

FEATURE ARTICLE

THE DARK SIDE OF THE DIGITAL WORLD: CYBERBULLYING GROWING THREAT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Fake and embarrassing photos of you are circulating on social media. You discover that someone created a WhatsApp group to scrutinise or shame you. Anonymous accounts are sending you threatening messages or worse, you find out someone has impersonated you online and is posting harmful content in your name.

Unfortunately, these are not hypothetical scenarios; it is a harsh reality for many people today. In today's interconnected world, the internet has revolutionised how we communicate, share information, and build communities. However, alongside these benefits lies a darker side, the rise of a new form of harassment and abuse. This is not just harassment, it is cyberbullying, a growing threat in our digitally connected world. Unlike offline bullying, cyberbullying can occur anytime, anywhere; it follows you everywhere and is capable of crossing borders.

Cyberbullying occurs when individuals use technology to harass, threaten, or embarrass a person. It commonly takes place on social media, through email, online games, and other digital platforms.

It can take many forms, including:

- Creating fake accounts to post harmful content in someone else's name.
- Repeatedly harassing or threatening someone online.
- Sharing someone's private information, photos, or messages without consent.
- Spreading false rumours, posting aggressive, insulting, or offensive comments.

The digital nature of cyberbullying means that harmful content can spread rapidly and remain online indefinitely. This amplifies the emotional distress felt by the victims, leading to anxiety, depression, and even long-term psychological effects. Additionally, since cyberbullying often occurs anonymously, the victim may feel helpless, not knowing who to confront or how to stop the abuse and in some cases has led to suicidal effects.

In Namibia, cyberbullying can constitute a cybercrime, especially when it involves threats and extortion. While there is not yet a dedicated cyberbullying law, existing legislation addresses various forms of online harassment. The Communications Act (No. 8 of 2009) prohibits the misuse of telecommunications services to send threatening or offensive messages, providing a legal basis to prosecute cyberbullies. Additionally, the Electronic Transactions Act of 2019 aims to promote secure electronic communications and transactions. While it does not explicitly mention cyberbullying, its objectives include developing a safe and secure environment for electronic transactions, which encompasses protecting users from misuse of online platforms.

Namibia is also in the process of enacting a Cybercrime Act, which is expected to introduce stricter penalties for online offenses, including cyberbullying, and non-consensual sharing of private content. Currently, without specific cyberbullying laws, victims can also resort to general criminal laws or civil remedies. For instance, Namibia's defamation laws allow individuals to file civil lawsuits if they suffer reputational damage due to false or damaging information shared online.

To combat cyberbullying, several precautions are vital:

- *Enable privacy settings*: make sure that you enable your privacy settings on social platforms, occasionally review your followers and reject or access to limit unknown followers.

- *Save the Evidence*: Keep screenshots of harmful messages as evidence.
- *Do Not Respond*: Engaging with the bully often escalates the situation.
- *Block the Offender*: Utilise device settings to block communications from bullies.
- *Monitor Online Activity*: Parents and guardians should stay aware of their children's social media usage.
- *Educate on Safe Sharing*: Be mindful of what you post online, as content can quickly go viral.
- *Report Abuse*: Notify platform administrators or authorities about harmful behaviour. The incident may also be reported to the Namibian Police.

In an era where social media and instant messaging are integral to our daily life, the line between genuine connection and harmful behaviour has become increasingly blurred which is why it is crucial to recognise that everything shared online can remain accessible indefinitely, so caution should always be exercised when posting or responding online.

Note: Contact local authorities if threats are serious and seek legal action.

END

Issued By:

Namibia Cyber Security Incident Response Team (NAM-CSIRT) housed by the Communications Regulatory Authority of Namibia (CRAN)

Tel: +264 61 222 666

Email: Communications@cran.na