullying. As noted in previous research with school principals there is a need for training, resources, workshops, and guidelines for school staff (Foody, Murphy, Downes, & O'Higgins Norman, 2018). Additionally, parents must be empowered to understand and engage with the cyber world. Focusing on emotional competence and mental health literacy in schools, as mentioned above, will empower peers to support each other. In the knowledge that victims are currently unlikely to report victimisation, those in contact with young people must be enabled to identify and take steps to remedy signs of distress. As well as peers, parents, and school personnel, this may include primary care services including general practitioners, families, youth services, communities, sporting organisations, and/or other clubs or outlets in which young people are involved. Findings from this study suggest that social withdrawal, lack of concentration, school avoidance, and fatigue may indicate distress in young people. It is worth noting that participants in this study used the term "*overthinking*" to describe the mental health impact of cybervictimisation. Adults should be mindful that the terms used by young people to describe their emotions may not obviously indicate distress. In the instance of a disclosure it is important that adults listen to and validate victims' experiences. Young people should be reassured that their concerns are legitimate, significant, and deserving of attention and support (Vaillancourt, Faris, & Mishna, 2017). Any course of action should be developed collaboratively with the young person and, importantly, acted upon.

Finally, it is vital that media outlets adhere to guidelines for the safe reporting of suicide in victims of cyberbully to reduce the likelihood of

imitative suicidal behaviour (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). Also, social media platforms must ensure the monitoring and removal of content that inappropriately represents or glamorises suicidal behaviour or cyberbullying.

4.3. Conclusion

Young people in this study described cyberbullying as more psychological in nature and impact than traditional bullying with increased deleterious effect on the mental health and wellbeing of victims. Participants perceived suicide as a viable escape route for young victims defeated and entrapped by cybervictimisation and their own negative thoughts. Future research should explore school-based interventions to develop young people's emotional competence and mental health literacy, and empower potential support networks including peers, parents, and school personnel. Involving young people in the development of any prevention and intervention strategies will ensure informed efforts to address cybervictimisation and youth mental health.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Rebecca Dennehy: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing - original draft, Visualization. **Sarah Meaney:** Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Mary Cronin:** Methodology, Formal analysis, Writing - review & editing. **Ella Arensman:** Formal, Analysis, Writing - review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104872.

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